

THE NEW AGE SERIES BOOK 1

# GENESIS

A man and a woman are seen from behind, standing on a pile of rubble and looking out over a city that has been completely destroyed. The city skyline is visible in the distance, with smoke rising from the ruins. The sky is a deep orange and yellow, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is one of desolation and hope.

NICOLETTE FULLER

# GENESIS

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THE NEW AGE SERIES  
BOOK 1

NICOLETTE FULLER

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## NEW AGE SERIES

Genesis

Rebirth

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Crisis

Sacrifice

Malfunction

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New Dawn

Retribution

Lost Years (Prequel)

*I would like to dedicate this book to the dreamers.*

*To the romantics and to the rebels.*

*To the non-believers, who can now believe. To the believers (and beta readers)  
whom I thank.*

*To all those who inspired me. From main characters to the secondary ones.*

*The Rebel Commander's, Dorian's, Adam's, and Amara's.*

*To my husband, James Fuller, who I'm sure wanted to throw a thesaurus at me  
many times. Who encouraged me to write and do something with this story.*

*This is for you.*

## GENESIS

IT WAS 2065, AND the world was finally at peace. Countries flourished economically; genetic scientific breakthroughs were happening daily; mankind was finally at the cusp of stem cell enhancement research. All world governments had come to terms and had made peace, or so everyone had thought...

There was devastation as nuclear war broke out. As countries fought, it had been a race to see who could gain the most knowledge and resources; it ended in the eradication of the world as it was once known. Cities were destroyed, entire countries blow apart by the great war. The world population was at its lowest in history as radiation slowly killed off those who had survived the initial blasts. Mankind's only hope for survival was to rebuild under a new government order, and so from the rubble and ashes, the walled city of Meridiana was born...

It had been five years since the world was left in turmoil after a nuclear war had spread across the lands, destroying a great deal of the world's population. Those who survived turned to anarchy, enraged that their government would allow such a war to be waged upon them. Crime littered what was left of the streets, more each day as the government tried to get a hold of the situation but fell short of improvements. Their only hope was a complete lockdown, do, or die. City walls were erected, harsh laws and curfews were put into place, soldiers were made into law officers. At this time, officials turned to science; after the war, a whole new wave of nuclear and genetic discoveries was made. A team of scientists had set out to create the ultimate human specimen, "peacekeepers";

they tried and failed miserably until a breakthrough was made by administering a series of injections of enhanced genetically altered stem cells, a body could maintain its youth. The injected cells would seek out the weak or dying cells of the subject. They would attach themselves to them and, in the process of creating a perfect cell, would kill the old one taking its place.

In 2075, the experiment had progressed enough to be tested. Fifty children from the ages of three months to five years, who were either orphaned or given as tribute, were injected and put into medical comas. The theory was that their sleeping bodies would take on the cells and start to genetically create enhanced cells of their own. For five years, the team worked feverishly, but their efforts went nowhere. Their subjects continued to die off while their bodies were asleep. The injection doses were cut in half and then even more so, yet it seemed that organ failure was inevitable as most of the children bled to death within months of the first injection. After running more tests, and many more millions of dollars of scientific experimenting being flushed away, the government allowed the head scientist twenty more children to experiment with. The success rate started to look up as the first few years went by without incident, but complications began to kick in. In the end, only three subjects survived the ordeal. They lay comatose in bed in the science facility, the scientists not knowing when, or if, they would ever awaken. A new government inside the scientific compound grew within Meridiana's walled city as the world outside the walls started to rot away from the death and destruction, leaving nothing but barren wastelands to fill the void which had once been a well-populated area of the world.



Hokura awoke in a dead sweat; her ears were ringing as her head throbbed in agony, blurring her vision. She reached blindly over to her nightstand, grabbed a syringe, and injected its contents into her arm. Within seconds her vision began to clear; she could see that daylight was already filtering into her room. The



alarm clock on the stand read that it was already 09:20 a.m. Hokura let out a sigh. She had roughly ten minutes to get ready and knew they would be waiting for her.

Stretching her muscles, her nerves started to ease as she got up. She put on a pair of blue jeans that lay on the floor beside her bed and pulled on a white, ribbed tank top. Stopping by the mirror to glance at herself, she pulled her long brown hair into a ponytail. She had only aged twenty of her twenty-five years until her body had stopped. Her body was taut and toned after rigorous training, months of combat, and being on the force for nine months. She considered her 5'4" frame short for her age, but her hundred and twenty-pound body was a solid mass of firm muscle and raw power.

There was a hint of glee in her light brown eyes this morning. Later in the afternoon, she had an appointment with Professor Dorian and Doctor Allen. Hokura slipped on her runners after exiting her tiny bathroom and made her way down to the mess hall.

"Morning, Hokura," Amara chimed. She was sitting at a table with a coffee in hand. Accompanying her was the third child, Adam, who had his head down on the table as he rested his hand on a steaming cup.

"Good morning." Hokura smiled while walking up to her best friend.

Amara had reached her twenty-second year. She was the second child to survive the experiments and had short sandy-blonde hair and blue eyes. Her figure was more masculine than Hokura's; Amara had strength, whereas Hokura had speed, but they were both evenly matched when it came to combat fighting ability. Hokura sat down with her two friends, her only friends really, besides the professor and his assistant, Doctor Allen.

"So, what's for breakfast?" Hokura asked, stealing a quick sip of Amara's bland and already cooling coffee.

"Same as always," Adam murmured, his face still buried in his arms as his head rested on the metal table of the cafeteria. His short black hair was tufted up and sticking out. His muscles were sturdy even though he had a gaunt exterior; he hoped it would fill out in the three years of aging that he had left. Hokura always thought that Adam had the most unique eyes left on earth. One of them

was light brown, while the other was a pale green with a slash of blue.

“Long night?” Hokura smirked, leaning back in her chair.

“Just a continuation of the last few nights, tracking down rebels who are breaching the wall and bringing in more weapons. You think you've finally gotten a hold of one band, and another one comes up on the far end of the city. Unfortunately, the night watch was chasing them around, too. It was a good thing I had Amara with me. It doesn't make any sense. We have soldiers guarding the wall. How are the rebels still even getting in? All in all, I just couldn't sleep last night. I think my mattress needs to be replaced,” Adam grumbled, lifting his head, and sipping his coffee.

“Aw, moan and complain about what was considered an easy night, and then whine about your mattress when you could just as easily sleep on your couch,” Amara teased, and Hokura chuckled. “So, when are you back on the force?” Amara asked, turning to Hokura. Her tone was a serious one.

“I've been having some awful headaches lately, same with some really bad ringing in my ears. Other than that, it didn't affect me. I have an appointment with the professor this afternoon, so I hope to be back tonight! Two weeks off duty has been enough for me,” Hokura answered.

“Didn't affect you! I found you like fifty feet from the initial blast, totally knocked out!” Amara scoffed.

Hokura looked away from her friend; she felt foolish.

“You're my best friend. I just don't want anything to happen to you,” Amara apologized, resting her hand upon Hokura's arm, trying to comfort her from her harshness.

“Yes,” Adam spoke up. “Remember what the professor has drilled into us? We may not age, but that doesn't mean we're immortal. You could have been killed!”

“The third child is right.” A deep voice came from behind the three; it was Professor Dorian. He was wearing a dark blue suit with a red dress shirt underneath; it looked more like something an officer or commander might wear. His glasses were so tinted they nearly shielded his blue eyes. He stood a tall man, taller than Adam. The professor must have been over six feet; he had dark

brown hair that seemed black when it wasn't in the light and a beard that he kept neatly trimmed. Hokura always thought of him as a ruggedly handsome man, even though she guessed he was possibly in his mid-thirties.

The three turned and stood. "Good morning, sir," they said, bowing their heads.

Dorian only laughed. "That's enough now. We're not in training or studies, so enough with the formalities. I hope you're all enjoying a good breakfast."

Adam rolled his eyes quickly enough that only Amara caught him. "Why can't we leave the facility and get something other than cafeteria food?" Adam asked but knew the answer.

Dorian only chuckled. "I'm sorry, my children, but I cannot allow you out to wander the streets. You would stick out like a sore thumb, and only negative attention would be brought your way. Maybe in time, I'll allow it, but not with the rebels about, even in the daylight hours," Dorian replied with a hint of sympathy for the group. "Besides, we're making breakthroughs every day with the GMO processing with our foods. It'll get better in time."

"We're peacekeepers. We're only allowed to be out in the shadows of night. Who knows what the civilians would do if they knew we were casually walking around," Amara scolded Adam, who shot back. The two squabbled as Hokura looked on.

The professor put his hand on her shoulder. "I'll see you later on this afternoon, Hokura." He smiled warmly at her and walked away.

"I saw that!" Amara cried, pointing at Hokura. "I've told you for months, but I saw it that time!" Hokura stood stunned, looking as if her friend had lost it. "I told you so!" Amara continued.

"WHAT!?" Hokura cried, wondering just what Amara thought she had witnessed.

Amara grabbed Hokura and pulled her in, closely whispering into her ear. "I saw the look that the professor gave you, first child," Amara whispered.

Hokura backed away. "Oh, Amara, you're so full of it," Hokura said, turning away. She was starving at this point, and even if the food wasn't great, at least it would fill her stomach.

“I saw you smiling this morning when you told me that you had an appointment with the professor,” Amara butted in.

“She’s got you there, Hokura,” Adam chimed in, looking as if he was going to go Hokura’s way of getting some breakfast. Hokura’s face reddened as she couldn’t hide her blushing cheeks.

“Honestly, it’s not like that.” Hokura smiled, which only made her brighten.

“Then what is it?” Amara blurted, not allowing Hokura a second of silent thoughts to herself.

“I don’t know. I really enjoy the professor’s assistant Doctor Allen. He’s just so kind to me. He always has a way of bringing me new canvases for my paintings.” Hokura blushed.

Adam pulled at Amara’s arm. “Are we gonna get some food, or are you just gonna sit here and gossip all morning?”

“Yeah, would you mind? I want eggs and toast and get Hokura a good hearty breakfast. Can’t have her going to this scandalous appointment on an empty stomach!” Amara said, waving Adam away.

Adam only shook his head as he walked towards the cafeteria buffet. Hokura knew he’d be back with enough food for all of them.

Hokura grabbed Amara’s arm and scooted closer to her. “Scandalous! Where do you get such thoughts like this?” Hokura said, shaking her head. “It’s nothing like that... I just really like him, that’s all. Besides, it’s not like I get to see him often since he’s always in the lab and working with the professor.”

Amara searched her best friend’s eyes and decided to drop the subject. “So, have you heard what’s been going on out there lately?” Amara spoke in a hushed tone. “Sounds like the city walls are being breached every night by bands of rebels. They’ve been exporting huge amounts of weapons, but unfortunately, between us and the night watch, we just can’t keep track of everything that’s being brought into the city. The word is that the civilians are buying them and keeping them within the city.” She shifted her weight. “I just don’t get it. The civilians need to learn to be grateful. The city took them in, gave them a place of refuge to live, protect them from the anarchy, even brings in penance and lets them work, and they go out and bring in weapons! For whatever reasons, I can

only imagine! Most likely to rob merchants like themselves who barely have anything.”

Hokura sat silently for a second as she gathered in what Amara was saying. The night she was taken down, it had been an exported bomb that had gone off while she was chasing down a rebel. The city was right not to allow weapons inside its walls... “I don’t understand why we can’t just live in peace. Why there’s so much envy in a world when we all have less?” Hokura shook her head.

“That’s because mankind is born evil and greedy,” Adam said matter-of-factly, setting down two large trays of food.

“Alright, enough of this down talk, I’m starved!” Amara cried and started to dig in, reaching for the dry toast and the eggs.

“Just like I said.” Adam chuckled, grabbing at a muffin, and taking a bite. “I guess we should all be grateful for what we have, even if it’s genetically modified eggs...” he looked at Amara, who grimaced as she took a large bite, “and what we’ve been granted here in Meridiana. We live here under protection; we have more resources than anyone outside.”

“I bet the outsiders have better food than this,” Amara muttered. “At least they’ve got the bread tasting a bit better, but the eggs still taste like paste... but I agree, and that’s where our duty comes in. It’s up to us to protect the civilians,” Amara huffed, taking another bite. “They’d just be blowing themselves, or others up, with those weapons if we didn’t confiscate them.”

Hokura smiled. She knew Amara held her code of being a peacekeeper in high regard, even if at times she couldn’t make sense of why things happened between the city and the rebels that none of them could explain.

The three friends made small talk through breakfast. Other compound workers and scientists made their way through the cafeteria, some in large groups, some alone, since it was already late. Hokura figured a lot of them were taking their first break, yet it seemed that they always stayed clear of the three youngest-looking people in the room and sat off to the side tables of the large hall. Hokura finished and started getting up.

“Sorry to eat and run, guys. I’m sure I’ll catch you two later,” Hokura said.

Amara grinned. “I’m going to be in the training facility’s combat gym all

day, brushing up on some hand to hand,” she mocked as she swung her fists in the air.

Adam looked up, tiredly at Hokura. “I’m going back to bed... I’ll catch you two at dinner hour.”

Hokura nodded; she wanted to hit the speed track before she showered off and went to the medical facility.

She made her way down to the training facility, yet another massive part of the first floor of the compound. It, too, was filled with large gymnasiums; some held weights and benches, while others had padded floors that were used for combat training. There were even smaller rooms where one could practice their hand coordination with a simulation fighting screen. The facility was rarely empty, as the night watch and day watch soldiers used the different stations to better themselves when it came to their duty. The day watch was more for civilian policing, making sure that Meridiana's people kept the peace amongst each other. The night watch went out at curfew to make sure that civilians weren't on the city streets. They were also to report in if they discovered any rebel activity within the walls. The peacekeepers were the lead soldiers when it came to disruptive activities during the night; because of their genetic makeup, their abilities were no match for any mere human. They made the perfect super soldier to defend the city.

Hokura walked into the speed training gymnasium; the track room, like all rooms of the training facilities, was all devoid of any color other than the floor, which had a beige track path around the perimeter of the room. There were computer terminals along the far wall along with medical equipment to test heart rates and other such equipment to monitor physical aspects. Hokura had changed into her track clothes: black spandex shorts and a sports bra. The room operator greeted her as she walked in.

“Good day, Hokura.” Annette smiled. “What would you like to test today?” she asked, walking over to a large computer to type in Hokura’s ID.

Annette was one of the top female tech operators of the facility. She wore a white lab coat over a sky-blue turtleneck and black slacks. She had shoulder-length wavy blonde hair and blue eyes, which were framed by thick black

glasses. Hokura guessed her to be in her mid-thirties but never asked about her assumption; maybe it was because age was irrelevant to her. Then again, it had been hard to tell in the compound. It seemed that everyone, from the doctors to the scientists, and even the watch guards, were all around the thirties age range, other than some government officials such as Governor Larson.

“Racetrack time trial,” Hokura responded, walking up to where Annette had been punching in Hokura’s ID. Hokura looked at the sensors laid out on the table and started to attach them to her body without any small talk. Once they were in place, she walked over to the starting point.

“Sensors attached,” the operator stated over an intercom, typing into the computer at the far end of the gymnasium. “Heart rate normal... blood pressure normal... brain wave activity normal... count down beginning.”

Hokura edged herself, focusing on the long, narrow track in front of her, which wrapped its way around the edge of the gymnasium. She hadn’t been too impressed with her last time trial; she was going for larger improvements today.

“Countdown started. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1,” Annette’s voice boomed. Hokura took off, exerting herself as hard as she could in hopes of making an improvement. She had been taken by surprise by the bomb. She hadn’t been on her game that night; she needed to do better, be faster and stronger... to be her best. She cleared the track quickly and went into a slow walk, waiting for the results.

“Heart rate good, blood pressure normal, brain waves normal, body temperature normal,” Annette’s voice echoed. “Time trial, 118.24 seconds.”

Hokura sighed in relief and smiled as the sweat ran down her stomach. That was three seconds faster than her last trial. Hearing the news gave her the satisfaction and confidence that she needed to feel that she was ready to go back onto the force that evening.

“Would you like to run any more trials today, Hokura?” Annette asked.

Hokura caught her breath. “No, thank you, Annette, that was just the boost I needed for the day. I have an appointment in about an hour anyway, thank you,” Hokura replied.

The operator walked over and handed Hokura a towel. “Your brain waves

seemed to have fluctuated after the race. I take it you have something on your mind?” Annette commented as Hokura wiped the sweat from her body.

Hokura blushed that she had been found out. “I was just thinking about getting back out there tonight, that’s all,” she lied; her thoughts were actually racing about her appointment this afternoon.

Annette smiled. “The professor will deem when you are ready to go back out on the force. Don’t push yourself too hard. Either way, I hope you’re happy with your results. You’re really improving your speeds.”

Hokura nodded firmly. “I hope that I’m deemed sooner rather than later. Have a good day, Annette,” she said and walked out.

Hokura made her way down the hallway and up to the housing floor and towards her room. The facility was a vast maze of operating rooms, council rooms, closed-off corridors, and housing for the workers. Every scientist lived on grounds; the professor even supposedly lived somewhere on the facility grounds, although Hokura didn’t know where. She never really pictured him living anywhere since he was always somewhere other than his living quarters.

The scientists and operators lived on the second floor. The three children lived on the third along with the main team of the stem cell researchers, although Hokura could never recall ever really seeing any of them in the hallways. That was most likely because they were up early while the peacekeepers slept. By the time the three were leaving for duty, most of the compound had already tucked in for the night.

Hokura’s mind wandered... she wondered where Doctor Allen and the professor were stationed among the living quarters. She wondered what Doctor Allen's room might look like, and with that, her cheeks reddened as her heart fluttered in a way she had never really felt before.



Hokura walked into her room. It was simple; there was a small kitchen, which she never used, that was filled with essential cutlery, bowls, and dishes. She’d



always taken her meals in the cafeteria with the other children, though. Maybe one day, she would take an interest in cooking, but she didn't see the need for it since it made no logical sense for her to cook a meal when there was food prepared and served in the cafeteria. There was a bathroom with a small tub that she used more for the shower, a bedroom, and a living room off the main hallway near the entrance. The decor was simple. On the beige walls hung a number of paintings she had done, along with one sketched in black paint, which Hokura had done when she had first awakened. Hokura sat on her couch, a comfortable beige sofa, across from a small old-fashioned television screen; she had a small wooden coffee table that she used to prop her feet up. The main living areas were always clean. It was Hokura's bedroom floor that was typically littered with the few clothes that she actually wore. There was a laundry service in the compound; she would stuff her clothes in a bag and hang them on her door, where they would be picked up and brought back the same day. From there, they usually ended up folded in a pile on the floor until they became scattered once more.

She breathed in, feeling more pleased with the day now that her time trial had gone well. Waking up to pounding pain in her head had put her in a mood, but her spirits were now lifted. She gave herself one more moment of peace before getting up. There was just enough time for her to freshen up with a quick shower, then be off to see the professor and Doctor Allen.

Hokura felt at ease as she stood in the shower, washing her hair. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt so relaxed. Her mind drifted, remembering the day she awoke for the first time to see the professor staring down at her. She could barely move, even though she had been hooked up to a device that sent electrodes to her muscles and massaged them. It was as if she was being born into an already adult formed body.

She remembered some of her first days, looking up at the professor who was smiling widely. He was talking, but the only thing Hokura's mind transfixed on was his assistant. He was looking down at her with a grin, a beautiful smile that almost glowed. His eyes were hazel: his hair, blonde and medium length: his face, chiseled and kind. She remembered the professor reaching down and

helping her sit up, and Doctor Allen rubbing her back as she sat silently. He had offered her something to drink and calmed her as she choked it down and spat half of it back up.

For the first few months, Hokura was constantly watched over by the professor. He helped her walk. He explained that she had not awakened naïve and ignorant to the world around her; while she was in a coma, her mind was forever learning new things. She had been hooked up to a device that fed her mind information at alarming rates. Hokura was tested about the information she had learned about while remaining at rest for nearly nineteen years. She had absorbed incredible amounts that seemed to floor Doctor Allen and even the professor.

Hokura smiled warmly at the thought. They had both been so kind to her. Doctor Allen was the one who had brought her canvases and paints and let her enjoy the simple pleasures of art. He even brought her some old books which had pictures of famous paintings from the old world. Art had always astonished Hokura, and strangely enough, even though she had just awakened from a nineteen-year sleep without any experience, she took to painting and sketching with incredible skill.

Hokura turned off the water and dried herself off; she got herself ready for her appointment. Before she left, she grabbed a piece of large canvas; She had a gift for Doctor Allen for being so kind to her and that he was always willing to bring her more supplies at her disposal when she wasn't in training.

Hokura took the stairs down to the first floor, passed the mess hall where a few people lingered eating a late lunch. The first floor was the largest of all three, over four times bigger than the living quarters. She made her way through mass hallways, following directions of signs. No matter how many times she had been down this way, Hokura always seemed to have difficulty finding the medical facility. There were tons of hallways and rooms for uses that she couldn't even imagine; large rooms that needed pass cards to get into and large spaces that were used for experiments that only the highest-ranking scientists of the original team had access to. Also, the GMO facility, where their food supply was continually being created and grown.

“Oh, why is it that I never pay attention to where this place is.” Hokura sighed to herself, leaning up against a wall as she held onto the canvas, trying to get her bearings.

“You look lost.” A kind voice came from behind her. Hokura sighed as she recognized it right away. She turned to come face to face with Doctor Allen.

“Doctor.” Hokura blushed, not wanting to admit that she was lost.

“What do you have there?” Allen asked, staring at the canvas.

Hokura smiled. She didn’t know what to say, so she held the canvas out in front of her. “This is for you. It’s a tiger lily. A flower from one of the books that you gave me with the photos of old-world vegetation and plant life,” Hokura commented, handing the canvas to the doctor.

“Oh, Hokura, it’s lovely! We’ve actually been able to create a genetic offset identical to this in the Ecco greenhouse. You did an excellent job, thank you so much,” Doctor Allen complimented, smiling warmly at her while taking the painting and staring at the brightly decorated canvas. “I always said we should use you as an artist around here. We have so many offices with white walls that could use a splash of color.” He chuckled.

“Like the old-world art museums!” Hokura chimed in, and Doctor Allen chuckled again.

“Indeed, my dear. I’m sure with your talent. We could have a room full of your artwork.” He placed a warm hand on Hokura’s shoulder. “Now, let’s get down to the medical wing. The professor will be waiting for us.” He led the way, with Hokura following beside him.



The two entered the medical facility, it wasn’t only used as a medical research lab, but it’s west wing also served as a hospital for the people of the city. In total, there were three hundred civilian medical rooms, five standard operating rooms, and over fifty research development rooms. The clinic took up one-third of the bottom of the facility. Its size was massive compared to the rest of the area’s that

Hokura had visited, although she had never been to the hospital's civilian clinic. She knew it had to be large enough to accommodate a city of over one hundred thousand people, even though there were always complaints of dwindling health aid and medical staff. Hokura knew the professor and the compound did what they could to keep everything running smoothly.

Doctor Allen turned down the hall and took Hokura into the facility's main research area where she had first awakened. They walked through a pair of large doors and then entered a room to the left, where the professor was waiting.

“Ah, good, you both made it here. I was worried for a minute that you would have a hard time finding the location again, Hokura.” The professor smiled.

Hokura looked around; she had never been in this room before. There was an examining table to the side of the room and a large CAT. scanning machine in the middle towards the wall. The room seemed darker than most; cupboards and shelves held regular medical equipment along with trolleys holding syringes of every sort.

“I need you to strip down to bare undergarments, please,” the professor ordered as he turned his back from her, checking a clipboard he had in his hand.

Doctor Allen turned his back to give Hokura her privacy. An act Hokura found strange. She had always been open about her body; the idea of finding shame or embarrassment in something that everyone had was foreign to her. Doctor Allen would be examining her anyway, so why did he turn now when he would be looking at her in a moment?

“Please have a seat on the table, Hokura. I’ll be over in a second,” the professor stated while he grabbed some examining tools.

Doctor Allen walked over to Hokura, keeping his eyes on her face as he did so. “How’s your head been since the incident?” he asked, shining a light into her eyes, and looking into them deeply.

“I’ve been suffering headaches and a ringing in my ears from time to time. Other than that, no physical effect,” Hokura answered, scratching her head.

“That was to be expected,” the professor chimed in, walking towards her with a syringe in his hand. He injected it into her arm, causing Hokura to flinch slightly. “I’m sorry for the pain, my child,” he apologized gently, rubbing her

arm, enjoying the contact with her.

“You see here, Doctor, I’m injecting her with an upped dosage of cells. Since her body was under stress after the accident, her cells may have slowed down in developing and possibly gotten weak. Hopefully, this boost will get her system fully going again,” the professor explained.

Doctor Allen nodded, glancing over to Hokura, who sat emotionless. She didn’t know what to say or how to feel towards the idea of her cells, possibly being inadequate. She just hoped that she would be allowed back on the force tonight.

“Now, Hokura, I need you to lay down on the machine over there. We need to do a body scan. I want to make sure that there’s no internal damage that we might have missed or that might have developed recently,” the professor ordered, stepping towards a desk that held the operating system for the CAT scan.

Hokura got off the examining table and did as she was told. Doctor Allen stared at her as she walked past him. He couldn’t help but steal glances at the first child; she was perfection itself, and yet she didn’t know it. That was a definite perk of the injections. Never in her life would she experience skin flaws. Never in her life would her body betray her. She would always be firm and toned. Her hair would always be healthy. She would forever remain young and beautiful.

Doctor Allen helped Hokura position herself on the table. As he touched her waist, she shivered. “I’m sorry,” he apologized profusely. “I guess I have cold hands.” He smiled.

Hokura nodded, but it wasn’t the temperature of his hands that made her tremble. It was having them upon her skin, which gave her a sensation that she had never felt before.

“Are you ready, Hokura?” Professor Dorian asked, looking up and over at her.

Hokura nodded as the process started.

She was scanned from head to toe as lights flashed over her. She closed her eyes to shield them from the brightness of the flashes. As quickly as the procedure had started, it was over.

“We’re done here,” the professor stated.

Hokura stood for a moment in silence, waiting to be told that she would be able to be off her leave and back on for the night.

“Doesn’t look like there’s any internal stress or damage. You got lucky this time.” The professor grinned at her kindly, looking at her scans.

Hokura nodded obediently. “I’m glad to hear it, sir,” she answered.

“You may get dressed now,” Doctor Allen said, his eyes faltering and glancing down at her. He handed Hokura her clothes as she blushed, taking them quickly.

Hokura dressed and resumed her position, waiting for the professor to give her the news. She desperately wanted to hear that she could go out and protect humanity with her two fellow friends.

The professor studied the scans for a few more minutes as both Hokura and Doctor Allen stood silently, waiting for his opinion. He cleared his throat and looked up at Hokura. “Do you feel ready to go back out there?”

Hokura stood tall as a smile formed on her face. “Yes, sir, it’s my duty to protect and serve. I’ve been incredibly restless the past few days.”

“Restless, indeed. I’ve noticed that you’ve been spending a lot of time in the training facility and at the time trial track. You’ve been improving,” the professor said. “Then you are back on duty as of tonight. I will see you at the briefing.”

Hokura nodded. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” She beamed with the good news.

“I’ll show Hokura back to the common area, sir,” Doctor Allen insisted, resting his hand upon Hokura’s shoulder.

“Yes, please do. We don’t want her getting lost and missing her first night back on duty.” The professor smirked and then winked at Hokura, who blushed at her horrible sense of direction when it came to the medical area.

Doctor Allen and Hokura walked down the vast hallways in silence. Doctor Allen eyed her as she silently strode beside him, then cleared his throat. “So, what’s it like?” he asked, knowing he would have to explain himself but just wanted to hear her voice.

“What’s what like?” she asked, still keeping pace.

“Knowing that you are the perfect image of mankind,” Doctor Allen

whispered.

Hokura stopped and turned to face him. “I don’t find any perfection in mankind,” she answered.

Doctor Allen licked his lips. “Is that the way you see the professor and me?” he asked, his throat feeling dry.

Hokura looked up into his green eyes. “No, you two are different. You two are trying to protect the people of the new world. You offer them medical treatment. Your work is to try and better mankind. You two work for the compound and government which has created this city, offered homes, and protection from the outside.”

Doctor Allen took a step back, staring back into her eyes. Her heart fluttered at the notion of this much attention from him. “And what about you, Hokura?” he asked.

Hokura took a second to consider her answer. “I don’t know. I have my duty. I was created to be a peacekeeper. A lot of mankind’s doings are a mystery to me even though I am human myself.”

“I feel sorry for you,” Doctor Allen replied, giving her a sympathetic look. “All you know is what you’ve been taught. You’ve been ignorant to everything but what’s been laid out in front of you. You have no clue about human relationships or how emotions work...”

Hokura gave a weak smile. “Maybe I’m best left ignorant, Doctor.” Inside she felt something, a warm feeling that she wanted to be close to Doctor Allen. She glanced longingly at him but didn’t know what to say. The Doctor had complimented her, and she’d shot it down. She felt childish in what was of her own stubbornness, or maybe it was her ignorance.

“Hokura, you can always talk to me if you have any questions,” he told her, placing his hand on her shoulder.

They heard a rather abrupt clearing of the throat. They both looked to see the professor standing in the hallway, staring at them.

“Doctor Allen, I forgot I need to have a word with you,” the professor said, giving him a hard stare.

Hokura had never seen the professor like this before; he almost seemed

upset.

“Yes, sir, right away,” Doctor Allen answered, looking back at the professor and then to Hokura.

“The exit is just down this hall and to the right,” he said, giving Hokura a bleak expression.

“Thank you, Doctor,” she answered, emotionless, and then turned to leave, making her way down the hallway and to the right as she walked. She wondered what had just happened. The professor almost seemed upset at seeing the two together talking; Amara’s teasing ways came fleeting back into her mind. “*I saw the look that the professor gave you, first child!*” Hokura banished the thought from her mind. The professor was her creator, her mentor if anything else, but certainly, he held no other emotions for her than that, or so she thought.



Hokura sat in the mess hall. It was dinner time, which was now being served at seventeen hundred hours. All meals had a duration of three hours to accommodate the hours of everyone working in the compound. Hokura sat in their spot in the cafeteria, and, as usual, she was waiting for Amara and Adam to meet her like they did every night. Hokura watched as Amara walked towards her; she was wearing navy blue tracksuit bottoms with a matching tank top.

“What a day of training! Nothing gets out frustration like some hand-to-hand combat.” Amara yawned as she stretched. Hokura beamed at her as she sat down. “I take it we’re waiting for the third child... always the last one.” Amara chuckled at her joke.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh about it. My alarm didn’t go off. I was rather enjoying a nice sleep for once,” Adam said, coming up behind the two and taking a playful swipe at Amara’s head.

“Hokura, are you back on tonight?” Amara asked as they both got up from the table to get themselves some food.

“As of tonight, I’m back out there.” Hokura beamed with the satisfaction of



knowing she would be able to be at her friend's side, back out defending the city and doing her job. She had felt useless while not being able to go out as the professor monitored her.

The three made their way to the cafeteria dinner buffet. Hokura loaded up on salads and some roast beef, whereas Adam filled his plate with different types of pasta. Amara took a bit of everything like she did every night, hoping to find something to her liking; in her words, *"it may be all the same when it's done, but that doesn't mean it has to taste like shit before it's digested."*

They all sat back down at their regular table as scientists and officers made their way into the hall. Most took their meals back to their offices or living quarters. Hokura quite enjoyed eating in the hall; it was the closest thing to "dining out" she would ever experience.

"I take it the appointment went well, then, today?" Adam said between mouthfuls of pasta.

Hokura put down her fork, which she was about to stuff into her mouth and looked up for a second. "It went well. No internal damage," she answered, not knowing what else to report. "Since I was allowed back on the force for tonight, everything must have been in order."

Adam nodded and went back to stuffing himself.

"What the hell is this?" Amara blurted with a disgusted look on her face.

Hokura raised an eyebrow and looked over to Amara's plate to see what she was making such a commotion about. "That's a yam," Hokura answered, giving Amara a strange look.

"Well, it tastes like a sweetened piece of cardboard! Adam, give me some of your food. It looks like it might taste better." Amara reached over to Adam's plate and took a large piece of what appeared to be lasagna.

"You said last time that you hated pasta!" Adam cried, trying to defend what he had left on his dinner plate.

"Yeah, but I apparently hate yams even more," Amara announced, stuffing some of the lasagna into her mouth.

Hokura giggled at the two as she ate. "You know, you can't just live off toast and sandwiches, Amara." It was the same thing every night at dinner, but she

never grew tired of the mealtime antics. “You should be happy that they have something other than just potatoes out there tonight.”

“You could be eating out of a tube,” Adam muttered, quietly taking another bite.

Hokura kicked him under the table and glared at him, hoping that Amara hadn’t heard.

“I bet the professor was delighted to see you, Hokura,” Amara teased, taking another forkful from Adam’s plate.

Hokura sighed in relief that Amara hadn’t heard Adam’s comment. The first child sat silently for a moment as she remembered the look on the professor’s face when he had called Doctor Allen back to talk to him. She wondered what had been so urgent and hoped that she didn’t get him in trouble for such small talk.

“Hello, earth to Hokura,” Amara said, waving her hand in front of Hokura’s face. “I was only teasing, you know.”

Hokura glanced at her friend, looking into her blue eyes. “I know,” she answered. “You know that the professor cares for all of us equally, though, Amara. I’m hardly his favorite. He’s taken great care and interest in all three of us.”

“He should. We’re his life’s work,” Adam chimed in, finishing the last of his food. “He put all his time and energy into the stem cell project, plus he’s created a scientific fortress to further the experiments. He lives for science, and we’re his biggest breakthrough.”

Amara nodded, as did Hokura; they both knew what Adam was saying was true. The professor had told them how he had fought tooth and nail with government officials after the first fifty lives were lost and about his struggle to perfect his science of stem cell research. It wasn’t until the last ten years that he had become liberated from the government and was seen as a higher-up after setting up the scientific facility and hospital for civilian use. He and the city’s governor seemed to work well together; they saw eye to eye in regard to keeping peace inside the city walls and helping its society grow and flourish.

“Well, I’m going to grab some more food,” Adam said as he got up, excusing

himself from the table.

“Bring me back some more of that lasagna!” Amara called to Adam, waving her hands at him. How she loved ordering him around, and yet it was all in fun; Adam knew that Amara would never take their friendship for granted.

As soon as Adam was out of hearing range, Amara closed into Hokura. “So, what about Doctor Allen? Was he happy to see you?” Amara said in a low tone, smirking.

Hokura blushed as she was caught off guard. “Doctor Allen is the professor’s assistant. He’s put just as much work into us. He was relieved to find out that I’m well enough to be back on tonight, as well.” Hokura knew that wasn’t what Amara wanted to hear. “He’s my friend, just like you and Adam.”

Amara let out a sigh, knowing she wasn’t going to get anywhere with Hokura on this topic. “Are you excited about tonight?” she asked, graciously changing the subject.

“Of course, I am!” Hokura beamed with excitement. “I can’t wait until briefing.”

Amara grinned at her friend’s excitement to be sent out into the night to do the job she was created for, to have her sense of purpose back again. “Are you at all nervous about going back out there after what happened?” she asked in a more serious tone.

“I haven’t overly thought of it. Honestly, being nervous about being out is most likely the furthest thing in my mind.” Hokura shrugged. “I’ll be sure to be more on guard tonight.”

Adam returned with a full plate. He sat back down and dished out a large serving to Amara. “So, what are you two going to be doing after dinner?” he asked as he commenced shoveling food into his mouth. Amara grabbed her fork and continued picking away at it.

“I say we go for a walk on the grounds. I haven’t been outside in a couple of days.” Hokura wanted to get out of the hold of the walls around her.

“Sounds good to me. Hopefully, the fresh air will perk me up,” Adam said with a tired look, and so they agreed that a walk around the perimeter was the perfect way to end their day before they went on duty.



As the one-hour curfew warning horns blared through the darkening sky, the three walked the back of the facility grounds, enjoying the fresh air and last hour before they were given their briefing and allowed into the city for their nightly duty.

“I wonder,” Hokura said, looking to the sky. “Do you think there’s any natural plant life left growing anywhere on earth?”

Amara shrugged, walking beside her. “Who knows? I’m sure there’s still something left out in the far regions of the world where the nukes didn’t hit. Somewhere far south or north, possibly.”

Adam cleared his throat. “I wonder if there are any free societies out there. You know, people living as they used to, in a city without walls, without curfews, without all this!” He spread his arms, looking at the perimeter walls that still held them in and away from the city.

Communication with the world outside the city didn’t exist. Meridiana had become self-reliant due to the compound. For all any of the three knew, it was like a vast fortress of four walls in the middle of the wasteland among rebel camps.

Hokura wondered to herself about the rebels; they were people, too, after all. She wondered where they got their resources from. Maybe they traded weapons with the civilians for those resources? Either way, everything they had couldn’t have been from the city; they must have been taken from another city or traded. There must have been another source that no one was aware of.

“And to think, beyond these walls, there’s an entire vast city that we protect, yet we never see its people,” Adam said, patting the cold stone wall.

“I wish I could see the city in the daylight... to visit the shops. Just for a day, just to see what it’s like,” Hokura said wistfully. She had only heard about the city from things the night watch had said.

“Don’t we all?” Amara said with a hopeful sigh.

“You both know it’s a long way from happening. It’s not in our best interest to be out there during the day,” Adam added.

“You’re such a mood killer, Adam.” Amara glared at him.

Hokura smiled, breathing in the air as the sky started to mix in bright oranges and pinks. “A girl can dream,” she whispered.

“Our briefing is at twenty-one hundred hours. We only have twenty minutes, so we’d best get back,” Adam commented, looking at his watch.



The three sat side by side on leather armchairs in the briefing room; across from them sat the professor at a large oak desk reading over reports. They knew to sit silently until the professor addressed them.

The briefing office was large but simple; it held four chairs, including the professor’s, a leather couch in the middle of the room, and several filing cabinets and bookshelves which held what Hokura figured were important documents. Hokura had always wondered if this was where the professor spent most of his time with Talon, the day and night watch commander, as they went over what was happening in the city. Surely, he also spent a large amount of time in the labs as well; the idea of the man being everywhere in the day seemed exhausting.

The professor sat wearing the same outfit as he did every day. He pushed his glasses up his nose as he continued to read until he cleared his throat and looked up. “Good evening, my children,” he acknowledged.

“Good evening, sir,” the three replied in unison.

“The night watch took after the rebels that were in the city last night but ended up losing their trail. This is unfortunate in our case. I see the rebels have been breaching the east wall nearly every other night. Adam, find out why they have such a strong interest in that area and if there are any warehouses or bunkers holding weapons or anything else of interest. If we can find out the exact location that they’re getting in, then we can have it guarded; if there’s a hole in the wall, we can have it reinforced.”

Adam nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Also, there have been reports that the rebels have been selling weapons to patrons in the city who have been using them for trade and resale. Apparently, the weapons have been stored in a large warehouse on the northwest side of the city. Amara, Hokura find the warehouse and take inventory of what they have stored there. Make sure you report in so we can send a transport truck to get everything out of there. I'm going to contact the night watch to see if they already know of the warehouse's location to see if I can make your lives any easier. Once everything is done, and the weapons are transported away, destroy the warehouse."

Amara and Hokura nodded. "Yes, sir," they replied.

The three then stood up, bowed their heads, and exited to the locker rooms.

"A seek and destroy mission, how lame! It doesn't look like we're going to be tangling with any rebels tonight," Amara mused as she peeled off her tank top.

"Well, I guess it can't always be fun and games," Hokura replied, walking to her locker. The locker room was fair-sized and had lockers along the wall of each side with a bench in the middle. Off to the far right were the showers, where there were ten separate stalls to allow privacy. "To be honest, I'm kinda looking forward to a peaceful night." As Hokura opened her locker, a note fell out. Hokura picked it up to examine what it read:

*Dear Hokura*

*I know your original suit was damaged in the blast; I would be honored if you would wear the new prototype. Please be careful tonight.*

"Signed the professor," Hokura said after reading the note.

"You get to wear the prototype? You really are the professor's favorite," Amara chimed in teasingly as she got dressed.

Hokura unfolded the suit. It looked no different than her old one. A one-piece

black catsuit with no sleeves, the material was made of an almost-liquid metal, yet it was incredibly soft to the touch. Hokura undressed and pulled on her suit. “Doesn’t feel any different. I’m sure it has the same technology as the old one, just upgraded, perhaps,” she said while checking out the fabric and how it melded to her body like a second skin. All the suits possessed microchip technology, which monitored things such as heart rate and body temperature, in which case the suit would cool or heat the body; it was also flame resistant and protected the wearer from possible exposure to radioactivity.

“You ready?” Amara asked, giving her back a stretch.

“As always!” Hokura grinned as the two exited the locker room and made their way down the hallway to the large storage garage which held all the watch’s vehicles. Adam was already waiting at the door, along with the professor.

“You are to take the bikes tonight. Remember, though, if you are to leave the vehicle behind for any reason, you must activate their self-destruct mode. Their internal computer stores valuable information on how to access this facility. If it got into the wrong hands, who knows what disasters it could spell out? Also, as always, the night watch is on duty. If you spot any civilians breaking curfew, you are to have them reported immediately. There are dangerous operations going on, and we don’t want to risk any civilian fatalities, understood?”

The three nodded.

“I expect you all back by three hundred hours tonight. These operations shouldn’t take long. If you run into any problems, make sure that you message back here,” the professor finished.

Talon then came up behind the professor. The man looked older and more hardened. He had a shaved head and always seemed to have stubble on his face. His nose was slightly crooked from being broken several times. “One of our transport trucks is down tonight, so it might take some time between dropping off watch shifts to get back to you,” he stated and looked over at the professor, giving him a leering glance. “The report on the location we’re seeking out tonight is in your office, sir.”

The professor merely nodded, excusing himself after wishing the

peacekeepers the best of luck on their mission.

The three entered the garage.

“Oh, baby, I’ve been waiting to get back on this thing!” Amara cheered as she ran over to her red sports bike. “Have you missed me?” she cooed, placing her arms over the polished chrome, and hugging the seat.

Adam rolled his eyes, and Hokura giggled. “You two have a good night,” Adam said as he mounted his green bike and secured his helmet.

“You, too,” Hokura answered, getting on her blue bike. “Don’t let the rebels keep you up all night.”

Adam nodded and smiled at Hokura. Amara revved her bike as the large garage doors opened, revealing the city world. Hokura sighed with a smile of relief to be back out.

“Let’s give them hell!” Amara cried as the three kicked into gear. Adam headed east as Amara and Hokura made their way up the street.

The professor’s voice came in over the livewire connection in Hokura’s helmet. “I have confirmation about the whereabouts of the warehouse. It’s on Sixth and West Avenue. You can enter from the back loading dock. You have two hours to do inventory. A transport truck will be there shortly after.”

Hokura nodded. “Understood, sir.” She motioned to Amara to follow her as the two drove through the silent trash-littered streets of the city, keeping their eyes open for civilians breaking curfew.

Hokura stared up at the large apartment buildings; they were like those from the old world, cracked and worn looming over the city streets. There were no houses in the city; everyone had a similar apartment for their family, larger families had larger living areas that housed them, but everything was divided equally.

The shop windows were mostly barren. In a few, there were clothes; in others were old-world pieces of literature. The compound always had a say in what could be sold and what was to be stored at the compound when it came to old-world artifacts. The buildings were mostly concrete and brick, with an odd piece of greenery or vegetation growing on them. Weeds that somehow survived randomly sprouted or patches of long grass alongside the sidewalks were the



only greenery; Hokura had never seen flowers or trees inside the city. The compound held a large facility specifically for plants where only certain botanists were able to access. They hoped that one day they would be able to plant vegetation outside in the harsh new environment, but until then, they were kept under specialized lights with the proper humidity and balanced atmosphere that they needed to survive. They also had a large greenhouse garden, which was more accessible with successful hybrids. Every day the scientists seemed to make new advances.



The two arrived at their destination half an hour after they departed from the compound.

“It’s awfully quiet,” Amara said, looking over to Hokura, who stared at her watch, prudently thinking.

“It’s also still early. I don’t think there’s anyone around. I doubt the rebels would be transporting weapons here this early in the watch,” Hokura answered. “We’ll drive up back but stay cautious and keep your eyes open.”

The two drove to the back loading dock. Since there was no sign of any rebel vehicles, Hokura motioned to Amara, and they drove their bikes right into the warehouse through the open dock.

“Quiet night,” Hokura commented, taking off her helmet and tossing her hair around to air it out from the helmet’s warmth.

“No, kidding. Not a person in sight. The night watch must really be cracking down on people breaking curfew nowadays,” Amara replied, removing her helmet, and looking around to see if there was any movement. She wasn’t about to let her guard down because she hadn’t seen any rebel activity; she knew better than that. Just because she didn’t see them didn’t mean there weren’t any around.

“Looks simple enough. This place is just a wide-open room,” Amara said with a whistle, staring up at the dusty rafters.

Hokura walked up to a work desk. Upon it lay scattered papers. “Looks like

half our work is done. There's a full inventory list right here." Hokura smiled, waving the documents in the air.

"How many pieces?" Amara called, walking over to a large block of wooden crates.

"Two hundred," Hokura called back.

Amara grinned wickedly, staring at the crates. "Looks like they alphabetized everything here for us," she called out.

Hokura walked over, staring at the list. "This, too. We'll double-check to make sure, though, but this will take no time at all."

Amara grinned. "No time at all. Each crate is labeled with its content and the quantity," she chuckled.

"Less work for us, now let's hurry up and get this over and done with," Hokura replied, ripping a lid off a crate, and counting the weapons inside.

The two sat resting their backs among the crates. "I don't think I've ever seen so many grenades before, let alone Beretta GLX 160s. What do you think they're planning to do with these kinds of weapons? Start some kind of war in the city?" Hokura mused, leaning her head back.

"Who the hell knows? What I want to know is how these civilians can even afford these things from the rebels? Yeah, they make a penance, but there's got to be something more to it," Amara answered, wiping the dust from her forehead.

Hokura merely shrugged, letting out a sigh and cracking her neck as she silently thought to herself, were the civilians fighting among themselves? Were they planning on starting some kind of war? She couldn't be sure herself but considering the onslaught of activity over the past two months, something was on the rise.

"Seems like these suits are getting a workout tonight," Amara complained. "I thought this technology was getting upgraded, but I'm still sweating!"

Hokura shifted. "It doesn't help that we're sitting in a humid, dusty warehouse. Even I'm sweating. Just imagine how hot we would be without the suits."

Amara made an annoyed noise. "Are you finding a difference in the

prototype?”

“A bit,” Hokura admitted. “Just be thankful we’re not the watch. They have to wear full army gear and don’t get the luxury of cooling suits.”

“Ugh! It’s been nearly two and a half hours! When is that stupid truck supposed to be here?” Amara whined, looking at her watch again.

“Obviously, that’s the problem with getting done quickly. Now, we wait. The truck should be here soon to transport the weapons out of here, and then we can destroy this place and get on with the evening.” Hokura wiped her brow of sweat in annoyance. The night air was starting to warm for this time of year, making it sticky inside the dusty old warehouse. There was nothing else to do than wait.

“I wonder, though,” Hokura said. “We’re the ones who are taking these weapons from the civilians. We’re the ones who control all the weapons. Are we right in doing so?”

Amara looked over at Hokura, who seemed to be off in her own world. “Ha, you know the law states that there are no weapons inside of city walls. Whatever these weapons were sold for won’t profit anyone. They’ll be used to kill and rob other civilians, not for protection, and you know that!” she scolded. “Man has nothing but himself in mind and will do anything to profit off of anyone else. The civilians know the laws, yet they still somehow have contact with rebels who breach the walls and buy weapons from them! It’s not like we’re holding these people to the city. They can leave whenever they want.”

Hokura’s eyes widened with such a thought. Leave the city? What existed outside of the city? Did anyone except the rebels even know? What even existed beyond the rebel camps? She couldn’t imagine.

Hokura heard a racket from outside, it sounded like a truck... but something was off. Right away, Amara took to her feet and peered out the dirt-stained window, cursing under her breath. “There’s trouble on the way,” she whispered to Hokura.

“What? That’s not the transport truck?” Hokura asked, raising an eyebrow.

Amara shook her head. “From the cloud of exhaust, it looks like a rebel group is coming this way. The truck isn’t here, so we’re going to have to lead them away until the truck can get here and load all these weapons in and get

them back to the compound. It looks like we're going to have some fun after all!" she cheered. "So, what's the plan? We just going to chase these guys around in hopes the damn truck will get here and will be finished by the time we get back, or can we just blow these guys to bits?"

Hokura shook her head. "I'm sure we can lead the rebels to the outskirts of the city if we cause them enough problems. They'd rather follow after us than tend to whatever business they might have here. There are enough explosives in those crates to level half the block."

Amara got on her bike and tenderly stroked it. "Looks like we get to take the bikes out for some midnight fun!"

Hokura nodded, putting on her helmet and mounting her bike. The two of them revved their engines and headed out the back in hopes of meeting the rebels further down the street. They drove their bikes towards the loud commotion. Sure enough, there were two rebel groups, each driving in an old all-terrain jeep that carried five people each.

Amara and Hokura sped past them.

Amara had picked up a piece of lead piping before they left the warehouse. She sheared it against one of the jeeps as she and Hokura drove past, hoping to get a rise out of the drivers.

"Hey, what the hell do you think you're doing?" the rebel driver of the damaged jeep screamed as Hokura and Amara turned on their bikes and stopped.

"Just improving that piece of shit vehicle you're driving." Amara cackled. Hokura stayed quiet; she knew Amara had a particular knack for irritating the rebels.

"Why, you friggin' bitch! You're going to pay for that!" he screamed.

Amara smiled cockily. "I'm sorry, I don't have any change on me," and with that, the two of them sped off on their bikes.

"That's it. We're gonna go after those two peacekeepers and see if they bleed!" the rebel driver shouted to the other as they all let out a good roar of a cheer in favor of chasing the two protectors down and showing them who was boss.

"The commander said we weren't supposed to engage with the

peacekeepers!” one of the rebels yelled back at the driver.

“Well, then the commander should have thought about doing his job instead of staying behind,” he sneered. “Besides, it’s just the two females.”

“Oh!” Amara cried. “The big bad rebel assholes want to pick a fight with the girls?”

The rebel driver scoffed. “When we’re done, I’m getting the cocky bitch, and I’m going to teach her some manners!” the driver shot back.

Amara smirked as she revved her bike, and she and Hokura sped off as the jeeps drove after them.

“The commander is going to have our heads.” The one rebel trembled.

“Shut up. We’re going to show those peacekeepers what we’re made of!”

Already down the street, Hokura rode up to Amara, who was wearing a wide grin. “Do you think they’ll actually follow us?” Hokura asked. Suddenly the two heard a pair of blaring horns blasting up from behind them. Hokura looked over her shoulder to see the two rebel vehicles hot on their pursuit.

“Does that answer your question?” Amara looked smugly at Hokura. “Let’s play.”

The two drove down 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue and then separated. Amara turned left down Quarter Street, going east towards South Avenue. Hokura turned left up Quarter Street, heading towards 5<sup>th</sup>. As the two peacekeepers split, so did the rebel groups.

Amara’s voice came over on Hokura’s livewire. “You know what to do. I’ll meet back up with you on the intersection of Holden Street and 6<sup>th</sup> in ten minutes.”

With that said, a set timer on Hokura’s helmet’s eyeshield started counting down from ten minutes. The red numbers glowed on the side as Hokura kept riding. She knew that to execute such a plan, she and Amara would have to be perfectly in sync with each other, or it could spell disaster. With the rebels right on her tail, Hokura took them down back alleyways weaving between buildings and back onto 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

One of the rebels tossed a grenade at Hokura’s back wheel, but the blast missed its target. The sound of the explosion gave Hokura an instant rush of

adrenaline as she started to sweat. Five minutes remained as she took a detour down a large alley making her way to 4<sup>th</sup>.

“Dammit, I hope that bought me enough time,” Hokura whispered to herself as another explosion went off to the side of her, catching her off guard. “Amara, I’m coming down south on Holden. Where are you?” Hokura called, connecting to Amara’s livewire.

“I’m on Holden coming up north. Contact will be made in two minutes,” Amara answered. Hokura could hear Amara cursing over the livewire. “Yeah, you like riding my ass? See if you can keep up with this!”

Hokura shook her head and pressed on down the desolate road, her eyes straining for visual as the timer counted down from thirty seconds. She was coming up on the intersection of Holden and 6<sup>th</sup>. Just then, as the counter started from ten seconds, Hokura saw her come out of nowhere. As the counter hit zero, the two bikes sped past each other merely inches apart, both maneuvering around the oncoming jeep with great speed and agility. The two rebel vehicles’ brakes squealed, followed by a large crashing sound as they hit head-on in an impact.

Hokura glanced back at the smoke from the wreckage. She looked to see Amara waving her free arm in the air. She could hear her friend screaming and hollering with joy when she suddenly came back over the livewire.

“Great job. I’ll meet you back at the warehouse so we can finish up.”

Hokura rather enjoyed the peaceful easy ride back. She imagined the silent streets flooded with people, children playing with friends, people conversing over whatever the civilians talked about. She could hardly imagine what the city would look like in the light of day, for she had never seen it; she thought it would be bright and full of life.

When she arrived at the warehouse, she saw Amara handing the inventory list to the transport truck driver as the last crate was being loaded in; she was yelling at the driver.

“Well, if you would have been here on bloody time, we would have been here to help you load the damn crates. Besides, isn’t that what the night watch is supposed to help with?” Amara bellowed.

“They’ve been busy with their own shit tonight,” the driver snapped back. “It’s not my damn fault that I had to do all the drop-offs tonight,” he continued, waving his hand out his open window and drove off.

Hokura walked up to her friend, who was wearing an annoyed expression.

“You okay? You seem a little on edge,” Hokura asked, giving Amara a concerned glance.

“They had grenades,” Amara said in a solemn tone.

Hokura was about to put a consoling hand on Amara’s shoulder when she erupted.

“Those explosions sent shrapnel flying all over the damn place! They scraped the hell out of my bike! I just had this thing painted, too! Can you believe the nerve of some people?”

As Amara was ranting, Hokura made her way over to the parked red bike to examine it, to see this catastrophic damage that Amara was talking about.

“You mean this little scrape right here?” Hokura pointed.

“That thing has got to be like four inches long, and it’s deep!” Amara whined.

“More like two and a half centimeters, and it’s just a paint chip. Some touch-up paint, and you’ll never even notice,” Hokura commented.

“I’ll notice! The whole thing needs to be re-painted.” Amara pouted while crossing her arms.

Hokura tried not to smirk at her friend’s apparent rage, so she excused herself. “I’ll set up the explosives.” She walked past Amara to her own bike, lifted the seat, and grabbed a small box. Hokura disappeared into the now cleared out warehouse.

Amara directed her attention back to her bike. “I know it’s just a paint chip,” she moaned, touching the scrape, “but still, I’ll notice.” Amara always put on a show about how much she loved her bike, but deep down, she really did. It was the only thing in this world that made her feel free. When she rode it, she controlled her destiny, not the government, not the professor, just her. It was her only way of escaping the real world of the science compound, of her life without a past. Amara could feel the hint of a tear in her eye but brushed it away as she

heard Hokura's footsteps approaching.

Hokura walked up to Amara and passed the detonation device to her friend. "To help you grieve your loss," Hokura said with a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

Amara beamed, taking the device in her hand and took a deep breath. "Die, you bastards!" she screamed as she hit the device, and the building in front of them collapsed.

Hokura shook her head. "Must you always scream such obscenities? Where did you get such language from anyway? Certainly not the professor," she said, getting back on her bike.

Amara grinned, glad that she was back working with her. "I learned it from the night watch. It helps the mood. You really should try it someday."

Hokura shook her head again, giving Amara a warm look. "It's good to be back." She noticed the livewire on her bike helmet was lighting up and quickly put it on to hear the voice of the professor.

"I just got word that you two were successful in capturing the warehouse. Good job! You might as well come back to the compound for the night. Hokura, you might be back on the force, but rest is still important," he stated.

"Yes, sir!" Hokura answered and turned to Amara, still smiling.

"Let's go home." The two revved their bikes as they slowly made their way back to the compound, each silently enjoying each other's company and the silence of the night in a city that they only saw when everyone else was locked down under curfew. Hokura thought of all those people, sleeping soundly as the three of them protected them from the unknown. All these people had lives, had pasts, had futures, had families...



Hokura and Amara walked out of the garage side by side. "Funny, it's been quite some time since we've been back this early," Amara said, looking at her watch; it was nearly two in the morning.

"Don't complain about an easy night's work. Who knows when we'll get it



again,” Hokura replied. Amara yawned as the two made their way down the hallway.

“So, what are you going to do, just go to bed?” Amara asked in a sleepy tone.

“I want to thank the professor for the new suit,” Hokura replied sheepishly, hoping Amara wouldn’t start in with her. “What are your plans?”

Amara yawned again. “I was going to wait for Adam and catch a movie, but I think I’ll watch some television and pass out on the good old couch.”

Hokura chuckled. “Still not sleeping in your bed?”

Amara shook her head. “The couch is more comfortable anyway.”

Hokura let it slide; she knew Amara was tired and wasn’t about to harass her.

“Have fun hunting down the professor,” Amara said.

After bidding each other goodnight and going their separate ways, Hokura checked the briefing room, but he wasn’t there. The compound’s silence filled Hokura’s ears; no one was about, but then again, it was late. She was sure that all the scientists had left their laboratories and had turned in for the night hours ago. “Maybe he’s already left,” Hokura said to herself to fill the void of silence. She had no idea where the professor’s quarters were. She started on her way to her living quarters when she heard the heavy familiar footsteps of the professor.

“You two did good tonight,” he congratulated her.

“I wanted to thank you for the suit,” Hokura said; she was still wearing it. That night she and Amara both decided they were too tired to change and shower in the locker rooms and would rather do so in the comfort of their own quarters.

“You’re very welcome,” the professor said, placing his hands on her shoulders and giving them a slight squeeze, staring into her eyes.

Hokura felt her heart race.

“I hope you have a good evening and enjoy the rest of your night. You deserve it,” he continued, lightly squeezing Hokura’s shoulders again.

“You, too, sir.” Hokura’s voice cracked. She stared at the professor as he walked back down the hall, not moving until she saw his shadow disappear.

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Hokura was exhausted; she decided she would shower in the morning as she undressed, then quickly fell into bed. She suddenly felt like her whole body was a lead weight. The night engulfed her into a heavy sleep that cradled her through the night.

In the night, Hokura heard a familiar voice around her.

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“This is one of the three left,” a voice echoed.

“She’s the youngest of them all. A dosage that large might kill her,” another voice whispered.

Hokura could feel a warm white light shining down upon her naked body as she lay perfectly still, not opening her eyes. She could feel the familiar presence of the scientists around her.

“Do you really want to go through with this?”

“Monitor her stats and go through with the procedure. Inject her with painkillers first. I want to keep her from the pain.” It was the professor.

“Sir, she’s in a coma...” a voice started in but was cut off.

“I don’t care, dammit, do as I say,” the professor’s voice reamed in again.

Hokura could feel a gentle hand upon her cheek, stroking it.

“Sir, even if we inject her with all the painkillers, we have no idea if this will still affect her.”

With that, Hokura felt a pinprick into her arm, and then another in her spine. She then felt a heatwave of pain. She started to shake uncontrollably like her body was being attacked. The pain as her system shut down and another wave of heat shot through her body.



Hokura awoke screaming as her head throbbed. She held it, crying, trying to control herself. “Why? Why does it hurt?” she cried as sweat beaded on her body. She reached blindly over to her nightstand, feeling for a syringe, trying to fight the pain. Her whole body rocked in pain as she grabbed it and injected it into her arm. She fell back into her bed as her heart rate soared, and as the pain rocked her entire body, Hokura passed out, letting go of the syringe, dropping it to the floor.

Short moments later, Hokura’s door burst open.

“Get her to the medical facility right away,” the professor yelled as medical staff rushed into the room.



Twenty miles outside Meridiana’s city limits, the rebel commander sat by a low fire warming his hands. His expression was as gruff as the stubble on his face. His green eyes watched as the flames licked up, and the light breeze blew his shoulder-length dark brown hair in his face. His back was still sore from spending the night before loading weapons into a large rebel vehicle for export. Even though he was young at twenty-three, the long hours of work he put in were starting to tire his muscular build. These past two weeks alone felt as though they had aged him a decade; he had felt tired, not just physically but mentally, too. He glared as he looked up to see a young rebel coming towards him; by the way, he held himself, it wasn’t good news.

“Sir, the two bands, are back from the city,” the young rebel offered. The commander stared up at him, knowing there was more by the expression he wore.

“Well?” he asked, tiring of the young rebel’s silence as he jittered up and

down. "Sir, they ran into the peacekeepers tonight. They lost both vehicles."

The commander's eyes glared at the fire. "Damn." He tried to conceal his anger; he knew it wasn't the troops' fault. "Tell them where I am. I want to know what happened."

With that, the young rebel saluted and was off as quickly as possible to alert the troop. "We can't keep losing vehicles like this," the leader huffed, grabbing his silver flask next to him and took a good hard swig, the whiskey rolling to the back of his throat. It burned... good stuff.

"Commander James?" one of the troop members asked, limping up to where he was sitting.

"Yes, soldier, come sit and tell me what happened tonight," James said, wiping the alcohol from his lips with his hand. He didn't bother making eye contact with the man. He didn't want to give off that he was disappointed, that yet again, another mission had failed, and that his patience with his rebel troops was starting to dwindle.

"Sir, we were on our way to the warehouse when out of nowhere, the two female peacekeepers came on bikes. They lead us on a chase through the city. They were bright, sir. They knew what they were doing. They had a perfectly executed plan," the rebel stuttered.

"Just get on with it, soldier," James grumbled, shifting his weight, still staring into the fire.

"As I said, sir, they lead us on a chase. Each vehicle followed one, and we ended up in an accident. Both vehicles collided head-on and were ablaze before we knew it. Our two groups barely got out alive, then the night watch was on us," he continued.

James' eyes narrowed as he let out a small chuckle. "Two groups of our hardest trained troops were beaten by two girls? Fucking pathetic."

"That's not all, sir," the rebel continued; he was shaking in anxiety.

James could tell in his voice there was more. He didn't have to look over to the soldier to know he was shaking. James waited patiently for the bad news as the rebel took a shaky breath in.

"Sir, they destroyed the warehouse..."

“What!” James screamed, getting up from the fire and glaring into the troop’s eyes. “You’re telling me that not only did they lead you in a game of cat and mouse but also that they had and took the full opportunity to destroy the warehouse as well?” He fumed; it had taken weeks to gather that shipment of weapons for the civilians, not to mention a week’s worth of nights to store them, and within a matter of twenty-four hours, all of their efforts had gone to waste.

“I’m sorry, sir, we did everything we could... but we...” the man stuttered as James looked away in disgust, “it... it wasn’t all of them, last night half the crates were already taken along with the inventory slips, so the civilians were still able to get a fair share of them...”

“That means nothing! The warehouse was still destroyed, and those weapons are still gone!” The rebel commander paced angrily, needing to move. “I guess from now on. I’ll be taking matters into my own hands and will be leading every mission to make sure you idiots don’t foul things up! You’ve been told time and time again to avoid the peacekeepers at all costs,” he growled darkly. He turned to the man. “Get the hell out of my sight!”

The rebel troop member ran off as quickly as he could, thankful to escape the wrath of their great leader.

“Dammit,” James moaned, sitting back down by the fire as he held his head in frustration. “The civilians get to deal with the loss, no skin off my back.”

He rolled his head, cracking his neck as he took another swig from his flask. He was drinking a lot more lately; he had a lot more reasons to drink away the past few weeks. He knew that he should have gone into the city to ensure that all plans were being executed properly. How many times had the rebels been told to be cautious about the peacekeepers? To avoid them, and that if they came into contact with them, they were to abandon the mission and set it back up for another night. Why they had agreed to export the weapons into the walls in the first place, he didn’t fully understand. Then again, there was nobody else on the outside to do it, and it accounted well for the rebels in trade for goods such as clothing and food. They just needed a little more time, and then they would be on their way again. Like always, this was just another pit stop as they traveled to find a place untouched by the war.

James stared into the fire. He was happy that his quarters were a way from tent city where the rest of the troops camped. Life as a rebel was a hard one, but at least they held more freedom than the civilians of the city. They didn't have curfews; their land held no boundaries; their laws were simple... give and take equally.

They had been on the move for some time now, forever trying to find a place they could finally call home. They had initially started in a small town, but once supplies ran low, the people grouped together and started on their way, trying to find what was left of the world. For years, they would camp where they could find resources; their numbers grew as they took on more people, all searching for the same thing.

He could hear the cheers in the distance as his fellow brothers drank happily. There was always food and always drinks to go around. They weren't such hardened people. Most of them came to the rebel camp with families. Only those who wished to be soldiers and help the cause did so; the rest of them were allowed to come and go as they pleased.

"This anarchy shit has to stop," James grumbled to himself.

It had gotten late in the night, but he was nowhere near tired. He decided to stretch his legs. He walked past his tent after dousing the fire. They were old army tents that the rebel band had found from old war camps. They were large and sturdy and perfect for the desert. He made his way over a sandbank. The night air was dry, and he welcomed the soft breeze as it swept up the sand around his feet.

He breathed in deeply, looking back at the camp as a dull light illuminated from it. A small smile crept across his face. He had hope that someday the new world would all fall under one government, one that was fair, where there was no war, where everyone could live in peace... the way it was before the nuclear war had manipulated mankind into the controlling beast it had become. He knew there were still cities out there, ones without walls. His father had told him about them plenty of times.

James was from a strong bloodline of men and leaders; it was in his blood to lead these people to the truth and to one of those cities. The commander turned

back away from the camp below and sat in the soft sand as he looked up at the stars, which shone above the desolate wastelands.

After some time, James walked back to the camp, where he could hear the booming voice of Barack telling his tales of living inside the city of Meridiana. The man had become his father's best friend and was now considered James' right-hand man. He had been in his mid-thirties when his father had come upon him. Barack had been a scientist in the compound and had somehow escaped the walls of the city. As far as James knew, he had been the only one to ever escape. Looking at him now with his wiry wild red hair and long beard, he looked more rebel than civilian; then again, he had been a rebel for a few years now.

"The compound is like nothing any of you could imagine. It could hold this entire camp in the cafeteria alone. It houses all of the lead scientists and government officials that had created the city," he went on. "I was told when it was first created, it housed the civilians as well, but as the new government stepped forward, the walls of the city quickly went up, and the civilians were put to task to help rebuild the apartment blocks. They were given rations and tasks to improve the city but leaving the city is punishable by death. It was never clear to me why there was such a law and why the compound didn't want anyone leaving. My guess is they didn't want people bringing back looters or raiders."

"What about the peacekeepers?" someone shouted.

"They were a creation of Professor Dorian, the head scientist of the genetic stem cell research department. Once the walls went up, the civilians in the city started crime waves. They sent soldiers out to deal with them night after night, but it was no use. He was determined to create a super-soldier. Years prior, he had tested his project on himself, and when he was able to get enough headway, the government allowed him, fifty children, to test on..." The man cleared his throat for a second while more rebels gathered around him and sat as they listened intently. "The experiments were a failure, but somehow his persistence with the governor had gotten him twenty more children. Three of them survived. These peacekeepers were created to be the city's protectors, immortal in the sense that they never age or become ill. They were to be the ultimate super soldier and the most advanced being ever created."

“This professor was playing God!” a woman shouted.

“The whole compound is playing God! How can they create such a thing?” a man cried from the crowd.

“Have you ever seen them?” another shouted out as the others continued along with the questions.

Barack grinned. “I did see one. The first child, Hokura, had just awakened a few months before I escaped. I was almost expecting to see some sort of soulless monster, but instead, I saw a beautiful and bright young woman who had an amazing potential to be a great leader.” Barack looked up at that moment and saw James standing just beyond the crowd that had gathered. He smiled. “Possibly a great match to help lead our great leader in what we’re looking for.”

The crowd cheered as they turned towards the commander. James merely grinned as he crossed his arms and shook his head, walking towards Barack.

“My friend, who’s to say a great man such as myself, needs a woman to lead him in life?” James continued coming around, patting his friend on the back.

“You know I like to ruffle your feathers, boy,” Barack said as he grinned.

“I know, my friend.” James was feeling much better after his stroll out into the desert. He always felt better after having time to clear his head.

“My friends,” James addressed the crowd. “I promise you, just as my father did, never will we have a curfew, never will we have decisions made for us! I promise we will always live in a free world! We know there are still free cities out there, and we will find one!” With his words of encouragement, a great cheer went up from the camp as everyone was renewed from the night’s troubles.

As James turned away from the hollering crowd, Barack placed his heavy hand on him. “You seem in a good mood after tonight’s fatalities.”

“Only setbacks. I feel something in the air tonight, that our hard work will pay off and that all our efforts will come through for us. We have lots of food, and we are set for some time now,” James said, looking at his large friend.

“Good way to look at it, sir.” Barack nodded.

“Tomorrow night, I shall start leading the troops out into the city. I’ll need your knowledge since I’ve rarely gone inside the walls, and even then, I had my father guiding me,” James said as the two walked away from the large group



who were talking amongst themselves.

“Is that wise, though? What would your people do if anything happened to you? We couldn’t bear to lose you so young. There’s no one here who would be able to take your place and lead them. Think of your people. After your father’s recent death, to lose another so soon...” Barack whispered, concerned at what he was hearing.

James laughed away the ache of being reminded. “My friend, you worry too much.” He continued walking, a stern look coming over his face as he was contemplating something. Barack walked silently beside him, trying to read his expression. “If anything were to happen to me, I would want you to lead these people, Barack,” James told him, turning to his friend. “You know every law inside that city, every nook and cranny... you were there. If anything were to happen, promise me that you would take my place. Besides, once the civilians are content with their weapons for their uprising, we’ll be on our way as usual. Promise me that you’ll continue on where I left off and get these people to a home where they can finally settle.”

Barack stood silently for a second. “It would be an honor,” he replied, giving James a nod of respect.

James grinned at him and, with the same respect, returning the nod. “But know that I don’t plan on dying anytime soon,” he added with a wink.

Barack laughed at James’ snide attitude. His father held the same attitude before he was lost, and his son took over. James was still young, with no heir to take over his duties. He had never found love, nor did he ever show any desire to do so. He was a solitary soul out to fulfill the duty of his father.

“Tell me, though, what is your honest opinion. Do you think the peacekeepers destroyed the weapons along with the warehouse we were storing them in, or do you think they took them back to the compound?” James asked as the two walked back towards his tent.

“I doubt they would let those weapons go to waste. Even the night watchers have handguns on them at all times, along with the civilian police and peacekeepers. If they had any idea that there’s going to be an uprising, you’d better believe they’re keeping them in case a war inside the city were to break

out,” Barack replied, giving thought to his answer, and scratching his chin. “I was no longer living in the compound when the peacekeepers were assigned any sort of duty. All I can tell you is what I’ve seen with my two eyes and know from working in the compound,” he continued.

James nodded as he walked around, but his comrade could tell something other than the weapons were on his mind.

“You look frazzled,” Barack commented as James gazed forward. He shook his head as he came back to the present.

“In my heart, I truly wonder about the peacekeepers. I don’t label them as the enemy. I believe they’re misguided. If all you ever knew were that which was taught to you by one view, then you would never see things the way others do,” James said as he continued to walk on, lost in his thoughts.

“Sir?” Barack offered.

James turned to face his friend; he sighed lightly. “I don’t believe that these people are the enemy. If we could tell them about the ‘before’ times, about how the government and law used to be, then maybe they would see things differently. Perhaps if we were to warn them about what’s happening, they would listen to us.”

Barack snorted. “You sound like your father. But if I know the professor, he’s completely brainwashed those poor souls into thinking that we’re the enemies and that life within the city walls is considered normal. They most likely don’t even know the laws of being a citizen, from childbearing to the laws of contributing to the city. It’s like slave labor in there, and if you so much as act anything but grateful, then you’re deemed treasonous, and the compound does whatever they like with you.” Barack shook his head. “The only ones who live free lives are those who live in the compound, and even they’re told what to do. The scientists and government officials all have jobs that they’re ordered to do, but at least they can leave the compound and go into the city as they please in their spare time. Then again, they had us working around the clock to the point we couldn’t even have our own lives.”

“I’m surprised more people haven’t fled the city,” James wondered, kicking at some burnt wood from the fire he was sitting at earlier; they were now in front

of his private quarters.

“The walls of the city are heavily guarded during the day, and at night, if anyone is caught breaking curfew, they’re dealt with severely. I was lucky. I fled the compound and hid along the wall and was able to find a way out. I was even luckier I met your father shortly after, or I would have been done for... of course, that was back before the peacekeepers were sent out,” Barack replied, thinking of the fateful day he left the city walls.

“My father never told me the story about how you two met,” James said, looking up at Barack with tired eyes.

“I promise, I’ll sit down with you one day and go over everything with you, but tonight you should rest. If you are to go out and lead in the city tomorrow, you need to be fully alert” Barack smiled, putting his large hand on James’ shoulder. “I will get you a detailed map of the city and have it sent to you for tomorrow’s operation.”

James nodded in agreement as he stretched. “Thank you. I guess it is that time.” He yawned, and he bid his friend goodnight and made his way into his large tent.

James walked into his tent. He lit a kerosene lamp, which was sitting on a small table next to the door. He took off his torn black sleeveless shirt and tossed it onto his dresser. His tent was relatively spacious, at 250 feet, which included a small eating area with a few makeshift cupboards and an old school stove where he could heat his meals. There was a cold canteen cooler to the side of the eating area.

Beside the kitchen was the main area, which held a wooden table scattered with documents and maps, none of which were kept in order. All had been his fathers. Alongside the tent’s left wall was an old foam futon, where his father used to sleep, allowing James to take the bed, which was only a few feet from it, towards the back wall. He swore he could still smell his father’s lingering musky scent; it would be years before it would fade.

Everything seemed old and dusty from the sand in the wastelands, but to James, he wouldn’t want to be anywhere else than here doing his duty, which his father passed down to him.

He made his way to the canteen and grabbed a large jug of water; he drank it down greedily as drops splashed onto his bare toned chest. After having his fill, he returned the flask of whiskey that he had put in his pocket from when the rebel troop had told him of the night's misfortune. James stretched again, letting out a loud yawn, scratching his bare chest as he made his way to his bed. He kicked off his boots and lay down on the soft sheets running his hands over his forehead and into his long brown hair.

He rolled over to face the living area of the tent; he could almost see his father's form hovering over the desk of scattered papers going about his business as James slept. He could see his father's image so clearly, his short scruffy facial hair, his brown hair kept back with his red printed bandana, his green eyes full of knowledge, yet they were still youthful. It had been two weeks since his father had died. He was still too young to be taken out of James' life. He remembered the night he had found out. Barack found James in his tent, going over his father's maps waiting for his return when he received the news. They had transported his body back to the camp, but despite their best efforts, it had already been too late.

There weren't many details, other than his father had been in danger, and a grenade had been thrown. Unfortunately, his father had been at the brunt of the explosion. There was word of another body that had also been caught in the blast, but nothing else was ever revealed. The rebels who had been patrolling with him had nothing more to say about the incident.

James never knew why they refused to talk about it. Maybe it was just too hard to come to terms with the loss of their leader. James felt a pang of pain in his heart; his father had been his only role model. He had been strong and fearless. James carried every physical characteristic that his father had held. James had never known his mother. She had died shortly after he was born. His father always talked about what a carefree woman she was, how she always smiled, how she loved to tell stories of the old world. How he wished he could have known her. On the day his father was taken, Barack had brought James a key and locket that his father had always worn. Inside of it held a picture of his mother.

The young commander rolled back, facing the wall. He didn't want to think of this, not tonight when they had failed their mission. He felt lost in his leadership. His father always had a plan, always knew exactly what he was doing, and it seemed lately to James that there had been more casualties in the city than he would ever know how to prevent. He thanked his father silently for having a friend like Barack at his side. At least James wasn't alone in the world of the rebels. The thought of having someone by his side almost seemed selfish; he watched his father's private pain of losing his mother, knowing that his father would never have another woman by his side. James never wanted to experience the loss of a loved one after his father, yet he yearned for the comfort of having someone to love unconditionally.

The thought warmed his heart in a way he had felt when his father would show him pictures of his mother when he was just a baby. She was a beautiful woman, young and strong. She had long dusty blonde hair, brown eyes, a wonderfully bright smile. Every time James thought of his father smiling down at the picture of his mother, it made him believe there was hope and that someday there would be peace.

"Enough already," James grumbled to himself, cursing at his thoughts, and rolled over again, taking a deep breath of air. "Just sleep, dammit," He whispered to himself, repositioning himself in bed...just sleep.



Hokura awoke hours later to find herself staring up at the research lab's ceiling. She knew right away that she was in the medical facility compound, in the room where she had first awakened from the coma. Her head rolled over to see that her arm was stuck full of I. V's. She had monitor patches all over her body.

"Why am I back here?" Hokura whispered to herself. The night before was a blur.

She lay thinking about what could have caused her to be in the medical lab, was she injured while on duty? No, she didn't feel any pain or injury. Everything

was numb other than a sweat that lay upon her feverish body and a slight pain in her chest. Hokura's head lolled back over as she drifted back to sleep.

The professor sat inside a medical office not far from Hokura's room. He was going over her charts when Doctor Allen walked in.

"How's she doing, sir?" the doctor asked. He had come right away after hearing what had happened and had concern written all over his face.

"She's stable, heart rate, and everything is normal. She'll make a full recovery," the professor answered, still reading, not looking up at the doctor.

"It's a good thing one of the residents heard her screaming. Who knows what might have happened," Doctor Allen said. The professor only nodded. "What action would you like me to take, sir?"

"Just monitor her for now. I'm not up for drawing any conclusions just yet. This may be something as simple as being dehydrated and having a nightmare setting off her heartrate."

The doctor pursed his lips and nodded in agreement, leaving the professor to continue going over medical documents.

The doctor made his way over to Hokura's room. He peeked in at her, and when he saw that she was sleeping, he made his way in. He gently brushed some hair away from Hokura's face. She was breathing steadily and looked to be doing okay other than she was perspiring. Her vitals were all back to normal. The doctor wondered what could have happened the night before. The professor didn't seem at all worried, which brought some relief to his assistant.

Doctor Allen quickly took note of all the monitors, ensuring everything was showing up normal and that he hadn't overlooked anything. Then taking his leave, he exited the room and made his way to the cafeteria.



Amara and Adam sat at their usual spot in the mess hall as breakfast was being served. "It's not like her to be so late," Adam voiced, taking a casual sip of coffee.

Amara sat silently pondering before she spoke up. “She wanted to thank the professor last night. I wonder if something happened.”

Adam snorted at her with a glare. “Would you get off your theories already? The man has done nothing but good in leading civilization, and you still keep on your accusations about him. The man’s not evil.”

Amara bit her lower lip. She felt foolish for voicing such a thing. True, the professor was like a father to them, but she couldn’t help but feel something off about the man. The two sat in awkward silence for a moment as Amara tapped her foot rapidly. She felt anxious this morning. She tugged irritably at her jeans as her intuition was telling her something. The second child stared over at Adam, who seemed to feel just as out of place. She could see he was sweating under his cotton white shirt and that he too was suppressing his emotion as he clenched a fist to his baggy blue jean shorts, among them the scientists dressed in their lab coats made their usual morning rounds of coffee and muffins.

“Dammit, I can’t take this waiting anymore!” Amara cried, getting up from the table. Adam watched with a puzzled look.

“What are you doing?” he asked in a mock tone.

“I’m going to check her room,” Amara answered, turning around when a voice rang out from the other direction directly behind her.

“You won’t find her there.”

Amara and Adam turned to see Doctor Allen standing behind them.

“Hokura was taken to the medical facility around three this morning.”

Adam stared up at the doctor. “What happened?” he asked in a demanding tone.

The doctor let out a sigh, looking up at the two. “We don’t know exactly.”

“Why weren’t we informed?” Amara hissed in anger, taking the doctor by surprise.

“The professor didn’t inform me until just a short time ago, he said it was nothing serious, but if you would like to see her, I can take you,” the doctor answered.

Amara and Adam nodded and followed Doctor Allen to the medical facility.

Hokura had awakened to see the professor standing over her. “Professor,”

she whispered, bringing a hand to her head to feel the beaded sweat on her brow. “What happened to me last night?”

The professor walked over to the corner sink and soaked a white washcloth with cold water. “I’m honestly, not sure,” he replied, placing the cool compress on Hokura’s forehead. “How are you feeling?” he asked, gently staring down at her.

“I’m warm,” Hokura answered, rolling her head to the side to get a better look at him.

He took her hand in his and gently stroked it. Hokura’s stomach fluttered as the professor glanced at the heart rate monitor with a smirk and a twinkle in his eye that even his glasses couldn’t hide.

“Tell me, Hokura,” he licked his lips, still caressing her hand, “have you been feeling strangely towards people lately, towards my assistant and myself?”

Hokura glanced up again with sincerity beaming from her eyes. She was about to speak when the door to the room opened. The second child burst through the door running up to Hokura and draping her arms over her. The professor took a quick step back to see the third child and his assistant following behind her.

“Hokura, I was so worried!” Amara cried, hugging her friend tightly.

Adam walked up to the bed with a wide grin as the doctor joined them.

“Have we come to a conclusion yet, Professor?” Doctor Allen asked, staring at his mentor.

The professor bowed his head slightly, meeting the eyes of his colleague. “It’s not certain, but I have reason to believe this was a result of a possible panic attack, possibly a dream or sensation of the incident that happened a few weeks ago,” he answered. “She should be fine, but I’d like to keep her here for a few hours more just to make sure,” he added.

“Looks like you get to miss breakfast,” Adam stated, trying to make light of the situation. Hokura smiled back, bringing an arm up as Adam bent down to hug her.

As Adam hugged Hokura, the professor turned to the monitor to see if there was a change again. He grinned brightly to see that the third child had no effect



on her.

“You’ll be out soon.” Adam encouraged her with an affirmative nod.

“Yeah, you just got back on duty, no more visiting here for a while after this,” Amara chimed in, hoping to boost Hokura’s spirit.

“Thank you, both of you,” Hokura said, lightly brushing away a stream of water that was making its way from the cloth down her cheek. She then turned to Doctor Allen, “and thank you, Doctor, for bringing them.” She smiled warmly.

The professor turned and glared at the monitor.

“It was nothing,” Doctor Allen replied, placing his hand on Hokura’s arm, giving it a gentle rub.

The professor was still staring hard at the monitor with his teeth clenched. He shut his eyes and breathed deeply, regaining his composure. This was merely a minor setback. He reminded himself.

“I’m sorry to interrupt you all, but I must insist that Hokura gets her rest,” the professor announced, turning to the three. “Doctor Allen will escort you two back to the compound facility.”

The doctor was taken back by the professor’s persistence. “Yes, sir.” He nodded as Amara and Adam said their goodbyes and followed him out.

“Thank you for allowing them to visit. Those two are everything to me,” Hokura said, faintly glancing up at the professor.

“Of course,” he answered, running his hand down her arm, and finding her hand in comfort. A pleasurable smile washed over his face; alas, he was alone with her again. Finally, he spoke after a long moment of staring at her as she rested with her eyes closed. “Do you enjoy your life, Hokura?”

She blushed; her eyes opened slightly. “You’ve granted me a wonderful purpose, Professor,” she answered before falling asleep.

The professor grinned wickedly as he sat, staring at her sleeping form, entranced by the way her chest would rise and fall as she gently breathed. He injected her once more, still smiling. “Oh, Hokura, your purpose has yet to be fulfilled,” he whispered.



Amara was following the doctor alongside Adam when she stopped.

“What is it?” Doctor Allen asked, looking back at her, confused.

Amara took a breath of courage for what she was about to say. “Doctor Allen, Hokura isn’t in any danger, is she?”

Right away, Adam shot her a look, Amara ignored him. “You wouldn’t cross us, would you, Doctor? If there were something wrong, you would tell us.”

Doctor Allen stopped and walked up to Amara, face to face. “I would never do such a thing. That’s why I came to you two shortly after I was informed. I care deeply for Hokura’s wellbeing and would never allow danger to find any of you. All three of you are my life’s work. I’m here to protect you.”

Amara nodded; she was satisfied with his answer for the moment.

“Come, we’ll get breakfast, and I’ll answer anything you wish to know to the best of my ability,” the doctor offered.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Amara said, continuing as they were led back to the cafeteria.



Amara sat sipping at her water, watching the doctor and Adam as they casually ate their breakfast and drank their coffee; finally, she cleared her throat and began. “Doctor, we did years of studies, but it was never exactly clear who created this compound...”

Doctor Allen looked up at Amara dabbing the corner of his mouth with a napkin. “What I’ve been told was after the war what little government was left set up this compound as a safe haven for the civilians. It used to be a large warehouse block of the city that used to thrive here. They took whatever was left of the war fund and slowly built the city around this fortress and named the city

Meridiana.”

Amara took in every piece of information before speaking again, “And where does the professor fit in with all of this?”

“He was head of the government’s secret genetic cell enhancement research team before the war had started.”

Amara narrowed her eyes. “The war began in the late fifties, that in itself was nearly fifty years ago. I thought the professor to be in his mid-thirties.”

“That doesn’t make sense!” Adam blurted out, interrupting.

Amara stared as the doctor gave her an all-knowing look.

“At a young age, the professor used himself as a guinea pig when he first discovered the altered stem cells. He knew it worked when he himself stopped aging. The project was classified as top secret until the professor could prove it worked, which ended taking years since the body wouldn’t just stop aging but would age until a certain point after the first initial injection. It took him up until 2075 to get the approval of the government for test subjects. They gave the excuse that if the experiment were a success, those injected would be used as super soldiers to keep the peace inside the city walls. It’s a very secretive project that barely anyone knows about. I don’t believe there’s even any documentation on it.”

Adam looked up at the doctor, disturbed about what he had said. “So originally, our purpose was undetermined. This experiment was merely to find the fountain of youth. So why did the professor survive among the fatalities?”

Doctor Allen cleared his throat, staring up at the two children; their eyes were bearing into his. “You see, it was determined afterward that the cells in children were still developing. The injected stem cells saw them as weak and dying and would replace them, but since there were no fully developed cells to go off of, the subjects remained weak and eventually died out due to their systems shutting down.”

“Then how is it that we three survived?” Adam asked in bewilderment as Amara sat wide-eyed, wishing to know the same.

The doctor shook his head with a sigh. “That question I don’t have the answer to. I wasn’t on the team until you three were already considered

adolescents.”

Adam shifted in his seat, his hands clasped in front of him. “And what about you, Doctor? Have you drunk from the fountain?”

Doctor Allen eased back with a smile. “If you’re asking if I have taken the injections, no, I haven’t,” he answered with a chuckle. “I’m not part of the experiment myself.”

The two exchanged glances as Doctor Allen sat smirking. Finally, Adam and Amara shared a nod, both satisfied with the answers they had gotten.

“Please, I’m only here to help,” the doctor offered, hoping to leave with light-heartedness rather than being seen as the enemy.

Amara stared up at him. “One last thing, Doctor, where do you come to play in all of this?”

Doctor Allen sighed as he got up. “The professor is a powerful man who holds an incredible amount of knowledge. If he were to be killed, all the information on this project would be lost. I’ve been his right-hand man since before you three awoke. The wellbeing of you three is also my life work. If you ever have any questions, I’ll always try my best to answer them for you. The professor wants the same thing.” With that, the doctor excused himself.

Adam stared up at Amara, who took the last drink of her water. “Do you trust him?” Adam asked, somewhat amused with Amara’s interrogating ways.

Amara smirked, crossing her arms. “And would it make any difference to you if he had injected himself as well?”

Adam shook his head.

But Amara could tell something was still weighing on his mind. “I don’t know how I feel about the professor’s side of things being so secret and hush-hush. As for the doctor, I guess, for now, my mind can be put at ease,” Amara said, leaning back, stretching her arms up in the air.

Adam looked over to her. “And what about Hokura?”

Amara brought her arms back down to rest on the table. “I think this was a fluke accident that has nothing to do with us or the stem cell experiments.”

Adam smirked, still peering at Amara. “You don’t even want to weigh in that there is a possibility that we’re merely test subjects and that anything can go

wrong with our systems at a moment's notice.”

“Don’t you dare talk like that!” Amara snapped, raising her voice as she stood up, leaning across the table. “Nothing is going to happen to us. This was a setback, something totally unrelated, and when tomorrow comes, everything will be just like it was. Back to our regular routines and back to carrying out our duties like we’ve been told to do, and so it’ll be that way until the end of time! Nothing is going to change.”

Adam slouched back into his seat, assessing Amara. “Are you really so afraid?” he started...

Amara shifted her weight. “I’m not going back to that facility; it’s not going to be me lying there in one of those medical beds as they run tests. I’d rather die than wake up in the medical facility again.”

“Behind all that brass, you sound like a coward,” Adam replied.

“Like you would volunteer to go through all that again!” Amara bit back.

“Yes, I would! If it meant me fulfilling my duty. If there was something wrong with the tests that were done on us... if my system was failing and there was a way to prevent it, then you better believe it I would strap myself to a gurney and insist on it.”

Amara rolled her eyes. “The scientists would have to hunt me down and drag me kicking and screaming back to the medical labs.”

Adam shook his head at Amara. “Your immortality means nothing to you if you’re willing to just throw it away like that then. You’ve been given a gift and have been given a purpose, and if you’re called to be comatose again, your refusal would be a slap in everyone’s face, my dear friend.”

“I have my reasons, selfish as they are,” Amara spoke.

Adam scoffed at her, looking away in disgrace. “You’ve had this attitude since I awoke. If that’s still how you feel after all this time, then maybe you don’t deserve what has been given to you.” Adam stopped; he didn’t mean to say what he had, but it was too late.

Amara got up and turned and walked away before things escalated. Never in her life did she feel angry with one of her own. Amara quickly ran to the housing vicinity and to her quarters. She opened the door and slammed it behind her and

wept as she fell to her knees.



“Honest, Professor, I’m feeling much better,” Hokura pleaded as she sat up with a smile. All morning he had been running tests and fussing over her.

“What about your fever?” he asked, turning over to her from a medical tray.

“The fever left me nearly an hour ago,” Hokura answered. “Please don’t keep me here any longer. I’ve spent enough time in this facility in the last two weeks to last me the rest of my life!”

The professor nodded as he washed his hands. He had indeed kept her longer than needed for his own personal enjoyment of being near her. “My dear, I apologize, but you must be famished,” he replied. “Please, won’t you have lunch with me?”

Hokura was taken back. She wanted to leave and meet up with Adam and Amara to assure them that she was okay but figured it would be rude if she didn’t take up the professor’s offer after he had taken care of her all morning, and so she obliged.

“Wonderful.” He took her hand and helped her up. “Why don’t you freshen up, and I’ll meet you back at your quarters in less than an hour.”

Hokura stood, feeling a little confused. “Sir, are we not going to just simply dine in the cafeteria?”

The professor let out a hearty laugh. “My dear, I never eat in the cafeteria; I would like to do something special with you.”

Hokura’s heart fluttered as she beamed happily at the thought of being treated special. “Okay, sir,” Hokura agreed.

She was then off to her quarters to shower since she had neglected to do so the night before.



“Something special,” Hokura thought to herself as she stood in the shower. The water felt cool and refreshing. Her thoughts of the night before vanished from her mind as it was now filled with the thoughts of a special lunch with the professor.

Hokura’s heart raced as she felt flush. “I should wear something other than my old torn jeans.” She thought to herself. The compound supplied each of the children with a decent wardrobe full of clothing for any occasion, from workout wear to dresses and skirts, yet Hokura never really got past the stage of wearing a pair of jeans or her training gear with a basic tank top. She figured she never had anywhere to go other than around the facility, so the other clothes were merely a burden of dishevelment in her closet.

After time Hokura kept the clothes that she regularly wore on the floor of her bedroom and shut the closet for good in fear of wrecking anything that she might need on a later day, and today was that day.

Hokura dried her hair as she looked through her closet. She didn’t have much fashion sense other than what she had seen in old magazines from the old world around the compound and had difficulty determining what she should wear. In the end, she picked out a white cotton skirt and a blue lacy floral tank top.

She smiled at herself in the mirror, eyeing what she had picked out. She ran her brush through her long silky hair when there was a light knock at the door. There stood the professor dressed in dark blue slacks with a matching coat and a white dress shirt underneath. He smiled warmly at her.

“Well, that’s a change from what you usually wear,” he said as she walked out of her place, closing the door behind her and locking it.

“I thought it would be appropriate.” Hokura blushed. Why was she suddenly feeling so awkward? Maybe she should have stayed in the medical facility, but she shook away the thought. “So where will we eat if not in the cafeteria?” she asked.

The professor offered her his arm and led her down the living quarter's hallway to the stairway. "Only a few hard-working people know of this place. It's only for the governed elite of this compound, so you must swear that this will be our little secret," he answered as they descended the stairs making their way to the first floor.

Hokura only nodded and said nothing as he led her to a part of the compound that she had never been in before. The southeast wasn't so much as out of their bounds but carried no interest to her. The long hallways held offices and facilities that were used for government purposes. They then came to an elevator with a sign upon it reading, "out of order."

"If all people know are what they've been taught, then they don't have means to question the truth." He chuckled, pressing the button which lit up as the door opened. The professor led Hokura in and pressed the button for the fourth floor.

"I didn't know there was an inhabitable fourth floor in this compound," Hokura spoke up.

The professor's grin widened. "There is, but only at this part of the compound."

The elevator gently lifted as Hokura wondered exactly where they were going to dine. They came to a stop at the top floor, and with a ding, the doors to the elevator opened to a large hallway.

"Up here are the elite quarters," the professor said, walking to the right and down the hallway to reveal a rather fancy looking lounge.

He stepped ahead of Hokura, leading her in. A finely dressed man greeted them both. "Good afternoon, Professor Dorian. How has your day been, sir?"

The professor smiled. "It's getting better."

The greeter then glanced over to Hokura. "And who is this beautiful young lady that you have with you today, sir? If you don't mind me asking."

As he stepped back behind Hokura, the professor answered, placing his hands on her shoulders. "This fine young lady is the first child Hokura."

With that said, the greeter gasped and bowed. "What an honor to be standing in her midst. Please do follow me to your table."



Hokura and the professor followed the man past the bar and lounge area; there were leather sofas and chairs placed among polished black wooden tables. The red plush carpet complimented the black furniture perfectly. There was a rather large looking bar set up with stools that matched the rest of the lounge's decor to the right. Despite the dark color scheme, the place was incredibly bright. Hokura wondered how on earth they had come up with such lavish furnishings.

As they walked into the dining area, the carpet turned to dark hardwood along with a light wooden table with matching chairs that had plush red upholstery. Sitting only among a few of the tables were people that Hokura had never seen before.

"Your table, sir," the man said, pulling a seat out and beckoning Hokura to sit.

"Thank you," the professor stated, seating himself.

"Your waiter will be along in a moment," the greeter said, bowing once more, and then was off on his way back to the lounge area.

The professor and Hokura had been seated at the far side of the restaurant next to one of the many huge bay windows placed along the lounge's circumference.

"Oh, my goodness, it's beautiful." Hokura gasped, staring out the window to the city. "I never thought I would see it in the daylight," Hokura continued, taking in the sights of the buildings and people. During the day, the city looked so warm and beautiful and full of life as people walked about, as opposed to the silent stillness in the dark of night during curfew.

The professor stared at Hokura's enthusiasm as she stared out the window. He was about to speak when he thought there were more beautiful things in front of him than the waste of the city below, but he was interrupted by the waiter.

"Excuse me, sir, but can I offer you a beverage?"

"Yes, I'll take a coffee, please," he answered, adjusting his glasses, not taking his eyes off Hokura.

"And for the lady?" the waiter continued after scratching down the professor's order.

“Umm, I’d...” Hokura stuttered. She hadn’t known any other source of beverages than water, coffee, and artificial milk. She didn’t want to seem out of place here but didn’t know what else to get.

“The lady will take a sweetened iced tea,” the professor answered for her.

“Very well.” The waiter marked down. “I’ll be back once you two have looked over the menus.” With that, he hurried off to fetch the drinks.

“Iced tea?” Hokura questioned, looking at the professor, who stared back apologetically.

“Forgive me, Hokura, for not broadening your horizons. I promise in time I shall do so, but for now, you’ll just have to trust me. I know you’ll enjoy it,” he said with a wink.

She smiled as her cheeks reddened. “I’m already enjoying myself, sir.”

The professor reached across the table, taking her hands in his. “I apologize for keeping you confined in this compound, let alone the cafeteria.”

Hokura looked down at his hands, clasping hers. “Professor, you have given your life to protecting the people of this city. I’m honored to be part of your mission.”

He inwardly smirked to see something was wearing at Hokura’s mind. “What is it, my dear?” he asked as the drinks were being placed on the table. He gave a dark glance at the waiter, who took it as a sign that they weren’t ready to order yet.

“Sir, you asked if I’ve had strange feelings lately,” Hokura stuttered, suddenly she noticed that her body felt tight and that her palms were sweating even though the rest of her body didn’t feel hot.

“Go on,” the professor urged, leaning across the table, listening intently.

“And the truth is I have been feeling a little off around you and Doctor Allen.”

When the doctor’s name was added, the professor looked away to hide his frustration and jealousy. He turned back to Hokura, who looked to be contemplating what she was saying.

“You’ve been so kind to me, sir, in ways that no one else ever has...”

The professor grinned; he was enjoying the conversation immensely. “What

do you mean by off, Hokura?" he pressed.

She gently bit on her lower lip. "My heart races, and I feel lightheaded sometimes, is there something wrong with me? Would this have to do with me having to be in the medical facility, sir?" Hokura asked, looking a little concerned.

The professor chuckled, taking a sip of his coffee, still enjoying what he was uncovering from the first child. "Not at all, my dear. It merely sounds natural to me." He smirked.

Hokura mulled the idea over in her head and idly picked up the cool glass of iced tea and took a refreshing swallow; with that, she licked her lips as she suddenly perked up. "You're right, that is good."

The professor grinned even wider with satisfaction picking up his menu. "Now, let us hurry up and order, so our poor waiter doesn't get impatient with us," he said, waving over to the waiter who was waiting eagerly close by.

The professor had ordered the sirloin. The beef was artificial but was of the best quality produced in the compound. Hokura, with some help, had decided on the Cajun Caesar salad. Professor Dorian chose not to press the matter of Hokura's strange feelings any longer. He was incredibly satisfied with what he had learned. He now wanted to take this opportunity to get to know the peacekeeper a little more intimately without the other two or the doctor being around.

"So, what is this place?" Hokura asked as they waited for their food.

"This is where the elite inside the compound come for their meals, the head scientists, government officials. The food here is a little more complex than what is served in the cafeteria," he offered.

Hokura's eyebrows raised for a moment.

"You see, Hokura. We are always striving to create enough rations to go around for the large population here. Since we are now able to do so, our scientists are finding different ways to enhance and grow our food." The professor could see that he was losing her. "It's merely scientific mumbo jumbo. Once something is perfected, it's served here. It's more of the best of the best. The people here are some of the highest-ranking scientists and government

officials. We couldn't have them eating in the cafeteria when there are such important topics to be discussed between scientists and government officials."

Hokura merely nodded. She felt out of place as she looked out over the city's vastness. She couldn't help feeling anxious about sitting alone with the professor like this.

"Tell me, Hokura," he leaned in, "since I'm always stuck in my office, or one of the many laboratories around here, what is it that you enjoy doing?"

The first child looked at him for a moment studying him. "I enjoy art and painting; Doctor Allen has been able to get me some canvas along with books of the old-world flowers. I especially love looking at the photos of the old-world cathedrals."

The professor merely smiled at her. She was so vibrant when she spoke. He had been so wrapped up in what she was saying that he hadn't noticed that their waiter had come back with their food.

"Thank you," the professor had said, bowing his head. He watched as Hokura's eyes widened at what was placed in front of her. Her naive enthusiasm enthralled him. He knew that the time for putting his plans further into action was at hand and that the next steps to Hokura's destiny were to soon follow.



Doctor Allen sat in his lab, contemplating Amara's question, why and how was it that only those three children had survived. Never once did the doctor ever question why these three were able to live while the rest of the experiments died off. He knew why the children had died but how it was possible for there to be survivors. "There's nothing in their files to show that they were treated any differently." He sighed, knowing what he was looking for must have been classified information or simply didn't exist. The doctor turned over to the report on Hokura's awakening.

**November 22, 2097**

First comatose female alias Hokura seems to be awakening. She started gasping for air at five hundred hours. The subject still remains in a coma but is now under surveillance by the first team of scientists. All stats seem normal and are attached to this recorded file.

**November 23, 2097**

The second scientist team was on the floor today and reported slight movement in the subject's fingers. Although this could be due to tremors, I have taken a personal interest in this possible awakening. If all goes well, there is a chance that she may awaken tomorrow after being comatose for eighteen years. Record logging will now take place as seen fit rather than every day.

*Signed Professor Dorian*

**1400 hours:**

The subject is stirring in her sleep; there are tremors throughout her left side. I have run all medical tests possible at this time, and they have all come back normal. There are no blood clots like suspected. Brainwaves have fluctuated, so I have officially taken subject Hokura off the TDCS device to see if these waves are occurring naturally and not to the instrument.

**1622 hours:**

Brain waves are holding steady, all statistics are normal, but tremors have ceased. There is no movement to be recorded.

**1715 hours:**

The subject just took a rather lengthy breath followed by what sounded to be a sigh; she is now breathing lightly from her mouth. All stats readings are

normal, no new movement to report, waves are still steady.

**1900 hours:**

No new developments in subject Hokura. I am afraid this might be a false alarm and that no awakening will take place. I have an intuition telling me I might be wrong; otherwise, the brainwaves are slowly fluctuating still. I have checked on the other two surviving children and have read over their recent reports; neither shows any sign of awakening.

**2400 hours:**

I've called upon my assistant to come in first thing tomorrow. Hokura seems to be resting peacefully, with no new developments, brainwaves are showing signs of sleep patterns. I will spend the night by her side to supervise any new developments.

**November 24, 2097**

**0600 hours:**

Doctor Allen arrives, statistics checked, and all seem normal, sleep patterns in brain waves still occurring.

**0903 hours:**

Brain waves have fluctuated again. There's noticeable twitching in fingers and toes, all medical stats are normal.

**1207 hours:**

Doctor Allen made contact with the subject; he was reportedly rubbing the palm of Hokura's left hand when her finger twitched and made what seemed to

be an attempt to close around his hand. After such a display, I fear her muscles may still be tight even after using the muscle emulator and massage therapy.

**1300 hours:**

I have injected Hokura with a muscle relaxant in hopes to encourage more movement. I am not sure at this moment whether she can feel pain or not. I am hoping that this development might assist in her awakening.

**1345 hours:**

The subject takes a deep breath and moans. Her toes on both feet are now curled. Brain waves have fluctuated again, and rapid eye movement was also noted. I fear she might be in pain, although there is no sign of wincing on her face. Her heart rate is normal, along with all other stats.

**1400 hours:**

Doctor Allen is quietly talking to the subject. As he did so, her lips pursed into a smile as she seems to have recognition and understanding of her own name when it was said. When this was recorded, there was a spike in brainwave activity, which has led me to believe that subject Hokura will be awakening soon.

**1405 hours:**

The subject's body is now giving off warmth as twitches and tumors continue throughout the body, eye movement noted to be not as rapid as before. The temperature reads a degree above normal, so I have removed the heavy medical blankets and have placed lighter cotton on top of her.

**1500 hours:**

Hokura appears distressed, as the heart rate has slightly risen. All her statistics are reading higher than normal; her breathing has also quickened somewhat.

**1521 hours:**

Subject Hokura seems to have tears forming in her eyes. If stats don't resume to normal, I will inject her in five minutes' time. I fear that she may be in excruciating pain and that she may have a heart attack like the others. I will not stand by and let that happen to this one.

**1525 hours:**

Noted at this time, subject Hokura has awakened. It has been video recorded and also personally logged by the doctor and me. Statistics are all normal; the subject seems to be aware and alert of her surroundings. Let it be deemed that the first child has awakened ironically enough upon her eighteenth birthday after being injected and put into comatose seventeen years and six months ago. See personal logs and medical forms attached to this file:

But when Doctor Allen turned the page, he noticed that the professor's log of the awakening was not attached to the medical log documents. He saw his had been copied and signed not only by himself but also by the professor and dated twice. Doctor Allen shook his head in disbelief. This hadn't been a filing error. There was a reason why the document hadn't been attached. Whatever had happened with these children had been kept a secret even from him. He searched the other children's folders to see what he could come up with but found the same accounts. There were merely a few pages of records containing their awakenings but nothing about the process beforehand. Even stranger, there were no other files that he could find on the failed experiments.

He sat back and mused for a moment about what he had said about the experiment failing on young children... could it have been that these three were



comatose at a young age but that the process of injections didn't start until they were older? Were the documents, in fact, forged? Sighing, Doctor Allen knew he would have to dig deeper for any answers. He knew precisely who held them, it was just addressing them to the professor at the right time' but he didn't know when that would be.



Hokura stood in front of her living quarters' door. She had told the professor that she would be able to walk herself back to her appropriate stationed facility, but he had insisted that he walk her back. He had wanted to squeeze every last moment that he could spend by her side out of this situation.

"Thank you for everything, sir." Hokura smiled, staring up at him.

"You are very welcome. I enjoyed myself today, the first time in a while actually," the professor replied, returning the sentiment.

Hokura turned away to open her door when his hand came up and caressed her cheek. It was such a warm feeling that overwhelmed her that she involuntarily turned to him, letting him embrace her in his arms as he stroked his fingers down her back, leaving goosebumps through her skin.

"Professor," Hokura gasped as she felt her heart and mind begin to race.

The professor grinned to himself as he felt her body tremble upon his as he held her. "What is it, Hokura, my dear?" he asked, bringing her in closer to his body, caressing her neck.

"I'm feeling rather faint, sir," Hokura replied, sidestepping out of his arms as she held her forehead, backing away from his grip.

The professor let her back up. He gazed upon her flushed look to see that beads of sweat had made their way to her forehead as she was breathed heavily.

"Maybe you should get some rest then. It has been a long day for you," he nodded.

Hokura nodded her head in agreement, looking somewhat flustered as her head continued to spin.

“I’ll see you tonight at the briefing,” he continued as he turned around and began walking down the hallway. He smirked to himself with the satisfaction of knowing that she would be questioning what she was feeling in hopes that she would come back for more, but until then, he had business to attend. He had to be back in his office to review rebel and civilian matters of the city.

Hokura watched as the professor made his way down the hallway and disappeared from her sight. She turned to her door. Hokura noticed that her door was already unlocked as she put the key in. “I thought I locked this,” Hokura whispered to herself, trying to think back if she had already unlocked it, but her mind was in such a lingering daze that she couldn’t think straight. She made her way into her quarters to hear the television blaring. “I know I didn’t leave that on,” Hokura thought to herself; she readied herself as she peeked around the corner. There, sprawled out on her couch, was Amara, one arm over her head with the other hanging over the side, draped on the floor. She appeared to be sleeping.

Hokura quietly made her way in and turned off the television. Amara stirred lightly, so Hokura quietly tiptoed into her kitchen. She leaned against the counter, her body still trembling from the lingering feeling that the professor had left her with. Hokura was so lost in her thoughts that she didn’t even hear Amara come up behind her.

“You okay?” Amara asked, breaking the silence.

Hokura turned to her friend, studying her eyes, which appeared to be bloodshot as tear stains ran down her cheeks.

“Yeah, are you okay?” Hokura asked. Amara nodded with a solemn look as Hokura extended her arms, and the two friends silently embraced in a soulful hug. As they did so, Hokura wondered to herself what Amara was truly upset about. She didn’t come to crash at her place when things were “okay.”

“You were gone for a while,” Amara mentioned after the embrace, “and what’s with the clothes?”

Hokura poured herself a glass of water and made her way to the couch, not wanting to say anything but knew she would come out sooner or later about it, so she decided to fess up now. “The professor and I had lunch together,” Hokura

answered in a flat tone, hoping that Amara wouldn't start in on her with her absurd gossip.

"And what about last night?" Amara asked, sitting on the couch next to Hokura.

"The professor said I would be fine and that it was nothing to worry about," she replied, taking a sip of the water and then curled her tongue. It didn't taste as good as the iced tea she had had earlier. Hokura stared up at Amara, she wanted to ask her why she was really there, but Amara spoke up first before Hokura could even form the question.

"Adam and I had a fight," she blurted out.

Right away, Hokura's interest piqued, she stared wide-eyed at her friend waiting for her to go on.

"I overreacted about something he said and stormed off angry at him. I didn't explain myself or anything. Never in my life have I ever been so mad at anyone I cared for before," Amara continued as she sulked into the upholstery of the couch.

Hokura sat for a moment, thinking before she spoke. "Then you need to amend this situation. You know that we work as a unit. If there's tension or anger built up against each other, we won't work together as a team. We all depend on one another; we're all one another has."

What Hokura had said was enough for Amara. She knew right away that her friend was right. "I will," Amara answered as she shot up from the couch.

Hokura watched as her friend made her way to the door when she suddenly turned to smirk at her.

"And later, we're having girl talk about this whole lunch date business with the professor." Amara grinned mischievously.

Hokura's heart sank as she blushed. Amara ran out the door in a hurry as Hokura sighed. She knew she wasn't out of the woods yet.



Adam sat on top of the roof of the housing quarters, glaring angrily at the wall, which restricted his view from the outside world he helped protect. He threw a rock at the wall, imagining that the structure would crumble as the rock made contact. Instead, the stone merely bounced off and landed on the ground three stories below. He sighed in his own misery that he had been so cruel to Amara. Sometimes he forgot that they were human too and that all people had a right to their own opinions and feelings, even fears. He had been insensitive to hers. Amara's biggest fear was going back to the lab for testing, why he didn't quite understand. It was simply something she never discussed with him, although he knew she confided in Hokura about it.

"Hokura," Adam whispered to himself, gripping another stone, "I sure hope that you're okay." With that, he threw the rock wishing with all his might for the wall it was hitting to crumble.

"Still trying to break down that wall?" a voice came from behind.

Adam chuckled, a smile finally spreading across his face as relief washed over him. "I thought after this afternoon that you would never speak to me again."

Amara sat down next to Adam. "Is that something you fear? Losing contact with Hokura and myself?" Amara asked, staring out at the wall.

"I don't know what I would do without you and Hokura. You two ground me. You're all I have. The only link to a possible past and family, and in a way losing you two would be like losing a part of myself," he admitted, looking straight forward, fearing to look Amara in the eyes.

"Hokura is fine. She was released earlier this afternoon," Amara added in a flat tone, still feeling upset about her and Adam's earlier confrontation.

Adam pursed his lips and nodded; the two sat in silence for a moment when Adam finally spoke up. "I'm sorry about earlier, for saying those horrible things to you. I don't know what came over me."

Amara merely nodded. That was enough for her. The apology in itself was worth the tears, for it had lifted a great deal of weight off her heart to know that Adam was being sincere with her. "Hokura says that we're a unit, that any friction between us will only cause our purpose to crumble," Amara added,

throwing a small stone against the wall, and watching it bounce off.

“She’s a wise one, and she’s right. We have to live and work with each other if it’s not in harmony, then there’ll only be problems.” Adam lay down on his back to gaze at the clear blue sky instead of at the wall that confined him to this place.

Amara shifted, looking at the roof of the compound and its many sections. “If you’re trying to get a look at the city, why don’t you try the roof of the high-rise over there?” Amara said, pointing southeast towards the elite side of the compound.

Adam breathed in deeply. “I’ve tried, but I have yet to find any access to that area. There are no stairs leading to the roof. I haven’t even come across any possible way inside of the compound, which might lead me there.”

Amara sat, staring at its circular structure. “Funny how we live in this compound, and yet we have only been able to access certain areas.”

Adam took another breath of fresh air. He suddenly felt more settled now that Amara was there with him making small talk. “I’m guessing that it’s some sort of government conference room,” he said, staring at the high-rise. “I once heard a rumor that it was nothing more than storage, but then again, why would the storage facility be on the highest floor of the compound, not to mention having grand tinted bay windows to boot.”

Amara nodded. “I doubt it would be of any importance to us anyway, for all we know it’s the living facility for the higher-ups,” she added, shrugging off the idea. With all the science experiments and labs in the compound, there were bound to be a few top-secret areas where only certain scientists or government officials could access. “So, what happened with your mission last night? Did you make any headway?” Amara asked, lying next to Adam, as she too had grown tired of staring at their confinement.

“There was a back alley that the rebels were using to export weapons throughout the city. They could pretty much go from east to west right between the back alley and 6th without being seen. I was following two jeeps last night, but they must have seen me because they ended up separating and taking some other unmarked alleys. I ended up losing them for some time, and it took me

nearly an hour to track them down again. When I finally did all that, all I found were their vehicles. I have no idea what happened, it looked like they had had a head-on collision, my only guess was you, and Hokura had something to do with it.”

Amara gave a light chuckle. “They ended up getting in the way of our seek and destroy mission, plus those bastards had grenades and ended up scratching my bike. They got what they deserved.”

Adam shook his head. “Obviously, there’s a world outside of these city walls. Some days I wonder if those walls were built to keep the rebels out or the civilians in.”

Amara sat up, staring wide-eyed at Adam. “What are you implying, you radical?”

Adam shrugged with a smirk across his face. “I’d love to go over that wall just once and see for myself what’s out there.”

Amara smirked, shaking her head. “That would be against protocol, and you know that.”

Adam gave an all-knowing chuckle gazing back to the compound wall. “Yeah, but you only live once. Besides, to be totally honest, if given a chance, I don’t know if I’d be willing to see it or not.”



Hokura was lying in her bed, staring up at her ceiling, her arm stretched over her head. She had felt tired after Amara had left, so she stripped down and decided to sleep. Alas, sleep wouldn’t find her as her mind drifted subconsciously thinking about the afternoon. She wished that she could have seen more of Doctor Allen during the day. The lunch with the professor, though, had been a surprise. He had spoken about new feelings, ones that she couldn’t deny she was having towards both the professor and his assistant.

Hokura sighed in frustration at her new feelings. She couldn’t describe them; all she knew was that she had suddenly developed a new fondness towards the

professor and Doctor Allen. “When I’m around them, I can’t help but feel so strange,” Hokura whispered to herself, wiping her hair from her forehead.

Admitting defeat, she got up and out of bed. It was still an hour before she would meet Adam and Amara for dinner. Hokura made her way to her couch and crashed down on the spot where Amara had been sleeping only hours before.

She turned on the television and stared blankly at the screen as a news program played. It was the same thing that was always on, news of the compound and historical documents of how the place was created. She couldn’t bring herself to pay any attention to it. Her skin felt tight. She couldn’t understand this new sensation coming over her as she thought about the professor holding her, the way he brought her close to him, clutching her body, his hands on her back, the warmth of them on her skin.

A warm feeling surged over her, a sense that she immensely enjoyed as she thought about the attention the professor had shown her. Even the doctor had never been as close as the professor had been when he held her at her door. Hokura could feel a longing ache in her heart. She wanted to see the professor again and feel what she had felt in the hallway.



Hokura made her way down to the cafeteria; she was wearing her usual jeans and a white cotton sleeveless top. As Hokura walked to the regular meeting place, Amara’s chipper tone filled her ears.

“Hokura, hurry up. The third child is hungry!” she cried, grabbing Adam around the neck, playfully tugging at him.

Hokura was happy to see the two had made up.

“Glad to see you’re alright.” Adam smiled.

Hokura couldn’t help but wear a blank expression. “Of course, I am,” she answered in a flat tone, her mind wandering back to the afternoon as her skin tingled.

Amara stared wide-eyed at her friend. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

Hokura nodded blankly. She suddenly didn't feel like socializing, which was very odd for her. "I'm just tired. It was a long day," she lied, not wanting to upset her two friends who were so concerned about her.

The three got their dinners and sat down. Adam loaded up his tray with a large assortment as he complained that he was famished. Amara grabbed an array of sandwiches as Hokura stuck to fruit, cheese, and some crackers. As she took a sip of water, it was all she could do to swallow it. Her meal was less than par as she stared blankly down at it, remembering the lunch she had with the professor.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Amara asked again, stuffing a bite-sized sandwich in her mouth, and then grabbed something off Adam's plate.

"You haven't said a word all night," Adam interrupted with a mouth full of potato salad.

Hokura nodded and then looked up to see her friends staring at her. "I'm sorry." She blushed, looking away from their concerned stares. "I just haven't felt myself today." What was this strange feeling that had latched onto her and was affecting her so much? She had never felt so confused or out of it before, and yet she couldn't explain herself to her friends.

"The professor brainwash you or something?" Amara laughed, popping another piece of sandwich in her mouth as she tried to make light of Hokura's strange behavior.

"Maybe you need some more time off," Adam suggested, trying to be helpful as he continued shoveling mouthfuls of food.

Hokura didn't like that notion one bit. "I'll be fine." She pouted, not wanting to miss out on any more duty time than she already had. She sat back in her seat and looked off, taking in a deep breath. "I'm just full still from lunch," she lied again, wishing to get Amara off the topic of the way she was acting.

"Yes, the mystery lunch that you had with the professor, what was that all about?" Amara chided.

Hokura's throat closed. She had sworn to secrecy. "It was nothing special, since I had missed breakfast and it was already late, we merely ate together and talked, I guess," she stuttered.



"Amara, you need to ease off of it. You're acting as if a meal we have every day together is something suddenly special," Adam said with his mouth full.

Hokura silently thanked Adam.

The second child merely rolled her eyes and decided to change the subject. "So, I wonder what we'll be doing tonight," she exclaimed.

"Who knows." Adam swallowed. "We may end up scouting for more warehouses that are being used to store weapons."

Amara's eyes brightened. "Maybe we can take the bikes!"

Adam glanced over at Amara. "I thought your bike was damaged."

Hokura picked up a piece of cheese. "Exactly, you can't be driving around with a paint chip," she teased, feeling a little better about the change in subject.

Amara stuck her tongue out at them both. "I just take pride in my appearance," she boasted.

Hokura's mind was still on the professor. Even though she wanted to converse with her friends, she suddenly couldn't take her mind off him.

"Do you have any plans for after dinner?" Amara asked, turning to Hokura, who seemed to be off in her own world again.

"I'm kind of feeling out of it. I think I might get some rest," Hokura replied sheepishly.

Amara looked disappointed when Adam's hand met her shoulder. "Don't worry, Amara, I'll spar with you." He smiled. Amara had talked to him earlier on the roof about brushing up on hand-to-hand combat.

Hokura excused herself as she got up from the table. "I'll meet up with you two at the briefing." She then quickly left the cafeteria after turning around to wave at her friends.

"What's with her?" Adam asked with a raised eyebrow and genuine concern for his friend. Never in his life had he seen Hokura so out of it.

"I don't know, but I bet it had something to do with her being back in the medical facility today," Amara answered with worry.



Hokura subconsciously made her way down to the briefing room to see if the professor was already down there or in one of the offices going over civil reports.

She had heard a hushed voice behind her, followed by a giggle. She ignored it for a moment until the voice spoke up.

“Hokura, are you looking for something? You seem lost.”

She turned to see Doctor Allen, accompanied by Annette, the sight of seeing them together sparked something inside of her. Maybe it was by the way Annette had so casually hooked her arm around his or by how close the two were standing. Either way, something had made her heart clench at the sight of them together in a sensation she had never felt before.

“I’m looking for the professor. Have you seen him, Doctor?” Hokura asked, making sure not to look at Annette.

“The professor?” Doctor Allen chimed, brushing his hair back. “I believe he’s taken his dinner to his briefing office...”

Before he could finish, Hokura spun around. “Thank you, Doctor,” she said as she quickly made her way towards the office. She couldn't understand the confusion that she had felt. Why suddenly she didn't want to be around him when she had spent the day thinking about the strange feelings that were taking over her when he entered her mind. She felt angry and hurt and didn't know why. Annette had done nothing wrong to her, and yet she felt a pang in her heart towards the doctor. She couldn't explain any of it. All she knew was that she needed to see the professor, that she wanted to feel whatever it was she had felt earlier in the day wash over her again.



Professor Dorian was sitting in the briefing room, which was just another office among many others in the compound. He was going over civil reports at a dark mahogany desk, sitting in a plush leather chair, when he heard a light knock at the door. "Come in," the professor announced. As the door opened, the professor looked up to see Hokura walk in and closed the door as quickly as she opened it. The professor grinned at the fact that she had sought him out.

"Hokura, what a nice surprise," he said, getting up and walking over to her. "Is there something wrong?"

Hokura gazed down, contemplating what to say, dumbfounded as her cheeks reddened.

The professor placed his hands on her shoulders, trying to comfort her. As he did so, he could feel her tremble under his touch. Still, Hokura was lost for words and said nothing. The professor pursed his lips and looked down at her as she stared off at nothing. "I see."

He stared down at her unmoving form, gently he cupped her chin, bringing her eyes up to meet his. "Hokura, you know that you can talk to me, that no matter what, I'll always be here to listen," he coaxed her.

Hokura gazed up at him, her heart racing as he gently brought his hand to stroke her face. She let out a soft sigh.

The professor grinned inwardly. She had come back to him and how he loved her in every way, especially in her ignorance and how he was going to mold it.

"Professor, I don't know what to do." Hokura sighed, allowing him to put his arm around her. He smelled so good. His scent only made her head spin even more.

"I don't understand Hokura," he pressed, enjoying this chain of events. He led her over to a black leather sofa and sat her down.

"I've never felt like this before, and yet I don't want this feeling to end," Hokura stuttered. Her palms felt so sweaty, and yet she had chills.

The professor smirked at hearing that she enjoyed these feelings and wanted to take her further but knew that he would have to move gradually with her. "Hokura, my dear, these are merely human emotions that you're feeling," he chimed, resting a hand on her shoulder. "They feel very strong simply because

you have never felt them before, your body and mind are catching up to themselves, and you're maturing emotionally."

Hokura looked up at the professor, her eyes watering. "So, what should I do?"

The professor smirked. "Whatever you deem necessary."

Hokura sat on the couch. Now she felt more confused than ever, was she supposed to act upon her feelings and explore them? She simply couldn't allow these emotions to affect her duty as a peacekeeper. Her feelings towards him were suddenly spiraling out of control. He was her mentor. Could he possibly feel the same way?

"Sir?" Hokura finally spoke up. "Whatever these emotions are, you have my word that they will not affect my performance."

The professor forced himself to stay calm; he shifted and sat right against Hokura, bringing his hands to her shoulders, gently massaging them.

With that, her determination was lost in a sea of warmth as her body relaxed under his hands.

"You must understand, these emotions are very important. You need to experience them; they're part of being human. Just because you're a peacekeeper doesn't mean you don't have a right to these feelings." The professor spoke softly in her ear.

Hokura's senses heightened at the weight of his hands on her shoulders as they gently worked at her stress. "Professor..." she whimpered.

The professor was about to tell her, about to open up to her, about what these feelings were called when suddenly there was a knock at the door. The professor turned away from Hokura with a dark scowl. "Dammit," he muttered. "I'm sorry, Hokura, we'll have to continue this discussion later," he told her, leaving the couch and walking to the door.

"Sir, I'm sorry to intrude, but you're needed in the governor's office immediately." Was all Hokura heard. She didn't dare glance over at who was at the door.

"Yes," the professor answered and then turned back to Hokura. "I'm sorry, my dear, but I am needed. I shall see you later tonight for briefing," he said,

leaving the office.

Hokura sucked on her bottom lip. She felt foolish at that moment even though she didn't know why. After debating staying in the office for a moment, Hokura let out a frustrated sigh as she decided to make her way to the workout facility.



“Damn you!” Hokura cursed as she swung her fist, hitting her target as it swung back. “Get a grip already.” She grunted under her breath as the punching bag swung around towards her, throwing another punch, letting the impact fully embrace her as she punched as hard as she could, allowing her raw emotion to control her power.

Hokura gritted her teeth as she brought her left leg up, swinging a kick at the bag in full force. She could feel the sweat trickling down her cheek. Good, it was good to sweat, good to work through the anguish and confusion. There was no need for her to ever feel confused. She was born for a purpose, she had a duty, and all she had to do was carry it out. There was nothing more to it.

Hokura could feel tears of frustration in her eyes even though she didn't know why she was suddenly crying, but it felt good to do so, to let loose and feel something other than confusion over these sudden emotions that were bombarding her. She thought about seeing Doctor Allen and Annette together and swung her arm back and countered the bag as it came back towards her, letting all of her strength go into the punch. As it made contact, the bag swung back with such force that the metal chain holding it to the roof broke as the bag hit the floor a few feet away and hit the floor with a loud thud.

Hokura caught her breath as she wiped the sweat from her forehead staring at the bag in disbelief at what she had done.



It was half an hour before the briefing. Hokura found herself in the outside premises of the compound. After her workout, she had gone out to find comfort in the garden and found herself sitting against the building, staring at a moth upon a long blade of grass. Beyond the rare sight was the wall which was built to keep them in. Hokura's eyes glazed over as she stared at the moth. It wasn't every day that an insect made its way into the city grounds. They were rare indeed, any animal was. The gray winged creature sat so casually on the blade of green. It would occasionally flutter to another piece and then back again.

For a moment, Hokura envied its freedom. It wasn't held captive to any responsibilities. It had no duty. Hokura even wondered if it had a purpose for most wildlife had died out during the war. She smiled smugly, picking up the blade of grass that the moth had settled on; it started to flutter again, Hokura only smirked. "Fly away, little moth, be free and see the world, don't stay here, or the city will imprison you," she said, bringing the moth to settle on her finger and then lifted her hand and gently shook it, allowing the moth to fly beyond the great wall.

Hokura breathed in deeply, trying to gather as much courage as she could as she filled her lungs with the fresh evening air as the sun had already set, at least unlike the moth, she had a duty.



"You okay? You've been kind of off all day," Amara asked as she suited up in the locker room.

"I'll be fine. I guess I've been thinking a lot lately, maybe too much. I don't know," Hokura answered, stuffing her clothes into her locker, and putting on her new suit.

Amara chuckled. "That makes a lot of sense. I'm just making sure," Amara said, pulling her catsuit up and over her shoulders. "You know if there's anything wrong, you can talk to me."

Hokura breathed. She knew her best friend was merely concerned; she had been off after spending yet another night in the medical facility. "I know, Amara, I'm sorry, maybe it was just that being back in the medical facility so soon after the accident has set me off a bit," she answered, wishing her friend would believe her. She knew at any time that she could count on Amara.

"As long as you know that I'm here for you, so what do you think we'll get up to tonight?" Amara asked as she leaned herself back, letting her spine crack as she stretched.

"I'm not sure exactly. Hopefully, it won't be something tedious and tiring," Hokura said, doing up the front zipper. "Although I'm sure we caused enough trouble for the rebels last night."

Amara nodded in agreement. "Well, you ready to go?" she asked, turning to her friend who was just doing up her laces on her shoes.

"Ready!"

The two walked silently side by side as they made their way to the briefing room. Adam met them outside the room and bid Hokura a good evening with a smile. Hokura smiled and greeted him, and they went through the door to the office, which Adam held open. Sitting at his desk, as usual, was the professor. Hokura tried to keep her eyes from him, but the second she gazed upon him, her heart started pounding again.

"Good evening, my children," the professor said, looking up at all three of them with a stern face.

"Good evening, sir," the three replied in unison, although Hokura's voice seemed to crack, nobody took note.

"You three did well last night. The warehouse has been destroyed. No one was injured; your duties were carried out," he continued as he ruffled through some papers that he had been looking at.

"I'm guessing that the rebels are set up closer to the city than we would have guessed with all the export that has been coming in. They're getting more

dangerous by the days as their numbers grow. I want all three of you to go out tonight and search the city for any civilian action. I know the night watch hasn't caught many in the past weeks and that the numbers have been lower than usual, but with that said, it is unusual. We believe the civilians are getting smarter with their movements and with their communication with the rebels. Since the day watch hasn't caught any rebels in the city bounds, they must be getting this information in the darkness of night. The night watch has yet been successful with gaining any information. It's up to your three tonight to see if you can find anything out."

"Yes, sir," the three replied.

Hokura could feel herself start to sweat. This meant all three of them would be splitting up tonight. It wasn't often that the three were sent to go their separate ways.

"You will be going out on foot; the night watch will drop you off to your designated area, but it will be up to you to make your way back by foot unless you can catch a ride back with the night watch. I know this mission sounds perilous, but the night watch guard has been tripled, so there will be more of them out tonight," the professor said.

All three of the peacemakers gazed wide-eyed at him, never were they without their own transportation, and never were they told that they would need to return to the compound by foot.

"Sir, will we have contact and weapons at least?" Adam spoke, hoping to lighten the air with a positive response.

"You will have your basic weapons. You will not have any communicating devices on you. The livewire will be offline tonight for upgrades... you'll only have access to walkie-talkies, which are linked to the night watch guards. Will that be a problem?" the professor asked, raising his eyebrows.

The three stood silent for a moment as they all took in what he just said. No livewire communication devices, never had they been disconnected from the base and from each other.

"That's ludicrous!" Amara blurted out. She knew she was talking out of place and fell silent quickly as her nerves shot through her knowing she would



be reprimanded.

The professor's expression didn't change at Amara's outburst; he still sat with his eyes peering at the three. "Do you not think that you are ready for such a mission? I have full faith that you three will be fine and will make it back." He stood from his desk, still eyeing them.

Hokura glanced down. The realization had hit; she no longer had the professor on her mind, but her thoughts were now filled with doubt and dismay. She would be cut off from the others. She would be alone, and that frightened and confused her more than the new feelings that she was experiencing. She stared at her dim reflection on the floor. She was trembling inside and didn't want to appear weak to the others.

"You three are dismissed. You can leave through the garage where three, night watch vehicles are waiting along with your weapons. You all need to be back by the latest before curfew is over at six hundred hours, although I'm sure you'll be able to make your way back easily enough by three hundred," the professor announced.

The three turned and walked out the door without saying a word, each lost in their own mind of what the night would hold for them.

"I can't believe this shit!" Amara yelled as they entered the garage. "We're expected not only to do the night watch's job but to make it back on our own on foot!" Amara ran her hand through her hair, yanking at the roots in frustration as she tried to calm herself down.

"Obviously, the professor thinks we can pull this off," Adam said, looking over to Amara, wishing she wouldn't voice herself so loud.

"We'll be just fine. We've been through tedious hours of training in combat. We all know the city is set up in a grid, so we won't have a problem finding our way back. It's not like we haven't been out there a million times before, plus we can always call into the night watch," Hokura said in a flat tone. She tried to stay calm and collected, but on the inside, she was anxious about getting out on her own.

"She's right, we'll be fine," Adam added with a reassuring grin. "Look at this as an opportunity to be free for a night. No communication, no transportation,

just doing our duty.”

Amara nodded as she pursed her lips. She still didn’t like it but forced a smile. “Let’s make sure we all make it back tonight, safe and sound.”

Hokura gazed over at her friend. She knew she wanted to say more but kept quiet. “We will. We’ll all be around that breakfast table tomorrow morning,” she stated. “Well, I guess we’re all going our separate ways now.”

Adam nodded to them both. “You two stay safe. I’ll see you tomorrow morning,” and with that, they all shared a silent moment of approving nods and then went off on their own towards their designated vehicle.

Hokura sat in the back of the army van. There were five, night watch soldiers also sitting around her. They made small talk amongst themselves but didn’t say a word or even acknowledge she was there. Hokura didn’t care; this was about duty, not making friends. She knew what the world thought of the peacemakers, that they were an ungodly creation by man that went against the science of nature. Hokura checked her gun and clipped it to her side; she hoped she wouldn’t need to use it tonight.



“We’re here at the drop-off point,” the driver said, coming to a stop. “If you need anything, radio in.”

Hokura jumped out of the back, and the vehicle drove away. For a moment, Hokura stood silently in the street, alone in the darkness of the vast city with no one around her, no way to report back, only herself to rely on. A slight breeze lifted Hokura’s spirit as a smile came across her lips; she was alone in the city to do as she pleased. She stared down the road and started walking, wondering exactly what it was she was to be looking for. There was no sound or movement other than her own as her shoes crunched against the pavement of the street.

“This is going to be a long night.” Hokura sighed as she continued on her way. She looked up towards the buildings. Many of them were apartments where civilian families lived. She thought about them sleeping peacefully in their

rooms. Their children tucked in snugly asleep in their world of carelessness. Hokura wondered what it was like to be a child, to be innocent and learn from your own mistakes, to cry over simplicities, to enjoy simple things, and to have a mother and a father. With that thought, Hokura felt a pang in her heart, a mother, she knew that she must have had one, but never did she ask about her. It hadn't seemed important who her parents had been. She wondered what it would be like to know her mother. Then again, maybe she didn't want to know. There were so many questions to ask. Did her mother give her up willingly? Did she do it because she knew Hokura would be protected and given everything she needed? Or was she merely an orphan?

Hokura didn't know. She had no memory of being a baby, of coming into this world as a baby. The only memory she had of coming into the world was waking up in the medical facility to Doctor Allen and Professor Dorian.

"Professor," Hokura whispered, for surely the professor was the only person who came close to being a parent or authority figure for her, yet he wasn't her father, a mentor but not a father. Just like a mother, Hokura had no father. Trying to think of the professor as one didn't seem to fit.

Hokura stopped when something caught her attention. There was a slight noise in one of the alleyways she contemplated going down into the darkness between the two buildings. Fear gripped her for a split moment, were there things lurking in the shadows out to get her? Hokura shook her head, cursing at the idea, what a silly thought. She knew that she had seen everything there was to see and that her fear was merely her imagination acting up.

"Get a hold of yourself." Hokura breathed out airily, trying to focus her thoughts. She stood tall and walked towards the alleyway, her eyes focused on the darkness as she peered in. She strained to hear anything, but there was nothing. "Must have been the wind," she huffed, turning away, and going back out to the road when she heard the exhaust from a large vehicle followed by cheers. They were about two blocks away.

Hokura centered herself in thoughts and dipped into the shadows thinking of her course of action. She heard them coming towards her. She needed to determine how large the group was. She knew she couldn't single-handedly take

on more than possibly three at a time. What if they had weapons? She might be able to disengage a few of them but not all of them if they were to draw weapons upon her.

Thoughts of weeks prior came to mind; it wasn't worth the risk. Hokura flipped on her walkie talkie and was about to signal the night watch when all she heard was dead air. The transmission wasn't connecting to anyone. Most likely due to the livewire being upgraded, she resolved; at this moment, she truly was alone.

Hokura ducked into the nearest alley. As the old rusty army jeep passed by, Hokura gazed up, rebels, she knew it was rebels. Her eyes looked up further to see one of them standing in the back of the vehicle, he called out commands on where to go, and before Hokura could plan out her attack, she knew where they were heading. 5th and Tore, Hokura knew she was on Spears Road, but exactly where she wasn't one hundred percent positive.

She started her way west in hopes of coming across an intersection to relay with if she was far enough south. She made sure to stay in the shadows as she silently made her way. With extreme luck, Hokura found she was already on 4th and was a block away from where the rebel leader had directed the group to lead to an all too familiar place. Only the night before was she a block over, demolishing a warehouse they had used for transporting weapons.

"The peacekeepers took down the warehouse. Now we're to use one of the back shed's for now to stash supplies," a rough voice called.

"You heard James! Now hurry the hell up. We don't have all night. They might already be on our asses," another called.

"Start loading the explosives already," the first voice called again.

Hokura stared as five rebels carried some small crates into the large shed. A sixth one stood guarding the crates. The seventh just stood in the back of the jeep, watching them. He was muscular with long brown hair. Hokura couldn't help but watch as he took command and stood with such authority.

One of the rebels ran up to him with a worried look. "Sir, I don't like this, it's too quiet, maybe I should keep watch in case a peacekeeper comes this way," he stuttered, loading up a gun.

As he did so, Hokura's throat tightened as a feeling of dread washed over her. Had she been discovered? Should she just run out and fight or stay back in the shadows holding her breath as she worked out a plan of attack? There was no way she could take on seven of them, especially when she had no idea what was in the crates they were loading. They could easily open fire on her. Hokura heard a chuckle.

"No, don't bother. We're not here to fight with the peacekeepers. I don't want any bloodshed tonight."

She looked up to see it was the commander talking. Shaken by what she heard, Hokura stepped back into the shadows of the alleyway. Was it true that the rebels didn't want any bloodshed on their hands? If that was so, then why were they selling weapons to people inside the city? Hokura was so lost in her thoughts that she had forgotten why she was out on duty and carelessly walked into a trash receptacle that clanged to the cement noisily. With that, she cursed, praying that the rebels would pay no mind. She knew she should run, but she stood frozen, unbelieving what she had just done. She could hear a commotion from where the rebels were loading the weapons but couldn't hear what was being said.

Hokura continued to back up as worry flooded over her, was this going to be her last night out? What would the professor think when they found her body? If they found it at all? Her throat tightened. She slowly held her breath, backing herself up. As she did so, she bumped into something rather large. She closed her eyes, letting out a soft sigh of knowing she had most likely met her end as all her combat training suddenly left her. Hokura turned around with her hand shaking to grasp her gun. Never did she enjoy having to use it. As she turned, she came face to face with the rebel commander.

"Pretty little thing you are," he said quietly, grinning casually.

Hokura pointed the gun at his face, trembling. She stared at him. He had nothing but a knife at his side. Other than that, he was unarmed, and from his demeanor, his intentions weren't to attack her.

"Pretty little peacekeeper out here pointing guns, but you don't even have the safety off," James said, gently slapping the gun out of Hokura's hand.

As it hit the ground, Hokura's eyes widened with fear, her lips quivered as all her training had been lost in the back of her mind. She could try and fight him, but any more noise would alert the others. She was easily outnumbered.

The rebel leader stepped towards her quivering form and put his finger to his lips. "Shhhh... I don't mean you any harm," James said in a quiet voice, stepping forward with his hands raised. Hokura backed up, still staring at him wide-eyed. He was like no one she had ever seen before; he was the enemy, and yet he looked to be so peaceful and calm. His voice was soothing; his green eyes spoke nothing but honesty.

"What do you want?" Hokura stuttered quietly, feeling helpless.

James grinned at her as he cocked his head to the side, he viewed her up and down, she the most beautiful thing he had ever laid eyes on, never in his life had he seen another like her, he was mystified and curious at the same time. "I don't want anyone to get hurt. I suggest that you turn around and forget what you just saw," James said, licking his lips as he turned away and looked back at Hokura, "and I'll do the same."

Hokura nodded. She was still shaking with fear; she had no backup, no communication, and knew that this rebel alone had the power to kill her without the use of a weapon in her current state. Hokura continued to back away when James crouched down and retrieved her gun; her heart stopped seeing that he had the firearm in his hand. He emptied the bullets out of it and stuffed them in his pocket; he then stretched out his hand.

"Don't forget this," he said, urging her to come closer to retrieve it from him.

She reluctantly stepped forward, taking the gun from his hand. Not for a second did her eyes leave his. She could feel the tension between them as enemies, but there was another tension as he looked at her.

With that, Hokura heard shouting from another rebel.

"Hey, boss, you've been down there a while; you need a hand?"

She froze at the idea of being brought down by the rebels. What would the rest of them do to her if they found her? The idea of dying tonight haunted her. Notions of being immortal didn't mean she couldn't die. She took a gulp of air as James looked forward to where the voice had called.

“All clear, nothing down here,” he called, looking back to Hokura. “You better get out of here; I don’t want to be lying to my troops,” he said with a wink.

Hokura nodded and ran past James as quick as her feet could carry her, into the darkness of the alley and away from where the rebels had been.

When Hokura was far enough away, she looked back to see if anyone had followed her. There was nothing but the dark loom of the alleyway. She stopped for a second and placed her revolver back in its holder as she recalled what had just happened.

“He let me go. He was so nice about it.” Hokura breathed lightly. He had let her go when he could have easily killed her. He could have brought her back to the rebel camp and have tortured her for information. Never had a peacekeeper been caught by a rebel or experienced such an encounter before. The professor always told her that if she were to be captured, she would surely be tortured and that talking would be treason against him and everything that she stood for. For the first time in her life, Hokura questioned the professor’s wise words. The rebel commander said he didn’t want bloodshed; he saved her and hid her from the others. “Maybe we’re wrong,” Hokura whispered as she continued her quiet walk down the alley.

She silently wondered what Adam and Amara had been up to, if they had had any run-ins with rebels or if their nights had been quiet. Hokura glanced down at her watch, it was already late, and she was at the far side of town. The first child figured it was time to start her long walk back to the compound. She cursed at having no transportation and at the fact that she wasn't likely going to run across any night watch vehicles.

Hokura made sure to keep her ears open for the rebel jeep. She had already decided that she didn’t want any more confrontations tonight. She felt a pang of guilt for not doing her duty, for allowing the rebels to transport weapons into the city in front of her very eyes, for allowing them to be mobile, for backing down.

“You’re a fool,” Hokura sneered at herself. Some peacekeeper she was for freezing up the way she did.

The night air was cooling considerably as the light breeze picked up

Hokura's hair and blew it in her face. She walked with a scowl because of what she allowed to happen but didn't regret her actions or lack thereof. She knew for sure if she were to try and fight them that she would have been killed. She should have just stayed in hiding so she could report what had happened. How could she report it in with no way of communication? She had no doubt in her mind that after the encounter that whatever they were loading was now being brought to a different location. She had missed her opportunity to know for sure what they were doing.

When Hokura finally arrived back at the compound, it was nearly three-thirty in the morning. She guessed that she had been the first one. She made her way to the locker room and changed back into her regular clothes. She didn't even think to check whether Amara's clothes had been picked up or not.

After changing, she made her way down the hall down to the cafeteria in hopes that maybe Amara and Adam were conversing and waiting for her return.

The cafeteria was silent. No one was in the hallways as Hokura started towards the living quarters. She closed her eyes in hopes of not seeing the professor making his way through the halls. She didn't want to face him in the thoughts of not following through with her duty. With that thought, a look of satisfaction made its way across her face. The professor would never find out. There would be no report of tonight's incident.

The hallways were empty and quiet as she made her way to her door; she unlocked it and went inside. *Home* Hokura thought faintly. She was safe in her own sanctuary, inside her four walls of her own privacy where she could think and do whatever she wanted freely. She threw her top off and zipped down her jeans, throwing them onto the couch, leaving her in her white undergarments. She didn't feel like sleeping yet. She made her way into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water, it felt cold and soothing as it splashed down her throat, but its taste was still lacking. Making her way to the couch, Hokura crashed onto its soft upholstery, letting her legs finally rest.

She grabbed the remote sitting on the small wooden coffee table and started flipping through the news channels. There was nothing worth watching; there never was. In a huff of frustration, she decided maybe it was best to wash up and



go to bed.

She turned on the sink and quickly splashed herself with cold water, enough to get the sweat off. She had decided that she would shower in the morning. After toweling herself off, she fell into her bed, where she hoped she could spend the remainder of the night. As Hokura drifted off, thoughts of the rebel leader played in her mind as he smiled at her so cockily, looking at her with those green eyes, letting her go free, and her own questioning thoughts of what she was really doing.



“Good job, men,” James cheered as the jeep rolled back into the rebel base where the others were waiting, cheering on the troops' return. The crowd of men and women alike hooted and clapped as the vehicle slowly drove into the camp where the rest of the transportation was kept.

“Good thing we didn’t see any peacekeepers tonight,” one of the seven troops called with a wide grin on his face.

James nodded as his face turned serious. “Remember, this isn’t about the peacekeepers. They’re merely doing their jobs.” The rebel troop just laughed and shook his head, as did the rest. James knew they didn’t mean any disrespect; maybe they too were as ignorant as the peacekeepers were.

As the troops and the commander hopped off the parked jeep, friends and family greeted them. James took a deep breath. It felt good to be back at the base as the aromas filled his senses, fire, and smoke along with food being cooked for their late-night meals. James watched as families reunited and hurried back to their camps to enjoy a meal and time together. Couples walking hand in hand, families, and friends in groups laughed together, yet there was him, the lone commander of the rebels. As the commander became lost in his observations of happiness, he didn’t hear his friend sneak up behind him.

James was flung a step forward as a sturdy palm hit his back.

“So was the city all you were hoping for, boy?” Barack laughed, taking a

drink from his flask.

James grinned as he looked over. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you about an encounter I had tonight,” James said, rubbing the back of his neck. James struck Barack’s interest as his friend leaned in rather intently to listen. “Not here, we’ll go back to my quarters to talk,” James whispered, looking around to see if anyone could be listening in.

Barack grinned widely. “Ah, I shall meet you there in a few minutes then. I have to put the rug rats back to bed. They wanted to see everyone back on arrival; then I’ll give my wife a kind word that I’ll be a while.” Barack then hurriedly ran off back towards where the tents had been set up in the rebel base.

James sighed as he watched Barack jaunt off.

The commander sluggishly made his way back to his quarters. He walked through the tent city and made small talk with a few people who were out and about at this time of night and greeted him. He was their leader, but he always expressed that he was no different than any of them. He took after this father and was kind and fair and always open to listen to new ideas to aid in their mission to bring a new order.

Campfires burned low as most families had already long past laid themselves to rest for the night. They all had different responsibilities. Some were messengers who would go into the city to come back with news of the compound during the day. Others were to gather supplies from wrecks of the old war. Scrap metal and such were rarities and were used for fixing transportation. Fuel was another necessity that they were lucky to come across from the different towns they had come across. Other rebels served as mechanics who fixed up the vehicles and kept them in running order. Some fixed weaponry while others were sent on long scouting missions into the desert for weeks at a time to see if they could come across any abandoned cities or groups of people to bring into the camp.

Finally, James had made it out of tent city and could see his tent only a few feet off in the distance. He smiled with the satisfaction of being back home again. He walked into his tent and to his kitchen area. He opened up his cooler and grabbed a jug of water along with his flask, which still held what he was

drinking the night before. He brought the jug and flask back outside with him to his fire pit.

James then went to the side of the tent, where he kept pieces of chopped scrap wood for his fire and loaded it into the pit. Within a few minutes, the fire was roaring heartily as he sat staring into the flame, thinking about his encounter with the peacekeeper. His eyes glazed over as he imagined her standing in front of him, her eyes meeting his in uncertainty the way she trembled when he spoke to her. He wished he could have talked to her. He wished she would have trusted him that he meant no harm. He suddenly wanted to protect her with all his might. Her being immortal only made her a goddess in his eyes; she was truly beautiful even though she was misled. James snapped back as he heard heavy footsteps coming his way.

“Sorry about taking so long,” Barack said in a gruff tone as he munched on what looked to be a drumstick from a fowl of some sort. “I brought you over some dinner, figured you’d be hungry after your first night being out.” Barack continued to chew as he sat down and offered James a large piece of cooked meat, which he happily took.

“So, then what about this encounter you had tonight?” Barack said, after swallowing and wiping his hand on his bare arm and brushing what was left of his dinner off his beard as he warmed himself by the fire.

“Well,” James started, taking a large bite out of the piece of fowl. It was well-spiced and still juicy. “I came across a peacekeeper. I think she might have been following us.”

Barack’s eyes grew wide in excitement. “Did the others see her? Please tell me you didn’t hurt the child!”

James shook his head, still chewing. “No, she was hiding in the alleyway near where we were loading. She was alone.”

Barack waited patiently for James to finish chewing before he went on even though he was anxious to hear about James’ encounter with what was supposed to be the enemy. He was curious to hear how things had turned out, considering the commander said he didn’t physically engage with her.

James finally finished and took a swig from his flask, which had been sitting

beside him. "Ah, good stuff," he stated, licking his lips. He then leaned back, stretching his tired muscles. "As I was saying, she was alone when I approached her. She pointed a gun at my face." James chuckled.

"A gun!" Barack interrupted. "Well, that's to be expected. But since you're still here, she obviously didn't use it on you. I'm sure the peacekeepers are well-trained in weapons and hand-to-hand combat."

James merely laughed. "She couldn't have been that well-trained. She froze up so bad she didn't even realize she still had the safety on. I slapped her hand, and she dropped the thing like she was stunned." He sat silently for a moment, thinking to himself, lost in his thoughts again.

"Then what happened?" Barack urged him as he sat in the sand and leaned into James.

"I told her I didn't want any bloodshed, that if she turned around and forgot what she saw that I would do the same," James said, stroking his chin as he brought his legs in and rested his elbows on his knees. "She was so scared of me. I wonder what lies she's been told about the rebels," he mused aloud. He turned to Barack. "She certainly was beautiful, though." He grinned as he thought back to Hokura's beauty, which had entranced him.

Barack lifted an eyebrow and took a drink from his flask. After taking a good swallow, he looked up at the commander, who still seemed to be thinking of the young girl. "What did she look like?" he asked in hopes of getting the commander talking.

James continued staring at the fire as he relived, staring at her. "She was young-looking, my age, I guess, an incredible body, strong arms, lean, not too tall, she had this long brown hair, and her eyes were like gold," he rambled on.

Barack tried to hide his chuckles as he laughed to himself.

This caught James' attention as he stared at his friend, wide-eyed. "What? What's all the laughter for?"

Barack took a large breath in and gave a toothy grin. "It sounds like you ran across the first child."

James leaned in, turning his head at Barack in fascination. "Is that the one that you knew? What was her name?" he asked wide-eyed, wishing to learn all

he could about her.

“That one would be Hokura,” Barack sighed, remembering her for himself. “She had awakened a little before I fled the city. From the time that I got to know her, she was a very bright spirit. She was eager to learn, very talented... and very beautiful” Barack started to trail off into his own thoughts. “It’s a shame that she’s trapped in that city. She’ll never be given a choice of sides. She’ll never see this side of life.”

James shook his head. “I don’t believe that for a minute. I’m sure there’s a way to talk to her if she’d be willing to listen.”

“That’s not going to happen, and how are you going to get to her? You can’t just enter the compound; you can’t go into the city during the day. If you’re spotted by one of the day watch soldiers, you’ll be arrested. The same goes for at night. You’re already putting yourself at enough risk going out on missions!” Barack said in a firm tone. “Besides, who knows if you’ll ever see her alone again.”

James sat in silence for a moment, rethinking what he had just heard. For some reason, he was now stuck on the idea of talking to Hokura. He wished to reason with her, to find out what she had learned about the rebels so he could get an idea of how they were viewed. It was apparent they were the enemies in the eyes of the government, but he so deeply needed to know why, and above all rest, he felt the need to warn her of why they were exporting weapons. “Are you saying that it’s hopeless?” James finally spoke up in a soft tone.

Barack’s face lightened as he looked down at his clasped hands, which were sitting in his lap. “Nothing is hopeless, lad. Your father taught me that... but what you’re aiming for here is a one in a million chance. If it’s fate, then I guess you’ll get it,” he answered.

James nodded as he stared off into the flames fire had always tantalized him; it had a way of bringing him away from the world around him.

Barack stood. “Give it time, my friend.” He patted James on the back. The two shared a smile of friendship. “I’m off for the night.” He started his way back to his wife.

James listened to his friend depart as he stared at the growing flames. The

excitement from tent city had since died down, and all was quiet other than the crackling of the flames as they licked the sky.

“There has to be a way,” James whispered. He tilted his head back and let the breeze blow his hair as he took in a deep breath hoping it would calm him. For some reason, he couldn’t get the image of Hokura out of his mind.



As Barack walked back to camp, he thought of his friend whom he had left back at the fire to suffer in his own hopeful thoughts. Barack knew that his commander was playing a dangerous hand in wanting to get involved with the peacekeepers, especially the first child, which he knew the professor had a special interest in. He shook his head at the idea of them being on duty alone. Back when Barack had been a scientist in the compound working alongside the professor while the three children were still asleep, he took note of how the professor would take time out of his day and just sit and watch Hokura. When Barack questioned his particular interest, the professor waved off his inquiries, but he too knew there was something about the child named Hokura that was different from the others.

In the days leading up to Hokura awakening, the other scientists had been informed that there was movement but were forbidden to be in her room. It was only the professor, along with his right-hand man Doctor Allen who was allowed in.

Barack shook his head again, trying to clear his thoughts. It all sounded preposterous that this child, in particular, was special, for all he knew, none of them had any more power than a regular human being. Yes, they had been trained day in and out on superior combat, but other than that, they were still human.

Barack arrived back at his tent where his wife Sheila and his two boys were already sleeping soundly inside. With that, Barack entered the tent and joined his wife in slumber.

He stared at his wife's sleeping form, her black hair sprawled upon her pillow, her fair skin seemed to glow in the night. He kissed her cheek as she stirred. Barack couldn't imagine being without his family. He had met Shelia when he first came to the camp city with the rebel troops. It had been James' father whom he offered his services to as a scientist who knew a great deal about medicine. The band of rebels took him in with open arms. Barack soon drifted off to sleep as he thought about the day he left the city, and his entire life changed.



James still sat daydreaming at his fire, pondering possible ways to have contact with Hokura again, wondering if there was any way to even step foot into the compound without being shot on site for entering a government building. Not only was he unauthorized, but he was also seen as the enemy; it looked like the odds were stacked against him.

He sighed in frustration as sweat glistened off his face. Even though the nights were still cool, the flame from the large fire cast an almost unbearable heat, but James had always been a man to sweat it out.

In a moment of solitude, he tilted his head back. "Father, give me strength. These are your men. Please help me lead them to what we have promised them." He prayed silently for a sign from whatever he was praying to, a spirit remnant of his father, a higher being. He didn't know anymore, for it seemed that any bit of religion had been lost in the people who remained after the great war.

He sat for a few more moments, almost intent on waiting for a sign, sitting perfectly still as not to miss it... but alas, there was nothing. James knew he was waiting for something that wasn't going to come. He cursed silently, not to himself but to whatever kept him waiting for any kind of answer. The commander splashed the water which he had brought out over his face cooling him down immensely. He then snuffed out the fire and headed back into his tent, where he drank the rest of his whiskey and returned the empty flask to the

canteen next to the water so that it would be cold for whatever he was to pour in it next.

James made his way over to his bed, tearing off his sweat covered shirt and pants after kicking off his heavy boots. He was far too hot from the fire to sleep in anything tonight. As he sat on his bed, he peeled off his socks and threw them to the far side of the tent. He lay down enjoying the coolness of the sheets against his skin, thinking of the irony that the night before, he had dismissed any thoughts whatsoever about having someone by his side, and now not even twenty-four hours later, he was imagining just that with Hokura.

As the night wore on, James tossed and turned in a restless sleep, he wanted to sleep, but his subconscious was nagging at him to find a way to the first child. Her voice haunted him, and every time he was about to drift off, he could hear it echoing the walls of his tent. He didn't know which he wished for more, a comfortable sleep, or to stay up reliving the few moments back in the alleyway. Never in his life had James ever been so transfixed on someone before. His heart pounded so hard as he thought about her that he idly put his hand to his chest to make sure it wasn't about to burst.

Finally, with a loud, deep sigh, James gave into the notion that slumber wasn't going to take him this night. He got up and retrieved his clothes, which he was wearing hours before. He dressed and went outside to see that it was still an hour away from dawn.

James made his way through tent city and over a large sand dune and continued to walk for a while. As he went over the final dune, he quietly stared at the large wall in the distance, which separated the world of the city from the world of the desert. Even though it was several miles away, James felt as if he could almost reach out and touch the cold, thick barrier. He sat in the cool sand, staring. He would sleep later on during the day, but right now, his eyes were transfixed on the obstacle which lay ahead of him. As the sun began to rise, James saw something flutter out of the corner of his eye as something soft landed on his shoulder. Glancing over, he saw a little gray moth perched on his skin. James smiled at the rare sight as it then took off again, flying towards the horizon of the great wall. Had this been the sign he had been waiting for?





“Quiet night?” Amara asked, a rather refreshed, looking Adam as he drank his coffee with a rare peaceful look.

“Walked around the whole northeast sector of the city and didn’t hear or see a thing. I haven’t had a night like that in weeks,” Adam said cheerfully, then frowned, putting down his cup. “Kind of a letdown, though. I was all hyped up for nothing.”

Amara chuckled as she bit into a buttered piece of toast. She felt the same way but was relieved that nothing had actually gone on the night before. “You know,” she talked in between bites, “maybe the professor knew it was going to be a quiet night and sent us out like that to get our sense of awareness up.”

Adam shrugged, taking a large forkful of scrambled eggs when Amara looked up past him.

“Well, she finally awakes!” Amara called to Hokura, who was steadily approaching them. “Seems like you’re taking over for Adam in being the late one lately.”

“Sorry, I didn’t shower when I got in last night.” Hokura sighed, walking past Adam, and taking a seat beside Amara.

“We can see that,” Adam said again with a mouthful of eggs. Even though he hadn’t done much other than walk around the night before, he had a pretty good appetite when he woke up. He had gotten to the cafeteria early and had loaded his tray before Amara met him for breakfast at their usual spot.

Amara took her finger to Hokura’s shoulder and dabbed away a few remaining droplets of water. “Learn to dry yourself!” Amara smirked. This was an ongoing thing that Hokura didn’t know how to dry herself off and was always walking around half drenched after showering.

Hokura grabbed the last piece of toast off the tray that Adam was now picking the last bit of food from. Her stomach was still in a loop from her mission, but she wanted to at least try to get something into her system. “Did

you both have busy nights?” she asked.

“I was just telling Adam that the professor must have sent us out like that, knowing there wasn’t going to be any activity,” Amara blurted.

Hokura was taken back for a second. “I take you both had quiet nights then?”

Adam nodded as his smile returned. “Walk in the park,” he said, stretching backward and giving his neck and back a good crack.

“Damn right, so what about your night?” Amara asked.

Hokura’s insides wrenched at Amara’s tone. It was that annoying tone she used when she figured something was up. Hokura knew she had somehow given herself away this morning. She sat in silence for a moment when Adam spoke up.

“Now we know something happened” he grinned with a twinkle in his eye, giving Hokura an all-knowing look... she was caught for sure now that she had undoubtedly given herself up.

She sighed in defeat as her two friends leaned in closer to hear of Hokura’s nights. “Not here,” Hokura whispered, glancing around. There were workers and scientists everywhere, none supposedly listening in, but every one of them had the potential to overhear their conversation. “After breakfast, we’ll go back to my room,” she continued.

Amara smirked deviously, giving Adam an approving nod. Adam raised his eyebrows but gestured that he, too, was in.

Hokura grabbed another piece of toast and was about to take a bite when Amara and Adam both took Hokura by the arms. “What the?” Hokura cried as they picked her off her seat.

“You really don’t expect us to wait to hear about this?” Amara asked as the three of them walked along, leaving the cafeteria.

“Besides, it was you who was late for breakfast. We both had our fill,” Adam added, pulling her along.

"I wasn't that late. You two were both early!" Hokura continued.

The three of them made their way to Hokura’s living quarters. Once inside, Hokura made sure to lock the door after she peered down the hallway to make sure no one was about.

“So, what is this all about?” Amara asked as she sat cross-legged on Hokura’s couch. Adam sat on the floor, waiting intently as Hokura took the spot on Amara’s far side.

Hokura cleared her throat but didn’t know exactly where to start. “I don’t think the rebels mean us any harm,” she stated but right away knew that wasn’t the way to start this conversation.

“What do you mean, don’t mean us any harm?” Amara erupted, shooting to her feet. “Just the other night, those bastards were throwing grenades at us, and now you say they mean us no harm! Two weeks ago, you were nearly blown to bits by them!”

“Calm down, Amara,” Adam coaxed as he motioned for the girl to sit down. “I’m sure Hokura has her reasons.” Adam then looked over to Hokura, who sat wide-eyed with her lips pursed.

Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all, but now the cat was out of the bag, she had to continue. “I... I ran into one last night,” Hokura’s voice cracked. She looked over to Amara, who sat staring at her slack jawed.

“Go on, Hokura,” Adam continued as he leaned in, listening, his arms resting on his legs as he bent forward, interested in what had happened to Hokura for her to make such a statement.

“He... I had never seen him before... he was a commander or something,” Hokura stuttered as she remembered his smile. “I had come across his band in a jeep. I followed them to where they were loading weapons... I didn’t know what to do, there were too many of them for me to fight, so I hid in the shadows of an alley, and as I backed off, I stumbled, and he found me back there...”

Amara put an arm around her. “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?” she asked in her mothering manner. At that moment, she felt nothing but fear for her best friend.

“I’m okay. He said he didn’t mean me any harm, I had my gun out, and he smacked it from my hand.” Hokura felt foolish for admitting such a thing and instantly wished she had left that part out. “He told me he didn’t want any bloodshed, then one of his men asked if he had found anything. He told them it was all clear and told me to leave.” Hokura smiled faintly. “He handed my gun

back and let me go.”

Amara sat back for a moment as Adam shifted in his seat. “So, what you mean to tell me is that he disarmed you and then let you go after handing your firearm back to you without so much as a struggle?”

Hokura nodded silently, maybe telling her friends wasn’t such a good idea. Dread flooded her. She had just told her two allies that she had been so easily disarmed and hadn’t put up a fight. She was a mockery to this whole project.

"Did you at least report it when you got back to the compound?" Adam asked, staring at her.

Hokura shook her head. "What's the point? I'm sure they ended up changing the locations of the weapons anyway. There's no way they would have continued on once I had stumbled across them. Besides, the lines to the night watch were all dead. I had tried, but I couldn’t make contact with them."

Amara scratched an invisible itch on her head as she breathed in deep, contemplating, trying to keep her temper from spewing out to her friend who had been so careless. “Maybe that blast did more to you than you thought,” she muttered.

Hokura felt angered and stood up to defend herself when Amara stood too staring hard at Hokura.

“This isn’t like you at all, Hokura! How on earth could you make such a stupid mistake! You could have gotten yourself killed! Not only that, but you listened to the enemy and turned cheek and ran without reporting this to anyone?”

“That’s enough,” Adam piped in, raising his voice, placing a cooling hand on Amara’s shoulder. “Don’t you see the opportunity we have at hand here? No rebel we’ve ever come into contact with before has merely disregarded us. You said it was a commander, they may be up to something, and that’s why they didn’t want to stir anything up,” Adam said, looking back and forth from Amara to Hokura.

“The rebels are always up to something.” Amara rolled her eyes.

“He was different,” Hokura snapped. She stopped herself for a second, realizing the words that were coming out of her mouth. This wasn’t like her;

nothing had been the same lately. Suddenly Hokura was having strange feelings that she had no answers for, she found herself drowning in self-doubt, and now she was fighting with her best friend. "I don't know what's becoming of me," she let out a small sob as her voice faltered. She thought of the pain and anger she felt when she saw Doctor Allen and Annette together. Maybe she was giving in to the evil nature of mankind. The thought buried itself deep inside her and scared her. "I just don't know!" Hokura cried, resting her hand against her forehead.

"It's alright." Adam sighed. "You've been through a lot lately; you're just feeling overwhelmed after your encounter last night."

Amara folded her arms and looked over to Hokura, letting out an exasperated sigh as she let her arms hit her sides. "I don't mean to be hard on you or hurt you, Hokura, but I think you might have rushed back onto the force a little quickly. I only say this because you're my best friend and the first child. You hold great importance over all of us."

Adam stood, glancing at Amara. "We should be on our way; you should get some rest."

Amara gave her a look of sympathy. "Go have a bath and try to relax."

Hokura was at a loss as the two left her living quarters; she felt like she had been dismissed. She was lost in a sea of emotions and confusion. Maybe she did need a day to herself to clear her head.

Hokura dipped herself into her couch; she had already showered and didn't need to waste any more water. She raised her hand, staring at it. She was trembling; her whole body felt like it was shaking. What was happening to her? She closed her eyes tightly, holding her breath. She wanted to just disappear from everyone. She felt like a disappointment. How could she have been so foolish the night before? What if the professor got word of what happened? Again, thoughts flooded her head, she was with the enemy, she could have fought, could have investigated further, but instead, she did as he said and left. She had gone against her code of honor. Not only was he able to disarm her, but she just stood there. "Stupid," she mumbled to herself, opening her eyes, "just stupid."

Hokura resolved that she wasn't about to spend the day feeling sorry for herself. She sat up on the couch and stared at her watch. It was still morning. She stretched with renewal on how she would spend her day; she was going to train so that nothing like this would ever happen again.

She got up and changed into her training clothes, light blue spandex leggings along with a matching top. She wrapped her hands and headed towards the training facility. She hadn't been on her proper schedule for the past two weeks as she had been recovering and had been slacking in her training; it was time to brush up on her hand-to-hand combat.

Hokura made her way to the training unit. She saw Annette in the track room programming away. Hokura tried to pass the large window quickly, but Annette had seen her. She ran over to the door calling to her.

"Hokura, I need you for a moment," Annette cried as Hokura tried to casually walk away. "I've been creating a new program, and I was hoping I could have you run a lap so I could test it out." She beamed.

Hokura wasn't in the mood to see Annette, but she disregarded that notion. "I guess I have time." She shrugged, putting the image of her and Doctor Allen being together out of her mind. She was going to put her frustration to some positive use and allow it to help her rather than destroy her.

Hokura walked into the facility and started putting the monitor pads on her body. She noted that there were new gray ones amongst the regular blue ones on the table. She decided to leave them unless she was instructed to apply them.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to have a minute or two to stretch." Hokura started walking away from the table, still eyeing up the pads as Annette punched keys into the computer.

"No problem, go ahead. I'm just punching in some data for the new system and double-checking it," Annette said, not looking up from the computer screen as she quickly clicked away at the keyboard.

Hokura walked a few feet away from the table and started to stretch. She stretched her calf muscles and then went onto her arms and neck. It was a routine she did every time she ran trials or did training. One of the first things she learned when it came to physical education and endurance was that stretching

was a critical part of any activity. Hokura finished by jogging and hopping in place, making sure she was limber as she pumped herself up for the trial she was about to run.

Annette walked over to her with the blue pads in hand; they were about the size of the regular sensors. They were slicked with what looked to be a petroleum jelly on the one side. “These are brand new; I was working on them the other day with Doctor Allen. We’re making leaps and bounds with the simulators. We want to test out the new monitors. We’re hoping we can use them in the combat simulations we’re working on,” Annette said, placing one on each side of Hokura’s temples. She then put one on the back of Hokura’s neck and then one on each wrist. Hokura didn’t say anything but found the placement of the sensors rather strange.

“The ones to the temple will monitor your brainwaves, the old ones just read the waves, but these will actually monitor how focused you are while you’re running your trials, whether your mind is wandering or not and how intense your focus is,” Annette said while double-checking that they were all correctly in place. “The one on the back of your neck monitors all of your muscles. Isn’t that amazing? Now, if you strain a muscle, we can catch it and make suggestions to you as you train.” She was now smiling intently at Hokura. “And of course, your wrists ones are merely upgraded heart monitors,” she said, licking her lips.

Hokura stood still, taking in all the information, she could clearly see that Annette was fascinated by her new discoveries and findings. “For now, it’s only the racetrack that’s had the sensor upgrades, but soon we’ll have them in all the facilities. Wouldn’t that be something to be able to really help you train?”

Hokura nodded. “Yes, that would definitely come in handy when it came to sparring or hand-to-hand combat,” she answered tightly.

Annette rushed back to her computer, locking in a few more key components before her voice came over the speakers. “Okay, Hokura, we’re all set up here, you can take your mark, and I’ll count you down.”

Hokura listened to the countdown. Her heartbeat felt hollow as she stared hard at the track. Suddenly it seemed that all her senses had gone into overdrive. Everything was so clear to her. She could see the scuff marks on the track floor,

she could smell the lingering fragrance of her shampoo, and then she heard the last number echo in her ears, and as it was spoken, she took off in a rage of thunder, hurdling herself down the track as fast as her feet could carry her. It was as if she was gliding, her feet not even fully impacting the ground as she went on full speed ahead towards the finish, crossing, slowing, her eyes blurring for only a second.

Hokura jaunted around, not allowing her muscles and limbs to immediately rest. Annette ran up to her, handing her a towel. Her eyes were wide as a broad smile spread across her lips. "114.02, that's amazing. You've never exceeded yourself by that much before. Four seconds is huge!" Annette looked at a chart that she had brought over from the table where her computer and equipment were set-up. "Three weeks ago, you were at 122.43, then two weeks ago 120.30, then the other day it was 118.00. You've been massively improving at alarming rates," Annette said, showing Hokura the printed-off diagram of her times.

Hokura smiled to herself, she had been feeling stronger lately, and she had been right all along. The blast hadn't thrown her off. "I would almost say these are abnormal..." Annette started, but Hokura cut her off.

"Please, Annette, don't even think about sending me to the medical facility to do tests. I've already spent more time than I would have preferred there."

Annette pursed her lips and simply nodded. "If it's alright with you, I would like to show these results to the professor, if you don't mind, so that he can track your progress."

Hokura's heart fluttered at the thought of the professor seeing her results, how pleased he would be to see how quickly she was improving herself. "I wouldn't have a problem at all with that, Annette." She grinned as she walked over to the table and started peeling the new monitors off her wrists. "Well," Hokura sighed, stretching her back, "I'm going to be off in the training facilities." With that made her way out of the track area.

Annette gazed back at the print-out, glancing up to see Hokura's reflection passing by the large window. She quickly picked up a phone receiver sitting beside her computer and dialed. "Professor Dorian, it's Annette, I have a progress report here from Hokura, and I think it's something you should see..."



yes, sir, I'll fax it to your main office right away, sir." Annette replaced the receiver and did as she was told, she faxed the report to the professor, and then shredded the original as if it came back through the feed.



Hokura had made her way down to the far training facilities. She glanced into the weight room to see the punching bag which she had taken out the night before was still lying on the ground, waiting to be hung back up. She grinned sheepishly, knowing that it was most likely going to take a team of facility mechanics to get it chained back up to the roof.

She leaned against the cold white wall of the hallway, wondering how she would spend her day in training. She had completely lost all focus when Annette had mentioned the professor. It had all come flooding back to her... the night before, she had been disarmed so easily, her focus had been totally off, and it could have easily cost Hokura her life. "Focus!" Hokura reminded herself.

She needed to get some one-on-one training. Never again could she be so reluctant with an enemy. There was that word again, such an ugly word. How could that rebel with his long brown hair, coy smile, green eyes, and sweet voice be an enemy? "He was so nice." The words echoed in the back of Hokura's mind. She must have been stupid to think such a thing, just two weeks before she had nearly been blown to bits by the rebel's explosives, and now, she was second-guessing one because he let her live! She shook her head at the memory. The poor professor had been so distraught after she had been brought in and had spent the past two weeks running tests on her to make sure she would be alright. Who even knew how many lives were at risk with all the weapons the rebels were importing into the city. Her life may have been spared but at what cost? For the deaths of how many?

She stopped for a moment. She didn't need to train, she needed answers, but she couldn't let the professor or any other of the facility staff know about what had happened the night before. They would call her on high treason for having

an encounter with the enemy and not doing away with them.

Hokura sulked, the only way she was going to get any answers was finding that rebel again, and that would have to wait until later on this evening. She weighed on the reality of chances of ever seeing him again. Until then, Hokura deemed it best to clear her head and make herself scarce from everyone else until the day was done... she truly wanted to hide, which was a sensation that she had never felt before.

She slid down the wall and rested her head in her lap. What was happening to her? What were all these horrible emotions waking up inside of her? She had never fought with her friends before, had never been disarmed or thrown off in combat, and yet this all started with everything else she was feeling. Was it jealousy that she felt because she yearned for Doctor Allen in some sort of way? Was she actually angry with Annette for being near him? She didn't feel angry at Annette, and yet when she thought about seeing them together, she wanted to push the image out of her mind as fast as possible. What about her sudden feelings for the professor? Why did she lose her focus? Her heart jabbed, the professor...he had been the only one who had never faltered. He had always been there for her, nurtured her, and had been so loving and kind to her. He would never judge her; would never think she was in the wrong; he would be able to come up with reasoning for all this. Hokura's eyes watered if only she didn't feel so alone all of a sudden.

She hadn't heard the heavy footsteps approach her as she silently let her tears fall. "Hokura?" a deep, familiar voice called from above.

She looked up, her vision blurred, but she knew right away. "Professor," she cried as she dove into his arms and clutched onto him, sobbing.

"Hokura, what's wrong?" he asked with deep concern as he wrapped his arms around her in worry.

"Everything, I don't know what is happening to me." She sobbed, her tears became uncontrollable; her insides felt like they were breaking apart.

"Come, we'll talk about this," he urged, leading her away from the training facility.

He had quickly gotten her to his office and locked the door. At that time, he

also took his phone off the receiver and sat next to her on the couch. He wasn't going to let anyone interrupt what was about to take place. His heart ached to see her so confused so he would see what light he could shed on what could possibly be causing her so much pain.

"Hokura, please, you need to tell me what's wrong," he urged, handing her a tissue to dry her eyes.

"I don't know if I can be a peacekeeper anymore, sir," she cried. "I can't make decisions fast enough anymore. I'm having these thoughts and emotions which are causing me to question myself and my duty. I feel like I've lost all focus."

The professor pursed his lips in worry. He loved her and hated seeing her like this. Was it wrong to unlock these feelings so soon? He had wanted to do so, he had wanted her to come to him and share these feelings, but he didn't want her ever to question herself and couldn't have her doubting herself. He placed his hand on her shoulder and brought her closer to him. "Hokura, these feelings, are they the ones you told me about before? Your heart racing, you feeling faint, your hands sweating?"

She only answered by nodding but allowed herself to rest her head up against his shoulder. She felt safe, and hopefully, he would give her an answer, and then possibly with this answer, others would begin to follow.

He cleared his throat slightly, smiling inward as he pressed her closer. "These feelings, both physical and emotional, that you're describing Hokura are love."

She looked up at him for a moment, still slightly puzzled, silently staring at him.

The professor sighed. "Not the kind of love that you feel for your allies but a deeper love that your body physically responds to." He placed his hand on her thigh and lightly rubbed it.

"Professor," Hokura stuttered as she started to tremble. It had never been explained to her before. The idea of such an emotion was unknown to her, and now she had been feeling them for the first time.

"Do you feel these things when you're around me?" he asked, looking into her eyes.

"Yes," she trembled in his arms.

"Do you love me, Hokura?" he asked, bringing his face closer to hers.

"I- I must," she responded, tears filling her eyes again with confusion. Hadn't she felt the same for Doctor Allen? But then Doctor Allen wasn't the one who was here talking her through these emotions. He wasn't the one who seemed to care as the professor did. He was her mentor, her commander, her protector, and he was here answering what she needed to know.

Before she had a chance to realize it, his lips were pressed up against hers. Her heart felt like it was either going to stop or explode. The kiss didn't last long, but there was enough heat behind it that when he pulled away, she knew the answer.

"Yes... yes, I do."

"And I do you." The professor smiled wickedly. "I have for some time now, but you are right. These emotions can tend to be complicated." He pulled away from her slightly and put his hands on her shoulders. "The other two cannot know. They can't suspect anything because they themselves don't know anything about this emotion yet. They won't understand, and they'll view it as favoritism."

"But you care for all of us equally," Hokura said, looking up at him but knew from the look on his face that it was a lie.

"Hokura, you are special. I can't quite give you an answer or the reason why yet. You just have to trust me. Can you do that?" the professor asked, enjoying every moment that he had her close to him.

"I trust you," Hokura whispered. She wanted to know more, but she had already told him she trusted him and that in time he would tell her the truth.

"My friends..." she started.

"They will understand in time as well. Remember, you are all new to this world. You are all still developing naturally, which is something an electrode pulsing in your brain cannot teach you. Just like these emotions, you will all feel and understand them at your own pace. I knew you would be the first one coming to me about this. You were the first to awaken, so it was only natural. But Hokura, you need to know the importance of keeping this a secret between only us," the professor pleaded.

She swallowed. They hadn't understood about the rebel meeting. Amara had always teased about her being the favorite. How on earth would they understand this? She would end up becoming an outcast among them. "Yes, Professor," she answered and knew in her heart that she would happily keep this a secret.

He kissed her head lightly, enjoying a few more moments of holding her. This was the breakthrough that he had been waiting and hoping for. He had to move slowly with her. He wondered what he could possibly do now to keep her from being a peacekeeper, how he would be able to contain her so she wouldn't be at risk. His mind reeled. He would need a better way to track her at night. He would station himself to oversee everything that she was doing. His mind laid out a careful plan on how he would bring her to her full potential, all the while, she was content to simply be in his arms. "Hokura," he sighed again as he breathed her in, brushing his fingers through her hair, "it's getting late in the afternoon, my dear. Your friends are going to be wondering about where you are."

"We fought earlier today," she muttered. "I doubt they're too concerned."

He brushed her hair, even more, enjoying being able to touch her like this. "Everyone fights, even friends and siblings, whatever it might have been about, I'm sure, it can be worked through if not be forgotten entirely in time," he mused. "Either way, I also have some duties that I need to take on before briefing tonight."

She didn't want to move; she didn't want to leave his arms. "Yes, sir," she answered.

He tilted her head up at him and looked her in the eyes. "*No, Hokura, when we're like this, it's Dorian,*" he said, kissing her again.



Hokura had made her way back to her room. She lay on her couch holding her breath as her heart raced. She wrapped her arms around herself as she yearned to be held by him again. She could smell his scent on her skin and wanted to

breathe it in, then her face flushed. How could she face him at the briefing? How would she be able to stand there as he gave her orders and remain neutral?

"What a mess I've made!" she groaned to herself. She wondered where her friends were, what they were doing without her. If they were training or if they had found out about the new technology being introduced.

She felt restless, she wanted to leave and look for them, but by looking at the time, she realized there was only over an hour until they would be at the cafeteria for dinner. She breathed in deeply again and knew that she would have to bathe before then, or Amara would keenly pick up the scent of men's cologne lingering on her and blurt out some sort of scandalous accusation, which now wasn't an accusation at all. A smile spread across Hokura's lips as she thought about this afternoon. She didn't want the warm feeling to spoil.



"Doctor Allen, please come in and have a seat," the professor stated as he made his way into his office and sat across from him at his large desk.

"You had called for me, sir?" Doctor Allen asked. He wondered if it had been about the files or if this would be the right time to approach the subject.

"Yes, Doctor, I understand that you have taken a special interest in Hokura, but at the moment, I would ask if you could please spend some time with the third child," the professor answered.

"With Adam, sir?" he asked. Taken back by the request, he decided he would do a little more digging before asking the professor about the files.

"Yes, it seems that our two female specimens are making leaps and bounds in their training, Hokura especially, which of course is encouraged, but I feel that we might possibly be overlooking our third child." The professor sighed, bringing his hands up to his forehead, rubbing it as if to get some relief.

"I don't understand, sir, Adam still has a few years until he's at his full physical completion, and he was the last to wake up," Doctor Allen answered, feeling slightly confused but willing to hear the professor out.

"Amara reached completion first since she's the oldest even though she woke up second. Hokura still has a few years left, but in the long run, will be stronger and faster than her. We need our final child, and the only male, to preferably be the stronger of the three. If you could look into running some tests and see if we are missing any components with his training or even in his injections, it would greatly help our cause. Right now, I need you to put all your time and energy in Adam."

Doctor Allen straightened himself. This was interesting information to be getting. He silently wondered how he would bring it up with the third child but understood exactly where the professor was coming from. "I will look at his training scores and get on it right away, sir."

"Good, thank you, Doctor." The professor smiled as he dismissed his assistant, now he wouldn't be in the way of ripening Hokura's newfound emotions towards him.



Hokura sheepishly made her way to the cafeteria. She didn't know exactly what to expect from the others but was relieved when she looked up to see Amara waving her over to their usual spot.

"Feeling better now that you've had some time to think?" Amara asked, sipping her water as she leaned across the table.

"Possibly... I mean, it was stupid..." Hokura started.

"Don't talk about it anymore, especially here," Adam piped in. "What's done is done, and no amount of talking about it is going to change that. We were sent out alone last night, and that's what happened. Who's to say either of us would have done anything differently."

Amara shrugged, letting it go. "So, what are we eating tonight?"

Hokura smiled weakly. "Same as always."

The three walked around the training facility after dinner as Hokura explained the new equipment and programs that were going to be put in.

"Wow, it sounds like we're going to have the works put in here to monitor us," Amara chimed as they continued down the corridors.

"They want to be able to judge our improvements; my guess is so they can relay it back to our injections or something." Hokura shrugged.

As they passed the weight room, Adam looked in and raised an eyebrow over the punching bag that was still sitting on the floor.

"Don't ask," Hokura muttered.

"You did that?" Amara burst.

Hokura bit her lip and looked away.

"How in the hell did you unhinge that thing from the roof?" Amara continued.

"I don't know!" Hokura moaned. "I was working off some frustration."

Adam smirked. "Remind me to never get on your bad side."

"Maybe training against Hokura would do you some good," Amara teased as she lightly elbowed Adam.

"Actually," a voice came from behind him. The three turned back to see Doctor Allen walking down the hall towards them, "the professor has asked me to see you through some training, Adam. He's hoping that we can give you a step up and help improve and hone your skills. Think of it as some specialized training," the doctor said.

Hokura couldn't help but feel upset at the thought of Doctor Allen earlier. Her thoughts towards him almost cooled as she thought of the professor.

"Special training?" Adam questioned.

"The professor thinks that if you give us a chance to monitor you and work in some specialized training that we'll be able to help you make some huge improvements, some that in time will surpass what the others have already achieved."

Adam nodded in agreement. "That would be most helpful," he said.

"Then it's settled, I will come to get you tomorrow right after breakfast, and we'll be able to run some tests."

"What about us?" Amara asked, feeling left out.

"The professor said you and Hokura are to continue with what you're both



doing training wise and that he will look in on you. I've been asked specifically to oversee the third child."

They all nodded, and the doctor smiled. When Hokura looked at him rather solemnly, the smile disappeared from his face. "I hope all of you stay safe out there tonight." He bid them goodnight and then walked back the way he came.



Hokura had held her breath as the three entered the briefing room only to see that nobody was sitting behind the large desk; instead, the night watch guard commander Talon walked in a moment after them.

"The professor told me that he had something come up and that he couldn't be at your briefing." He cleared his throat. "He said since last night was so quiet, he thinks something might be up tonight, so he wants all three of you to go as a group to inspect the East wall where we've been having all of these infractions. He also said that he would be monitoring you if you need to call back through the livewire for anything." Talon shifted for a minute as if he was running the information over in his head. "The night watch is going to drop you off at the starting point on first and pick you up wherever you end the night at two hundred hours, something about not trying to exhaust you or something."

The three nodded in agreement. Talon then turned and left the room, muttering about the night watch being on shift duty until the curfew was lifted at six hundred hours.

Hokura sighed in relief but felt a pang of sadness that the professor hadn't been there at the briefing.

"You going to be alright?" Amara asked as they dressed in the locker room.

"Yeah." Hokura let out a breath.

"You know you can talk to us about anything," Amara said, looking over at her friend. "I know I'm not the easiest person to talk to and that sometimes I get riled up, but I'm your friend, Hokura. I'll do anything that I can to help you and be there for you."

"I know," Hokura answered back, closing her locker.



The professor waited in the training facility as Annette came up to him. "How long will it take to get something like this made?" he asked.

Annette breathed in for a second, calculating in her mind. "It might take a few days, sir. As for being able to monitor what's being said, it'll end up interfering with the new livewire updates, but that can also be worked on so we can have it transmitting the entire time the peacekeepers are out."

"Just see that it gets done," the professor commanded, and he walked out of the facility. He smirked to himself. Soon he would be able to know Hokura's exact location at any time and keep a real eye on her until it was time to relieve her of being a peacekeeper as she had more important duties at his side.



As the curfew horns blew, James approached the men who were gearing up the jeeps. He had endured a restless sleep and was still tired but was anxious to get back into the walled city.

"There are to be no weapons brought with us tonight," James said as he walked over to the group.

"What do you mean no weapons? We're going up against the night watch and the peacekeepers. What in the hell are we supposed to do?" one of the men argued.

"Listen here. There's been a change of plans," James commanded. The men all stood up and stared at him, taking note of his charge. "Tonight, we're taking the jeeps to the walls and going in on foot. We're going to seek out the peacekeepers."

There was an uproar of anguish, James knew that this was going to be a risk

and that they would be upset with him, but he knew it was for the better of everyone. He just hoped that it wouldn't bring down everything around him that his father had worked so hard to build.

"That's enough!" a voice bellowed from behind him. It was Barack making his way to the group. "Your commander has reason to believe that we should be able to speak to these peacekeepers, and I, for one, agree with him! These people are not evil. They're misled. They know only what they've been taught and are totally ignorant that they're slaves to the compound. Don't you think that they wonder why they're not allowed out during the day? Why they eat, sleep, and breathe whatever laws have been pushed down their throats?"

"What makes you think that they won't just shoot at us first?" another one of the men shouted.

James licked his lips as his stomach rolled. He had to tell them, they would accept what they were about to hear, or they would turn away from him as their leader. "Last night, while we were in the city, I came across the first child. She did not fight me. If anything, she was terrified of me. I know in my heart that if I was able to come across her again and speak to her, that I might be able to get her to listen."

"And then what?" a voice called.

"And then possibly our revolution here could start," James called out, lifting his arms. He closed his eyes momentarily in hopes that he wouldn't have to witness his men walking away from him. Instead, there were cheers that echoed through the camp. He could only hope that he was right and that they would continue to follow him. "My father brought all of you in, he never turned away a soul that was in need, and I have full belief that the peacekeepers are also in need. They have no idea what is about to happen to them or their city. They are an innocent pawn in all of this."

"What's the plan then?" one of them shouted.

"Tonight, we go in through the West wall; considering we have continuously breached the East, I'm hoping that's where they'll be. From there, we move on foot to see if we can locate them. If we go on foot, we'll be able to stay out of sight from the night watch. My hopes are we'll be able to catch the first child

alone and be able to talk to her. If that's not possible, then simply observe them. There's to be no bloodshed. This mission is for observation only. If possible, then I will be the one making contact with her, no one else."

Everyone nodded in agreement with their great commander.

Barack put his hand on James' shoulder. "You've done well."

"Thank you, my friend," James replied. "We move out on the hour!"



The three peacekeepers sat in the back of the night watch truck as it eased to a stop not far from the compound. "Just radio back at two hundred hours, and I'll pick you up," the driver said as he let them out, giving them a salute and then driving away.

"What exactly do you think we're looking for?" Adam asked as he stared at the Eastern wall.

"Anything really," Amara answered. "Holes, gaps, and anything that can serve as a bunker for storing weapons."

"So, anything," Adam muttered, kicking at the gravel.

"They've been able to get their vehicles in here, so there has to be a large enough space somewhere that they can squeeze a jeep through," Hokura stated.

"Unless they have them already parked inside the walls," Adam suggested.

Amara let out a low whistle. "Damn, now that's using your head. For all we know, those bastards are climbing the walls and taking a leisurely walk over to a garage somewhere."

"And for all we know, it could be a civilian hiding it for them," Hokura groaned.

"Could be, so stay quiet and stay sharp. We don't know what could be out there tonight," Amara said in all seriousness as she continued looking around.

As the three moved together, Hokura enjoyed the silence between them that left her to her own thoughts. She puzzled why the professor hadn't been at the briefing. He had never missed one before and had always been there to see them

off no matter the amount of work he had to attend to. Maybe it was because of earlier today, because of what happened between them, and that he wasn't ready to face her as the first child and he as her commander. She wanted to see him again in a way she didn't quite understand, she had seen him every single day of her life, but now she wanted more. Was this what he had tried to explain about love and her coming into understanding such an emotion?

Amara waved them forward. "This block is clear," she stated as they grouped back together and walked along.

The night air was still cool but was slightly warmer than before she had been involved in the blast, another sign that the seasons were slowly changing. Although, in this environment, the weather could be unpredictable. Hokura could feel the crisp air on her arms but took note of her suit regulating her temperature and keeping her comfortable. She had wondered about her new suit, was Amara right about that too? Had the professor given it to her because she was special, or was it merely happenstance since her old one had been destroyed in the explosion? Either way, Hokura let her mind drift back to the professor. She was aware that she should be on closer watch but with the other two by her side, she felt more at ease to be able to let her thoughts go, and they always went back to that lingering kiss.

"When we're like this, it's Dorian." Hokura mutely said the name to trying it out on her lips. Would she be brave enough to call him by his name?

The hours had drifted by. They scouted the walls, removing garbage bins, litter, and debris. The night had been quiet and uneventful up until that moment.

"Over here!" Adam called, pointing towards a large piece of sheet metal that was lying against the wall. He lifted it away and beckoned the others to come closer. "It looks like I've found one of their entrances. This hole is big enough for someone to slip through, and with the alley being so full of garbage, nobody would think to even look behind something like this."

It was true. The gap was very low to the ground. It looked like part of the wall had been broken away, whereas the rest of it looked to have been dug out of the ground. Surely someone would be able to get through it, and if what they had wondered was true, and the rebels had stashed vehicles within the city, then they

had just found the perfect place to breach the walls.

"I'll radio it in. Besides, it's nearly two hundred hours anyway," Amara said, checking their coordinates on her watch and grabbing her radio livewire communicator on her suit.

Hokura stared at the gap, a hole just big enough for a rebel to get in. Or for someone to escape, her breathing hitched at the thought. "Wait!" Hokura said in earnest. "I want to see!"

"What do you mean you want to see?" Adam asked, examining the hole as Hokura moved forward as Amara put the radio down.



"Finally, we've found them," James said, looking through his binoculars to one of his allies as they perched up on the roof of an apartment complex.

"Yeah, and look what they just uncovered," Anthony muttered next to him.

James smirked. "And when was the last time that you crawled through that hole? Besides, they passed one of our main breaching points without even looking at it twice. They would never think to physically touch the wall to see that part of it actually moved quite easily."

"Unfortunately, they're all together tonight, sir," Anthony said with a low tone. "And from the looks of it, they're having a night watch pick them up."

James hushed his ally and tried desperately to hear what they were saying, his eyes on Hokura the entire time.



"This might be my only chance," Hokura said as Amara and Adam stared at her. "I want to see what's out there!"

"Dammit, are you nuts?" Amara cried.

"It's only a few feet. I'm not going anywhere," Hokura said, crouching down

staring at the hole.



James held this breath. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Was she really willing to break protocol and see what was out there? How could it be that she was so curious about the outside world? He stood deadly still, watching her intently.



"Then do it and get it over with so we can call it in," Adam said anxiously, curious himself what was out there but finding the idea of being on the other side of the wall suddenly terrifying.

Hokura made her way through the opening. The wall itself was about five feet thick, and the hole itself had turned upwards. She poked her head through as her heart raced but dropped at what she saw... nothing, nothing but dunes and wasteland for as far as she could see. She pursed her lips at the disappointment and sighed. When she made her way back through, Amara cocked her eyebrow.

"Well?" she asked as she folded her arms in front of her and leaned back against the back-alley wall.

"There was nothing," Hokura said in a defeated tone. "Just sand and wastelands."

"Did you expect anything else?" Adam piped in, feeling disappointed himself. "It's not like the rebels are camping out that close to the city. That would be too easy. I'm sure their base is quite a number of miles away."

"Now, can I radio this in?" Amara asked in exasperation. Hokura only nodded.



James smiled to himself. "I've never heard of a night watch or anyone on a watch doing that before. None of them have ever shown any interest in what was outside these walls!"

"Nobody has left the city since Barack," Anthony replied. "At least if they've tried, they haven't been successful."



Adam paced as Amara finished calling in the report. He felt restless just being near the breach, he wanted to look for himself, and still, he hung back. If there was nothing to see, then there was nothing to see. "Well, considering we made it to 5th, I guess we'll be out here combing around tomorrow night again, too, unless something else is going on that catches the night watch's eye," Adam said.

"Seems like it's been a pretty quiet night all in all," Hokura added, ignoring her disappointment as she joined Adam. "I haven't seen anyone breaking curfew for weeks."

"Just because we don't see them doesn't mean it still isn't happening. Civilians could be getting sneaky about their nighttime roaming," Amara added. She couldn't believe what she had just witnessed, they had all spoken about the outside world, but until now, none of them had ever laid eyes on it, even if it was just a glance. What on earth had caused Hokura to be so reckless.

"But why, when they can just go about their business during the day?" Adam asked.

"There's no way a rebel would be stupid enough to breach the wall during the day. Not only would they most likely stick out like a sore thumb, but the day watch is double in size of the night watch," Amara answered.

"I wonder who might be dealing with the rebels. If we could find someone



who has spoken to them, maybe we can find out what they're up to... that or talk to one themselves," Hokura added but then quickly shut her mouth.

"No one who's ever been caught has confessed to dealing with the rebels. Usually, there's no proof either. There have been very few cases where a civilian has actually been caught red-handed with weapons. When that's been the case, it's because they were identified under surveillance robbing someplace." Adam shrugged. "Besides, good luck ever sitting down and talking to a rebel about the weapons they're exporting," he added.



James' attention piqued. "Did you hear that? She said she would talk to us; she might be willing to do so!" he chimed.

"Yeah," Anthony piped in, "*she* might be willing to talk, but I doubt her two peacekeeper friends feel the same way, especially if they can radio in to night watch. You'd approach them, and they'd be calling you in. Not only that, but they'd be attacking you as well. Your only hope would be they shoot you and take you out of your misery because the night watch locks you up for life."

"There's got to be a way," James said in earnest. "We'll keep watching, keep tabs on them, maybe if the rebel activity dies down in the city, they'll be sent out on solo missions again sometime soon, and that'll be our chance."

"What about civilian exports?" Anthony asked in earnest.

"They'll just have to wait; they have enough weapons for their uprising and if they need more, then so be it. They knew this was going to be an arduous job and was going to take a while." James hushed.

They could see the large, canvassed truck making its way towards the peacekeepers from up the road.

"For now, we stop all rebel activity and simply observe," James commanded as Anthony nodded. "I'll radio into the others that they can fall back and leave." James watched as the truck pulled up and the driver got out. Hokura and the others moved out of the way to reveal the hole. Three other men jumped out of

the back of the truck with supplies and set to work as the three peacekeepers climbed in. James made a note that this entrance would now be sealed off and useless, but it was hardly worth the worry with all of the other hidden breaches scattered along the wall of the city.

The night hadn't been a total loss with the information he had gained. Even more than that, he had gained some hope that there could be a possibility to be able to speak to Hokura. More than that, he had gotten to see her again.



"Well, wasn't that a piece of cake?" Amara slipped her suit off in the locker room. "One could almost say it was boring... almost."

"But it needs to get done," Hokura answered, opening her locker door, and noting the piece of paper that was stuck to the back wall. "Besides, if we limit the number of places that can be breached, then maybe we can have a more quiet nights."

"Considering this was the second night in a row," Amara said but caught herself. "Well... at least it was for Adam and me." She stopped for a moment. "What on earth possessed you to go through that hole?"

"This might have been our only chance to see what was beyond the walls; something inside of me just pushed me forward. I had to know." Hokura shrugged.

Amara raised an eyebrow but could understand. "And you're sure you're okay?"

Hokura turned to her friend. "Yes, I'm sure I'm okay. It was nice being out there tonight with both of you. Maybe that's why I did it because I had both of you there for back up. And maybe you were right about coming back onto the force a little quickly. Maybe I was still shaken up from the blast."

Amara rolled her eyes. "Don't let me win that easily by giving in."

Hokura threw a towel at her. "Go wash up already, or are you taking yourself to your room tonight?"

"It's still early. Adam mentioned that he was hungry on the way back, so we might grab a quick snack from a vending machine before strolling around the compound. I'll shower quickly here, I guess, if you think I smell that bad. Are you in for coming with us?" Amara asked.

Hokura stared at the note. "I didn't plan on showering here tonight; I'm going to run back to my room, and I will see about catching up with you two." She quickly grabbed the note and excused herself from the locker room.

As soon as Hokura was down the hall, she stopped for a moment. She had lied to Amara, there was a small feeling of guilt, but she had remembered the professor's words. They wouldn't understand, especially Amara. She doubted that she would see her two friends tonight as she took a breath and then opened the note:

*Hokura, please meet me in the briefing room once you return from your watch.  
Professor Dorian.*

Hokura's heart raced as a feeling of warmth washed over her; she had thought of him all night during her watch. She should have been paying attention to her duty, but all she wanted was to bask in the feelings she had experienced his afternoon. Doubt then washed through her. Maybe he wanted to see her about the mission. Perhaps this wasn't about this afternoon or why he wasn't at the briefing. Maybe this was about him overseeing her and Amara's training. Hokura steadied herself and made her way over to the briefing room. The hallways were empty other than the sounds her shoes made against the tiles and her heartbeat, which sounded loud as a drum. She knocked on the door and entered the room. He sat behind his desk and looked up expectantly.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" she asked bleakly.

His eyes held hers for a moment until he stood. "Come here," he said softly, motioning for her to come towards him.

Her body obeyed as she stepped forward and moved towards him. She

suddenly found herself in his arms and even faster, his lips upon hers as warmth flooded through her. She didn't want him to stop. When he did, she could barely form the words. "You weren't at briefing tonight."

He smiled slightly at her; he heard the tremble in her voice. "I thought it might be easier for you if I wasn't there tonight."

The words caught in her throat. She didn't know what to say. Was it easier that he wasn't there standing in front of her with her two colleagues by her side? Would they have sensed something from her? Could she stand there while she was now just the first child being told her duty by her commander?

He sat back down in his chair with her in his lap, his arms still tightly around her. She sighed inward, which brought a grin to his face. Things were playing out well, he hadn't imagined things starting off this smoothly, and yet the answers he had given her had been received well enough. "Do you enjoy this Hokura? When it's just you and me like this?" he asked, looking down at her as she rested her head on his shoulder.

She looked up at him and answered innocently. "I don't want to ever leave; I want to feel like this always."

"And what about when I do this?" he asked, bringing her mouth to his, this time he went a little further and slowly opened her mouth with his tongue, allowing her to taste him as he did the same. She moaned, clutching to him. He tried his best to suppress his smile.

She was dazed in his arms, her heart raced, and she wanted more but didn't know what more was at that moment. Her yearning flooded over her as she looked at him longingly, transfixed that he could do this to her. "I want more," she whimpered. "I want to feel more."

The professor's smile widened. "And my dear, I promise you that when you are ready, I will give you everything." He kissed her again, at first lightly on her neck, brushing softly against her, then he moved to her jaw as he heard her breathing pitch. He kissed her again to the point that she was shaking. He wanted to give her more, he had longed to take it further, but he had to fight himself to hold back and was in pain for doing so. "Hokura," he had moaned, looking down at her, trembling in his lap.

"Prof-" she started, but his look stopped her, "Dorian," she gasped, feeling his name on her tongue.

"My dearest, it's very late. You need your sleep as I do as well. Please let me walk you back to your room," he said, giving her arm one last caress. He could touch her skin all day long and never tire of it.

Hokura merely nodded as he helped her off his lap. Her knees were weak. In fact, her whole body felt as it was about to tear apart on her. She didn't want to leave. Dorian straightened himself up and adjusted his suit jacket and tie. He stood proudly as he raised his eyebrow to Hokura as if asking about her composure. She nodded again, drawing a breath as he opened the door to the hallway.

They walked in silence side by side until they were in front of her door. Dorian smiled at her wickedly and leaned down to her ear. "Sleep well, first child."

"You as well, Professor," she whispered back as she opened her door and shut it behind her. She leaned, trembling against it as her body felt like it was vibrating. She couldn't tell anyone. It was their secret. His words followed her as she showered, they followed her as she dried her hair, and they followed her as she lay in bed, tossing and turning, and then followed her into her dreams.

*"When you're ready, I will give you everything."*



Hokura drowsily made her way to the breakfast table, all night she had dreamt about the professor. She winced, knowing that she would be asked about her not joining them last night. She hadn't even been aware of the time that she had finally made it back to her room. It seemed like when she had been in the briefing room, that time had stood still.

"Well, don't you look chipper this morning," Adam said, taking a sip of his coffee, looking up at Hokura as she sat down across from him and Amara.

"Yeah, what exactly happened to you last night?" Amara added in, giving her

a questioning look.

"I must have been tired. I took a shower and passed out on my couch," Hokura lied, shifting her eyes back and forth between the pair, but as soon as the words left her mouth, she knew neither of them believed her.

"That's funny because we went to check on you last night, and when we knocked, you didn't come to your door," Adam replied, staring up at the first child.

"I must have really passed out," Hokura mumbled but knew she was only digging herself in deeper.

Amara chuckled a bit. "Really? Well, you must have been invisible too because when we went into your room, you weren't there..." She looked up at her friend with an accusing glance.

"We've never known you to lie to us, Hokura. We just wanted to know where you were, and maybe it's none of our business, but..." Adam started when Hokura interrupted him.

"If you must know, I was asked to see the professor. He wanted to know about the new suit he had given me when I got back on the force. We spoke for a bit because he was concerned about me, and then I went back to my room!"

"See?" Amara mused. "Was that so hard? Why would you lie?"

Hokura rolled her eyes. "Because I didn't want you thinking anything ridiculous was going on," she mocked.

Adam glared over at Amara, who seemed to find the situation amusing.

"I was just kidding about the lunch date, and I thought it was Doctor Allen that you liked." She smirked.

"Not anymore," Hokura said in a dull voice as she excused herself to grab something from the buffet for breakfast.

"See?" Adam said, looking over at Amara as he ate a piece of toast that she had dipped into egg yolk. "You started this, and now she doesn't want to tell us what's going on because she thinks we're judging her. Do you really think the professor took her on some sort of lunch date? She was in the medical facility, and he most likely brought her something and sat and ate it with her. If you keep up these wild accusations, then no wonder she doesn't want to tell us anything."

Adam felt his heart clench; he didn't want secrets between them, and it seemed like Hokura was suddenly keeping a lot of them.

"It was supposed to be all in fun," Amara mumbled, nibbling at her toast. "It wasn't supposed to be something that drove a wedge between us. She's the one who said we're supposed to be the unit, and now it seems like she's the one stepping back lately."

"Well, now that I'm going to be training solo with Doctor Allen, you two will have plenty of time to patch things up and clear the air between you," Adam continued.

Hokura came back to the table with a meager breakfast. She felt jittery this morning and didn't know whether her stomach was ready to accept food. "What did you two get up to last night?" she asked, hoping to make light conversation.

"Ate some stale leftovers and walked around the compound" Amara shrugged. "Adam has a theory about the fourth floor to this place, so we strolled around the stairways seeing if we could find anything."

Hokura ate her meal quietly, another secret, she wondered if they had passed the elevator with the sign on it and thought twice about it or if they even noticed it. She didn't ask. She sipped on some coffee and thought about how nice it would be to be with the professor dining above the city again.

"So, Adam," Amara nudged him, "I bet you're looking forward to some special treatment and training today." She was hoping to get the conversation going elsewhere. Maybe then Hokura would chime in.

Adam continued eating. "I wouldn't call it special treatment, but it'll be nice to get some extra training in." He chewed and swallowed quickly. "You two always seem to have one up on me with speed and hand-to-hand combat. I'd love to work on some strength training."

"Yeah, and take the punching bag off the hinges like Ms. Muscles over here?" Amara smiled, looking over to Hokura.

"Amara, that was a total fluke," Hokura said, trying to eat what was in front of her yet seemed to choke on every piece as she swallowed.

The three went back to enjoying their breakfast when Doctor Allen approached the table. "Good morning, you three." He greeted them.

Hokura looked up at him. She couldn't help the natural reaction of smiling back.

"Good morning, Doctor," Adam chided as he finished chewing and took a swallow of his coffee. "I take we'll be starting soon?"

"I've been asked to take you to the medical facility first, just to run some small tests and take a few samples, nothing evasive. From there, we'll look over your training records, and hopefully, we'll be able to get a better overall idea of how we can work on improvements," Doctor Allen answered.

"Will we be seeing the professor at all this morning?" Adam asked simply out of curiosity.

The doctor grimaced slightly. "The professor has asked me to see you through this. He will be monitoring the other two children throughout the day and checking in with the new sensors that we've been able to get in the training facility. Most of his morning will be spent running tests there."

Hokura looked up. She felt flush at the idea of the professor being there watching her as she trained.

"We'll be off in a minute," the doctor stated, he turned to Hokura. "I wanted to thank you again for the picture. I have it hanging in my room. Do you need any more supplies?"

The first child gulped nervously. "I actually haven't had much time for painting lately." Her voice was nearly a squeak.

The doctor looked at her solemnly. "Well, when you do start again and need more supplies, you know where to find me."

With that, Adam stood and walked away with the doctor at his side. Hokura could hear him explaining about the tests he was to run on Adam while they were in the facility.

Amara crossed her arms and looked at Hokura with a quizzing stare. "So, a few days ago, you were blushing over how much you liked him, and now you're avoiding eye contact with him and acting cold."

Hokura looked down at her barely touched food. "It's fine, Amara. He has someone else, and that's okay with me."

Amara gave a worried look but didn't say anything else. She merely reached



over the table and squeezed her friend's arm, a gesture that spoke more than words could at the time.



After breakfast, the two walked back to their rooms to grab their training gear. Hokura had made it back to Amara's place and walked inside. "My goodness, no wonder you can't find anything!" Hokura cried as she looked at the disaster.

"I already got the same speech from Adam, and I'll be damned if I have to hear it from you too!" Amara yelled from her bedroom.

Hokura shook her head. She knew that she was guilty of having her clothes scattered over her bedroom floor, but at least it didn't reach beyond there. She stared at the dirty glasses and plates that were strewn over the kitchen counters, the random training reports that littered her coffee table, and the shirts, socks, and pants that seemed to be randomly dropped throughout her home. She tsked, starting the water in the sink, and poured some soap in.

"Don't do that!" Amara yelled again from her room. "Leave it be, and I'll do it later!"

Hokura merely rolled her eyes. "I doubt that," she muttered as she heard Amara struggling in her room. "Besides, we have a few minutes anyways until we usually meet in the training facility. That's enough time to get these dishes washed," she called back. She heard some sort of groan but ignored it as she set to work gathering and washing the dishes.

By the time Amara had found her duffle bag, pants, top, and towel, Hokura had already finished washing and drying dishes, picking up the clothes, and gathering them into a pile.

"Don't judge me!" Amara chided as she walked to her door, waiting for Hokura to hurry along with her.

Her friend smirked. "I wouldn't dream of it."



The professor had made his way to the training facility and was watching over the machines. "Annette," he said, looking up at the facilitator, "all reports that are done today are classified and are to be handed straight over to me, do you understand that?"

The woman only nodded; this was the first time the professor had shown an interest in sitting in on any of the peacekeepers' physical training since they went on the force. Did it have to do with Hokura's vast improvements? Or was there something else to the training that he needed to oversee himself? Annette had a feeling that it had something to do with the device he had asked her to make.

The two females entered the facility side by side. "Good morning, Professor," they said in unison.

He had looked up at them and had stared at both of them, fighting the urge to speak directly to Hokura. "Good morning, ladies. I trust you're both well-rested. Today I'll be sitting in on your training and making notes on your reports, similar to what Doctor Allen is doing with Adam today."

"Will there be any lab testing?" Amara asked, shifting herself. She had been wary about having to go back to the medical facility.

"Not of this moment," the professor answered, adjusting his glasses. "You two are to get changed and come back in ready for your training."

They nodded and were on their way. He was interested to see Hokura's performance and how it matched Amara's. He was also curious to see if his presence would at all catch her off guard while she was training and if him being there made any kind of impact on her scores.

"First, we'll run the time trial around the track," Annette said, placing the sensors on both the peacekeepers. The entire time the professor stood back with his arms crossed, merely observing the first child.

Hokura clenched her fists. He was going to be watching her, which made her nervous and giddy at the same time. She wanted to do her best for him, but at the

same time, she couldn't help but feel the pressure of his stare weighing down on her.

The two took their marks as Hokura looked over at Amara and smiled as her friend nodded back at her.

Hokura had always been faster than Amara, but Amara's fighting skills always ended up with her on the ground. It was as if Amara could read her moves before she did them and was excellent with counterattacks. She shook her head, listened to the countdown, and focused herself on the task at hand. She had just done the speed trials and had trumped her last record. She would do it again. As body feet took way, she wasn't even aware of Amara being so far behind her. All she was aware of were her feet that seemed to have taken on a life of their own as she barreled forward.

Crossing the finishing point, she slowed only to have her senses return as she heard Amara crossing a few seconds behind her.

Annette was back at the machines grabbing the results as they quickly processed and printed.

The professor was smiling and staring at Hokura as she breathed deeply.

"You're like the wind!" Amara congratulated as she shook her friend's hand.

"The results are in, Hokura. You beat your last score of 114.02 by .02 seconds. Amara, you're sitting at 117.06."

The professor cleared his throat, causing Hokura to look up at him. "Good job Hokura, you're vastly improving, you as well, Amara."

Hokura couldn't help but feel her anticipation growing. She knew in hand-to-hand combat. She would have to step it up if she was to stand any ground against Amara.

They all made their way to another room in the facility; it was smaller than the track but had a padded area for fighting. Hokura could feel her nerves fraying.

"We'll allow you two both a few minutes to do some warmups before we start," Annette announced. "This way, I'll be able to run some data through the computer and sync our monitors."

Hokura walked and stretched away from Amara. She hadn't been doing her

combat training lately. Maybe that's why she had frozen the other night when faced with the rebel. The thought didn't comfort her at all when Annette called them both over to the padded area to attach the sensors.

"You are to show no resistance while facing each other. We'll be able to monitor if you're holding back, so I want both of you to act as if this is the type of combat you would use if faced with the rebels," the professor had announced as Annette continued placing the monitors.

Hokura closed her eyes, she had wanted Amara's reassurance that she would go easy on her but with the professor's orders, she knew her friend was tied to giving it her all.

"We will call the match when we deem fit," Annette called as the two went to either side of the area. Annette lifted her arms and dropped them down, signaling the fight to start.

Hokura came to the middle of the ring, but Amara was faster, diving at her with a fist. Hokura ducked just in as she went low, swinging her leg out, trying to off-balance Amara. Hokura had missed as Amara turned again, throwing a fist towards her face. This time, she couldn't move fast enough as Amara's fist hit her cheek, knocking her back a step. Again, Amara didn't stop as she brought her fist to Hokura's abdomen and knocked the air out of her causing her to stagger back. She could see the desperation in Amara's eyes as she threw another punch, this time Hokura blocked it and kicked out to the side, catching Amara in the ribs. Hokura tried to cartwheel her way into another kick, but Amara was too fast and chopped at her shoulder, taking Hokura to her back. She had flung herself back up quickly when Amara's foot hit her face. The impact caused Hokura to spin and crash to the ground with a thud. She lay there for a moment, only wishing it would be over.

"Hokura!" the professor cried out; Amara stopped for a second, looking up at him just as Hokura did. "You need to focus, Hokura, get up, and fight, dammit!" he commanded.

Hokura nodded as Amara took a step back to allow her a moment as she brought her fists back up in a fighting stance.

Hokura could feel blood pooling in her mouth. She spat to the side and, in

horror, saw how much saliva was actually red. Hokura rushed Amara once more. She was able to land a punch to her jaw as Amara brought her interlocked fists down on her back of her neck. Hokura's vision blurred as pain surged up to her head. The two backed up again for a moment. This time Hokura charged Amara, again going for her abdomen, latching onto it, trying to force the taller girl down. At that moment, she felt Amara's knee meet with her stomach, followed by a fast pivot as Hokura was knocked to the ground gasping for air.

"Enough!" the professor yelled as he ran over to Hokura.

Amara quickly stepped back, her eyes wide on her friend, who was on the ground in pain.

The professor brushed the hair away from Hokura's bruised face. "I've seen enough today," he said in a low tone, his worried eyes still on the first child as she lay in fetal position gasping for air and coughing on blood.

Annette walked over to Amara and placed a hand on her shoulder. "You did well, Amara. You didn't hold back. You did just as you were told."

Amara's head dropped. "But at what cost," she muttered, still looking down at the shaken professor tending to her friend.

"Hokura will be fine. This is all part of the training. We'll get her over to the medical facility and patched up as soon as possible. She'll be good as new in a couple of hours," Annette reassured.

Amara walked over to Hokura, who was still on the floor, grimacing in pain. "I'm so sorry," she said, kneeling beside the professor.

"No," Hokura smiled weakly, "you've just shown me that I've gotten weak and that I need to strengthen my skills. This isn't the first time you've put me to the ground," she said faintly.

"It's alright, Amara," the professor said, lifting Hokura's body off the mat. "I will take it from here and make sure she's alright. You can carry on with Annette for the rest of the morning. I will let you know when we're ready to proceed again. These tests today are crucial for a new combat simulator that we're working on."

Amara stood back, clenching her teeth, not knowing what to say. She merely nodded as she watched the professor take Hokura away. She wondered if she had

done the right thing by following orders. The professor might have been impressed by her skills but was distressed over the state Hokura was in. "Damn," she swore to herself. "Nothing is ever easy."

"What was that?" Annette called over; she was printing off the results from the machine.

Amara merely shook her head. "It was nothing."



The professor carried Hokura to the medical facility. Once he was in the hallway, he placed her on a lone gurney and wheeled her to the room where she had her tests done just a few days before. He swiped his pass card and brought her to the middle of the room. He then slunk into a chair and held his head in his hands for a moment, trying to breathe. How could he let this happen to her? How could he just stand by and watch and goad her to do better?

"Professor?" Hokura called weakly. She was suddenly so tired. The headache and the ringing had returned, but at least she was able to catch her breath even though her stomach ached from it.

Immediately he was by her side. "I'm so sorry," he said, shaking his head as he stared at her. Already the side of her face had turned into a massive bruise, and her one eye was swollen shut. There was a slight cut on the side of her lip, which seemed to have dried. He remembered how she looked after the explosion, she had been cut up and bruised badly enough, but there had been nothing he could have done to prevent such a thing. This he should have stopped.

Hokura smiled up at him as best as she could. "Why? You told us not to hold back. We were merely following orders. We've done this hundreds of times; before the accident, we sparred daily."

She wasn't blaming him nor Amara, but he had known that this had been a mistake, one that they were both paying for dearly now. "I need to make sure there's no internal damage," he said, quickly brushing her hair back as he noticed

that her abdomen was already darkening in a series of different colors. Something wasn't right. Bruising happened, but not at this speed.

He set to work at the CAT scanner in the room, getting it ready. He heard her groan in pain as she rocked her head back and forth while closing her eyes.

"Hokura, you need to stay with me," he ordered. "I need to make sure there's no internal bleeding." After finishing, he walked over to her. "I need to check you for a concussion," he said, shining a light into her eyes.

Hokura sat up staring at the light for a moment, suddenly her vision blurred as she grabbed onto the sides of the bed, trying not to be sick.

"I can't do it," Hokura moaned. "I think I'm going to be sick." She heaved and thanked herself for having such a small breakfast that there was nothing in her system. She crashed onto her back, holding her head, gasping, and crying in pain.

"Hokura!" the professor cried. He knew that the impact from the second child was enough to easily break bones, she was so much stronger than Hokura, but he had never thought that there would be this much damage done in a training exercise. Her body was strong and was supposed to be able to withstand such hits.

He ran over to a locked cabinet and wrestled with a key. He grabbed the syringe as quickly as possible and plunged it into Hokura's arm. "Work, dammit!" he swore as he watched her rock in pain. He promptly took her pulse and cursed again as he grabbed another syringe. "You will not do this!" he cried as Hokura's body started to seizure. The professor ran to the wall and hit the red emergency button. "Code blue in room 121."



Doctor Allen looked up as the alarm sounded, and the professor's voice came over the medical facility's intercom. He closed his eyes for a second and grimaced. "Damn, that can't be good," he said and then looked up at Adam, who had suddenly gotten up from the chair that was across from him. "I have to go!"

the doctor said, grabbing his clipboard and racing out of the room.

"I'm coming too!" Adam said as he ran after the doctor, who seemed to have suddenly taken on lightning speed.

"No!" Doctor Allen stopped looking at him with hardened eyes. "You would only get in the way. I promise once I know what's happening, I'll come and find you. You can wait in the training facility." With that, the doctor ran down the hall.

The doctor barged into the room to see the professor giving Hokura another dosage of cells as another doctor tried to place monitors on her shaking body. "What's happening?" he cried.

The professor shot him a look. "I don't know, dammit, I think there's internal bleeding. That's what happened with the others."

"The cells should stop it; they should clot it or heal it!" Doctor Allen said, grabbing the rest of the monitors and applying them.

"They're not!" the professor shouted back. Looking in horror at the monitor as Hokura's heart rate monitor dropped. His eyes widened in disbelief; in a minute, he was going to lose her if he didn't think quickly. "Put her to sleep!" he commanded.

"But sir, we don't know if she'll ever wake up again or if it'll even work to heal her," Doctor Allen stuttered.

"It's the only hope we've got! Do it, Doctor!" he commanded again.

Doctor Allen switched the tubes on the breathing mask. He gently placed it on Hokura's face and prayed that she would wake up again. Within a few deep breaths, her body settled.

The secondary doctor read off the monitors as everything slowly returned to normal. The professor had been grateful that he had come running. He had also been thankful that his assistant had been close by.

"Thank you, Doctor Spindler. Doctor Allen and I can take it from here," he said, dismissing the hospital doctor, who merely nodded to them both and took his leave.

The professor sighed and sank into a chair. He removed his glasses, closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose as if trying to keep his composure.



"What happened?" Allen finally asked, his voice cracking.

"I don't know," the professor answered, keeping his head bowed, and his eyes closed as he breathed deeply.

Doctor Allen was about to continue when the professor started.

"Doctor, I would like some time alone with her please, I will page you when I need you again. For now, I just need to think."

Doctor Allen took a step back. He knew he was being dismissed. He was about to open the door when he looked back at the professor. "What should I tell the others? Surely they'll be asking."

The professor sighed, still unmoving. "I will report to them in time once I'm ready."

With that, Doctor Allen took his leave.

Once his assistant had left, the professor lowered himself to Hokura's gurney and crouched on his knees as he gently laid his head on her bed and helplessly wept a few silent tears.



Adam made his way down the training facility; he came across Amara, who was being observed by Annette in the weight room. She was going at a punching bag as a nearby scanner monitored her speed and velocity. The other bag still lay on the ground where Hokura had put it. That's when he knew that the medical alert had been for her. He grimly walked over to Amara and watched as she finished up.

"That's good," Annette stated as the report printed, "and that's all that we need for now."

Amara stared at Adam for a moment, not understanding why he wasn't with the doctor until Annette spoke up in concern. "Adam, I'm surprised to see you. Did the doctor have to take leave to help the professor with Hokura?"

Amara's eyes widened as she stared at Annette. "You said he was taking her to the medical facility and that she would be fine in a few hours! What could

happen that Doctor Allen would be called in?"

Adam tightened his lips and looked grimly at Amara. "There was a code blue. The professor's voice came over the intercom, stating that there was an emergency."

"No," Amara whispered, "we have to go there; we have to see what's happening to her!" She was just about to rush past Adam when he grabbed her arm.

"No, Amara, the doctor said he would find us when he knew what was happening and report it to us. He said we'd just get in the way."

"I only did what I was told," she cried. "We've sparred like this so many times! I didn't mean to hurt her!" Amara slumped to her knees.

"Come on," Adam coaxed, "the doctor said he would meet us here, you can get changed, and we can wait for him together."

The two sat outside of the locker room of the training facility on a white bench. For a while, there had been silence until Amara couldn't take it anymore. "How long does he expect us to sit here? We should be the first ones to know what's happening!"

Adam put an arm around her shoulder, trying to comfort her, as well as himself. At the moment, he just needed to be around her. "We'll find out when he knows, don't think about that now because all you're going to do is think about the worst-case scenario when that isn't the case."

Amara lowered her head; he was right as always. "So," her voice broke, "what about your tests today? What happened with those?"

Adam was happy to be off the subject. "The doctor was looking over my training reports, I'm surpassing levels in strategic combat, but I still need to work on my strength and conditioning. He's going to test a new substance program on me. He admitted that the food we eat here lacks the vitamins and nutrients needed for a body to build the appropriate muscles when we're working so vigorously, so he's going to come up with a protein mixture for me that'll help my body create more muscle mass."

"Well, isn't that lucky for you? You get to miss out on modified eggs." Amara chuckled.

"Apparently, the eggs do still have modified protein in them, just apparently a third of what real eggs used to have. In fact, a lot of resources at the moment are being put into how we can enhance our food to being more nutritious rather than just filler," Adam replied. "Among that, there were blood tests to check for deficiencies. Unfortunately, I won't hear anything about those for a few days since it seems our training has come to a halt for today."

Amara merely leaned her head against his shoulder and took comfort in Adam being there. She had tried to hold back; she had tried to allow Hokura to take the lead in the fight while still being on guard. She couldn't imagine what was happening, what on earth had she done to cause this. She felt Adam's hand moving up and down her arm.

"Stop thinking about it," he whispered.

"It's been an hour," Amara muttered, looking up at the ceiling, trying to contain herself.

"Maybe that just means that they're merely getting ready to release her so she can come along with him for the report," Adam said hopefully. He hoped he was right, but deep down, he knew that wasn't the case. The alarms wouldn't have sounded if the professor had everything under control, and if he had just needed the doctor's opinion, he would have simply paged him. No, it was something worse, but Adam didn't want to think about the reality of it just yet.

Amara chewed on her lip when she heard footsteps coming down the hallway. At first, she had just thought it had been a night watch guard coming in for training since they also used this part of the facility, but she caught the rhythm of the footsteps and held her breath.

Adam looked up as his heart sank even further; it was the professor.

He stood in front of them for a moment in silence, wearing a grim expression before speaking, "I regret to inform you both that Hokura is now resting in a medically induced sleep."

Amara burst from her spot faster than Adam could grab her. "What!" she cried. "You told me she would be alright. You told me not to hold back!" Tears streamed down the second child's face.

The professor now wore a stern look. "And I'm telling you *now* that she is in

a coma."

"No!" Amara screamed, falling back into Adam's arms, crying.

Adam looked up at him. "Professor, what happened?"

He looked grim, but the stern look faded into one of exhaustion. "I don't know," he breathed out, "but as of tonight, you two are dismissed from peacekeepers duty. I will follow up with you both tomorrow if there's any headway."

"Dismissed?" Adam asked. "So, we're not going out tonight?"

The professor merely sighed. "I will be monitoring the first child; I won't be able to give my attention to the peacekeepers tonight, so it's better that just the night watch goes out instead of you two being unsupervised."

"Yes, sir," Adam answered with Amara still in his arms, lightly crying.

With that, the professor turned and made his way back down the hall, back to the room where Hokura was still sleeping.



The professor made it back as quickly as possible and shut the door behind him. He looked up at the monitors and sighed with relief. She was stable. "We're alone now," he said, running his hand down her arm. He hadn't the slightest idea of when or if she would wake again. He could only hope that her body would heal. "I'm sorry," he whispered, "so, so sorry, please just come back to me." He laid his head on her bed and merely held onto her hand, hoping that she could feel him, and through that, she would recognize his touch and open her eyes.



Amara sat in the cafeteria, still fuming.

"There's nothing we can do, Amara," Adam said, sitting next to her staring at his glass of water. They had gone to the cafeteria together, but neither felt hungry

after the news.

She sighed, tapping her fingers against the table. "I feel too anxious to do anything productive anyway," she muttered as she stared off towards the scientists and personnel that were arriving for their mid-day meal.

Adam put his arm back around her, trying to offer some comfort. "Then why don't we grab a few sandwiches and head back to your place? We can tidy your room," he said earnestly, hoping to give Amara some outlet for her frustrations.

Amara let out a groan. "Hokura already did that for me this morning," she said, hunching back over.

Adam bit his lip. "Sorry." He put his hand on hers. "How about we grab some cards and board games then and just busy ourselves as best we can for the rest of the day." Finally, Amara nodded.



The two peacekeepers decided to skip going to the cafeteria for dinner. Neither of them could stomach sitting at their usual spot, knowing that their friend wouldn't be there, knowing that there was a possibility that she wouldn't be sitting with them for a long time, if ever. Neither of them spoke about it, but they both knew that's why they decided to slowly snack on the sandwiches they had brought up earlier for lunch. They had played a few card games; Amara had even taught Adam how to play bridge. The two even exhausted their patience playing chess and had tried watching some news which Amara glared at the tv after a few short moments and turned it off. Now they had been sitting on the floor playing an old-world game called Dominos to simply pass the time. They had done so in silence until Amara cleared her throat.

"I'm going out," Amara said, sitting on the floor.

Adam looked up at her. "Out where? For a walk?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm going out tonight, into the city."

Adam looked up at her in shock and confusion. "What do you mean, we're not on duty tonight..."

"Do you really expect me to stay here and bide our time tonight?" Amara urged. "I can't do it! I need to be out there. I'm going to go undercover, in my normal clothes."

Adam could feel his temper waning. "Are you stupid? What if something happens? You'd have no weapons, no backup, and what if you got caught by the night watch? Can you understand the trouble that you would be in?"

Amara scowled as she clenched her teeth. "I need to be out there tonight, Adam; I don't expect you to understand, but I do expect you to cover for me." She looked up, glaring at him.

"I just lost Hokura, and now there's a chance that I might lose you too, and you're asking me to cover for you?" he cried, getting up, he started to pace, he felt his heart race as his body chilled with the idea. "I can't, Amara, you can't ask that of me!"

"I just did." She shot back, putting her hands to her head, gently tugging at her hair. "Adam, I promise nothing will happen to me, but you need to do this for me, for my sanity, for our friendship!"

Adam stopped, and blankly stared at her. "So, this is our friendship now that you're weighing in on this? If I protest, then what, we're done being friends?"

Amara let out a frustrated noise and fell onto her back, "No" she murmured, "I can't explain it, Adam. If I could, I would tell you, but I just have this feeling inside of me that I need to be out there, like these walls are suffocating me, and that they're pushing me out those doors."

Adam continued pacing, swearing to himself, which was something Amara had rarely heard. It wasn't like him to swear. "You need to give me your word that you will come back," Adam commanded. No, that wasn't even enough. There had to be something more than just her word. "Swear to me, Amara," he said... "swear it on Hokura's life that you will come back."

Her eyes widened as she stared at him, hardened, she knew this wasn't going to be easy on him. "I swear... and I want you waiting here when I get back."

Adam continued looking at her, angry that she wanted this, mad that she asked him to back her but relieved that she had told him instead of lying to him and sneaking out. "Fine!" he said through gritted teeth. "And just how in the hell

do you expect to get past the night watch and out of the compound?"



It had been nearly eleven hours since Hokura had gone into her coma. He hadn't bothered with paging the doctor. He wanted to be alone with his madness of the unknown. Dorian paced frantically in her room. He had run so many tests; there had to be something he was missing. He then stopped dead in his tracks, not something missing perhaps there was too much of something.

He went over to her files and checked again. The injections had become more frequent since her accident. Not only that, but he had upped the dosage and frequency of the stem cells. He mused for a moment, was it at all possible that the injections were now to blame, that Hokura's body had actually reached the stage where it renewed and perfected cells on its own, and with the foreign cells being injected, they were now seen as malignant.

He scowled, taking out the appropriate equipment to run this test. He needed to collect Hokura's cells and then add a dropper of what had been injected to see if that was the case.

An hour had passed since he made the discovery. He now lay next to the first child on a separate gurney that he had wheeled into the room. The day had merely been a blur of tests followed by the steady beeps from the monitors. He would stay by her side for as long as he needed. He had his answer now, but that only held so much for him. He would be there when she woke up. He would hold her and kiss and promise her that she would never be in any danger of coming here again. He had hated himself; he had done this to her. He had wanted to push her to see her at her full potential, all the while her body was retaliating. He had felt a pang of guilt for having to be so hard on the peacekeepers, but he couldn't let the mask slip, he was their commander, and that was it.

He looked at Hokura. To her, he was more. To her, he could be Dorian, but to everyone else... they must view him as in full control. They must never have any reason to doubt him, or everything he had worked so hard for would fall

apart. He shook his head; he wouldn't believe that; as long as he had her, they would move forward.



Amara and Adam had made their way down to the hall that held the briefing room. The night watch had already briefed and left for duty. "It's abnormal to be in this area with so little security," Amara whispered, looking around.

"That's because, by this time, we're already out there. The night watch shift doesn't change until one-thirty. It seems like it's an unusually quiet night, though," Adam urged as they continued towards the garage. He silently wished that Amara would change her mind or that the garage would be full of night watch mechanics working on vehicles and refueling them so Amara wouldn't be able to slip out.

"I'm not used to it being so dead in here," Amara whispered as they walked to the large base of the garage, which was in total darkness. "Do you think there's surveillance in there?"

Adam shook his head. "If there was, I doubt there would be any focus on it. Talon's in the watch control room supervising the night watch. We already know the professor isn't in his control room watching. Either way, it's pitch-black, so I'd say you're pretty safe."

"It's nearly twenty-two-hundred hours. If I can get out of here quickly, I'll be back by twenty-four to one-hundred hours at the latest to beat the night watch back," Amara whispered.

"That's all fine and dandy, Amara. You've gotten lucky so far with nobody being here, but how do you suppose you're getting out? You don't have a mechanism to open any of the garage doors with," Adam continued, looking over at her.

"There's got to be a loading dock door nearby where they unload the weapons. I've never seen a boxed transport truck in the garage, only the jeeps. They have to be located elsewhere," she said, looking around. This had been the



first time they had been able to simply stand in the garage and look around without being shuffled into a jeep or onto their bikes. "There has to be some kind of door. Start looking around," Amara whispered, "and stay low in case someone comes in and turns on the light."

Adam let out a low growl and started towards the far side. It had been dark, but with their genetic enhancements, their eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness. Adam had been grateful for that instead of needing the night vision goggles that the night watch had to rely on. He walked along the far wall, grazing it lightly with his fingers when he saw it. There was a door, but whether it led outside the compound was another question. Adam gently tested the knob as he held his breath; it was locked.

"I found one!" Amara whispered loudly at the other side.

Adam grimaced and carefully made his way over, taking care to duck below the crates and vehicles, almost hoping that they'd be caught. He stood next to Amara, who seemed to be waiting for him to be at her side before she tested whether it was locked or not. He closed his eyes and made a fist, hoping it wouldn't budge.

"Yes!" Amara whispered enthusiastically as the door cracked open a hint as she tried to gaze out to see where it would lead. She had been right. There had been a loading dock.

Adam looked away, he knew this was it, and there was nothing he could do or say to hold her here, now he had a decision to make. "I'll go with you," he whispered to Amara.

"No!" Amara stated. "You can't! Like I said, what will happen if someone comes looking for us? They'll put this whole place on lockdown, and then we'll both be in shit! You need to stay here and cover for me, Adam," she urged.

Adam stared at her; she was right, and he hated it. "Fine," he answered begrudgingly.

Amara merely smiled and brought herself forward, kissing him on the cheek. "I promise I'll be back."

Adam stepped back, rubbing his cheek... promise that won't be the last time you kiss me either... it had gone unspoken. "Come back safe," he said, hugging

her and then watched as she silently slipped out the door and into the night on her own personal duty.



James sat up on the top of a roof. He had positioned scouts all around the city, looking out for the peacekeepers. They were ordered to radio in if they had seen any activity, but there had been none. James rolled back on his heels and sat with his binoculars still set towards the compound. "How can it be that it's been an hour, and nobody has seen anything," he muttered to himself. The night watch had left and fanned out over the city at their usual time, and yet there had been no sign of the peacekeepers.

"Another night watch truck unloaded a few men at 6th and Tore" Anthony's voice came over the radio.

"Any sign of the peacekeepers?" James asked in earnest.

"Negative, sir."

"If any of you have seen them yet, speak up!" James commanded, but the radio was silent. "Damn," he muttered. Was it possible that they had missed them? Was it possible that they weren't on duty? No, that couldn't be it. They were out every night along with the night watch.

James shook his head; he had stationed himself at Main and 3rd so he would be the first to see them leave the compound. He had wondered if he had missed them in one of the canvassed vehicles, but it had been confirmed throughout the city that none of the thirty rebels he had brought with him had seen them tonight. He found it odd that the night watch was fanning out in such an irregular formation. They were hitting areas in the city that there hadn't been rebel activity for weeks now. He merely shrugged off the notion.

The commander was about to tell the men to start falling back and head back to base when the movement below caught his eye. He brought his binoculars to his eyes and stared. It had looked like just a civilian. He stared for a moment, no, he was wrong; it wasn't a civilian. He could tell by the fluid way she moved; it

was the other female peacekeeper.

Sitting back on his heels, he weighed his options. She was alone, and yet he puzzled for a moment; she was in civilian clothes. Were they out on a special mission tonight where they were to be dressed as civilians?

He observed for a moment and found it strange that she was sticking to the shadows as she moved as if trying not to bring any attention to herself, as if she was sneaking about. It didn't make sense to him; something nagged at him, maybe it was instinct, but he found himself silently slipping down the fire escape to the building in hopes of getting closer.



Amara walked silently, staying in the shadows, she was able to duck around getting out by the loading dock, but she was still in plain sight as she came around. The compound let out onto Main and 3rd. She tried to stay in the shadows and close to the buildings as she listened for the night watch. Her senses sharpened as she crouched by a large garbage container trying to make her way East towards the wall. She had reasoned that since there had been the most activity there that maybe she would be able to catch something happening while she was concealed away in the shadows of the alley.

James stepped quietly; he had turned his radio off the moment he descended from the roof. He watched her as she moved quickly and almost too carefully. He wondered why she was alone since it was supposedly such an uncommon practice for the two females to without back up. He looked even closer. She didn't have a clip on her. In fact, she seemed to be weaponless. James stopped for a moment. It was ridiculous to assume that a peacekeeper would be in the city without being armed. Surely, she had something on her. He wanted to wait and simply observe her until he knew for sure that he would be able to approach her without causing too much alarm. This had been an exercise that James' father had instilled upon him when coming up on an enemy, move silently but be on alert.

Amara rounded the corner quickly and ran along 3rd, staying as close to the buildings as she could. She stopped at the intersection of Holden and ducked into a shop entranceway. She was certain the night watch wouldn't have a unit stationed this close to the compound. Even rebels knew better than being this close. They usually took to the outskirts of the city to do their dirty work.

She raised her head for a moment and strained to listen to see if she could hear anything. There hadn't even been a breeze tonight as the city seemed to stand still in darkened silence.

Once she was satisfied with being in the clear, Amara continued as her heart raced. What did she hope to find out here? She wasn't sure, but it was better than being in the confines of the compound as Hokura lay in the medical facility. She shook her head. She wouldn't think of that out here. She wouldn't allow that to come to her mind and to believe that she would never have her partner at her side again.

Amara grinned as she could see the darkened alleyway of 3rd and Emanuel. She was nearly in the clear and in the Eastern part of the city where she could finally breathe a little easier. She didn't give it any thought of how she would continue to duck in the shadow as she would have to retrace her tracks back to the compound before the night watch shift change.

Amara's senses piqued as she stopped and spun around. She had sworn that she had heard the gravel shift behind her. She wanted to call out but knew that in doing so, she would be giving her position away to anyone who might have been out there, civilian, rebel, or night watch guard. She stayed silent and continued her forehead creasing. Hokura had encountered the rebel commander just the other night, but it had been quiet for her and Adam. Where had Hokura been again? She couldn't remember whether she had said or not. At least here, she felt safer and better hidden between the wall and city. That's when she knew for sure she was being followed. She spun back to see James, who already had both hands open and in front of him.

"Stop! Who goes there!" Amara called, reaching to her side. She cursed at herself. She didn't have her gun. She had nothing. Adam had warned her, and now she found herself in the same situation that Hokura had the night before.

Dammit, she had thought to herself but held her stern composure. "Just who the hell are you?"

James took a step forward. "Please, I'm unarmed. I'm not here to fight," he said, taking another step.

"Don't you fucking move another step!" Amara cried, taking a position, she would fight him if it came down to it, and she would beat him to a bloody pulp if she were forced to do so. She wasn't about to break her promise to Adam because a rebel had tracked her down.

James slowly stepped back, his hands still out. He knew he had to be calm, that he needed her full attention and some of her trust. If he made any sort of move that would alert her into attacking him, then this would all be for nothing. "I'm the rebel commander," he said in a low tone. "I just want to talk."

Amara's eyes widened as she straightened herself but was still on full guard. "You're the rebel who disarmed the first child the other night," she said, her voice just above a whisper at the realization that this had been the same rebel.

"I heard you all talking last night while out on duty. Hokura said she would be willing to talk and listen if a rebel was willing to do the same," James blurted out. He didn't have time for small talk; he had to make every word count.

"You've been following us?" Amara glared at him. "You've been observing us? Is that it? You've been keeping tabs on us, so you know exactly where to be when exporting your weapons..."

"Please, your friend has the right idea about us. If you won't listen, then maybe I can talk to her..."

Amara took a step towards him. "She's not here," she said with her teeth clenched.

James took another step back. This wasn't going in his favor. He was sure there were other rebels watching. He didn't want any of them stepping in. He had wished he had commanded so, before leaving the roof, he thought of his radio at his side and knew that any sudden movement would cause a reaction. He just had to trust that his men would trust him and not get involved in the confrontation. Still, confusion knocked at him. "She's not here," he repeated, then it hit him. They hadn't seen the peacekeepers out all night. "You're not

supposed to be out tonight, are you?"

Amara looked away. "No," she answered, "but that doesn't mean anything. You're still an enemy, and I'm still a peacekeeper."

"But I'm not," James said. He dropped his hands and ran one through his hair and was relieved that it didn't cause the second child to rush at him. "If you would just listen to me, I'm trying to warn you. There's going to be an uprising..."

"I don't want to hear it from you," Amara chided. "For all I know, you're lying."

"And what gain do I have to lie to you? Think about it? What do the rebels have to gain with the civilians going to war with the compound other than they'll finally be free, and we'll have more mouths to feed if they decide to leave the city and join us."

Amara stared at him in disbelief. "The civilians can leave the city anytime that they want." But that's when she stopped, was that true? Or was the city confining the civilians as the compound did them? What did she have to lose in believing a rebel? It wasn't exactly like she believed the professor.

James could see the contemplation on her face. He couldn't wait another moment, he was here, and he needed an answer. "Where's the first child?" he asked quietly.

Amara looked up at him. "She's in a coma. There was an accident during a training exercise, all thanks to me," she answered dryly.

James was about to say something when Amara shifted and started walking towards him. He stayed perfectly still as she passed him and kept going.

"It's lucky for you that I'm off duty tonight, or things would have gone a lot different," she called back at him. "And don't think to follow me either, I'm heading back to the compound, and I'm sure it's crawling with guards."

James smiled... a lot different. It could have been worse, but then he allowed her words to hit him. "She's in a coma..." his heart sank. Was all lost?



Adam sat and waited in Amara's room as he had promised. Too restless to merely sit still, he busied himself with physical activities. When he was too sore to do push-ups, he switched to sit-ups; when his abdomen burned to the point where he couldn't lift himself in position any longer, he went onto lunges. Set after set until his muscles burned, and even then, he kept going until his body protested; even more, he still pushed.

It had become an act of self-inflicted punishment for allowing Amara to go out, but he fully understood her need to do so. Still, it weighed on him. He needed the physical exertion to keep from thinking about what might happen to him if he lost her. Hokura and Amara had been his only anchor, the only thing that was stable in this life he had been tossed into.

He had never been asked to be a peacekeeper, to be part of this bigger scheme. He merely awoke into a destiny that was already chosen for him. He was lucky enough that he wasn't alone.

"Dammit, Amara, you better come back safe," he breathed as he began the cycle again. He could have been in the training facility, but she had asked him to be here and cover for her in case the professor or Doctor Allen had come looking for them with any news. He pushed the thought out of his head. He couldn't think about Hokura right now. He had to believe that the professor knew what he was doing and that she would wake up. He had to have faith; unfortunately, it seemed like Amara had lost hers, not that he had blamed her. Amara had already felt a grudge about being used as a science experiment. Her awakening had been the worst of all three. She never went into full detail, but he had pieced it together by the way she avoided the idea of being back in a medical facility that she would rather give up her duty than be lying upon a stretcher, being tested on.

He looked at her clock, which hung above her couch. She had been gone for nearly two hours. He wondered just how much time she needed before she felt the need to be back.

Finally, the door opened slightly as Amara slipped in, quickly closing it behind her and sagged against the wall. He ran to her and threw his arms around her. "Don't ever ask that of me again. I won't allow it. I can't do it!" he said sternly, looking at her.

Amara looked down and away. "Don't worry; you won't have to," she answered.

"Did you do what you needed to do?" Adam asked.

"That and then some, something has come up..." she stated.

Amara told Adam about her confrontation; Adam merely shook his head.

"An uprising? If civilians didn't want to be in the city walls, why wouldn't they just leave? Why would they be kept from leaving? It doesn't make any sense."

"He's a rebel. Why listen to him?" Amara asked, shrugging.

"Hokura listened, you listened, so you tell me, Amara, why listen to him? Unless there's some small part of you that doubts what we've been led to believe about this place."

"I don't know what to believe anymore," Amara whispered. Adam was about to make his way for the door when she grabbed his arm. "Stay here tonight, please? We can drag my mattress out into the main room, you can sleep on that, and I can take the couch. I just don't want to be alone tonight."

Adam nodded with a slight smile; he had felt the same.



James returned to the base along with his men. They had ridden out to the city tonight in a large number in hopes that James would be able to contact the peacekeepers. He hadn't said anything else to them other than when he gave the order to move back out of Meridiana and head back to camp.

He rode in silence as he stared out at the wasteland that spread out ahead of him. He was happy to be back among his own people again but shaken by the news he had learned. The only person who might possibly listen to him, the one



person who held to the key to everything, his entire plan, now lay in a coma.

As the jeep stopped at the camps and people jumped out greeting their loved ones, James headed towards his tent. He needed to think. That's when Barack came around the corner.

"How was your night commander?" he asked but stepped back as he looked at James' expression. "What went wrong?" he asked.

James closed his eyes for a moment in hopes it would clear his head, but still, the words echoed inside his skull. "It appears that the peacekeepers weren't sent out tonight."

Barack gave a puzzled look. "Odd," he replied, fidgeting with his beard.

James gave a soft chuckle. "That didn't keep me from meeting with one of them. It was the second female. She said she was off duty, which explains why she wasn't in her usual outfit..." James cleared his throat. "She also said that Hokura was in a coma..."

"Damn," Barack muttered. "I'm sorry, my friend." He couldn't imagine what had happened. Then again, with all the madness that ran amok in the compound, was it really so hard to believe? The professor had treated his subjects like science experiments. "But not Hokura," he muttered to himself. No, she was special... the professor had doted on her. He would never put her at such a risk. The others, possibly, but not her. There must have been something else.

James only shook his head. "She said it was no thanks to her, maybe something happened, and the second child wasn't there to protect her. I haven't a clue."

"So, what now?" Barack asked as they walked further out of camp, closer to James' tent.

"For now, we halt everything, maybe we'll even move further away from the city, but for now, I will be entering the city alone and observing. Maybe she'll awaken," James continued. He felt lost. He had no backup plans and had counted on being able to talk to her. Unfortunately, it would take some more time, which was the ironic part because time was something the rebels had an unlimited amount of. It was the people of the city that were running out of it.

"I'll give it a week, two at most, and then re-evaluate everything. Until then,

the civilians will just have to put things on hold.”



The sun rose over the horizon as the second night watch shift made their way back into the compound, trading off with the day shift watchmen. The curfew horns blew across the confined city, alerting the civilians that they were now free to come out of their homes and go about their daily tasks. They could pick up their ration tickets and figure out their meals for the day. They could go to their shops that the compound allowed them to manage. They could walk about freely again and converse.

Inside the compound, Amara slept on her couch as the third child Adam, slept next to her curled up on her disheveled mattress. Doctor Allen sat in his office, drinking his coffee mulling over missing documents that might supposedly hold the key to the peacekeepers' futures. Annette was in her lab fighting with a tracking device, trying to secure it to a bracelet that might never be worn. The professor was asleep next to his life's work that he had spent the night watching over as he paced the room endlessly, tearing himself apart mentally to the point of exhaustion.

The professor's pager vibrated on the far table. He had purposely taken the phone in the room off the hook. He couldn't be bothered by anything but what was in this room. Whatever the night watch might have uncovered, whatever new information the governor had about the rebels, he could care less and would deal with on his own time. There was nothing that was above task for Talon to oversee.

He woke up blurry eyed, his neck sore from sleeping in such an awkward position in a strange bed. He struggled to get up and clenched his eyes shut, rubbing them. His white dress shirt was rumpled as his sleeves were rolled up partway. He had taken his jacket off some time during the night but couldn't recall when. He reached over to his glasses and put them on out of habit. He hoped that there would be a brighter outlook on the day once he did, but there

was no change. He looked away from the monitors and scowled. He had to think. He needed a way to bridge the connection and bring her back to him. He slowly looked up at her; there was a way...

The professor grabbed his pager. It had been Doctor Allen, who was just the person he wanted to speak to. He picked up the phone and dialed into his assistant's office. The phone picked up as he answered. The professor didn't even give him a chance to speak. "Doctor Allen, I need you to go to the lab and get me the Transcranial Direct Current Simulator!" he ordered.

The doctor's curiosity piqued. "Sir, it hasn't even been twenty-four hours; I doubt she's losing any information that was learned while in the coma the first time."

"That's not it," the professor said. "I believe I can bring her out of it, but I need that machine here now, Doctor!"

"Yes, sir, right away," Doctor Allen answered in earnest.

"It might be a long shot, but it just might work." The professor grinned, he had just needed one more thing, but he would wait until the doctor had come and gone to retrieve it.



Amara woke up to the light snoring beside her and smiled. She had actually slept the full night without waking up from nightmares. Adam was sprawled out over her double-sized mattress, which had been haphazardly flopped next to her couch. He was the reason to wake up this morning. She wouldn't allow herself to think about anything else. She just wanted to enjoy his company. He had been there for her all day yesterday; he had even been there when she had ignored protocol and gone out. Adam was the most loyal friend someone could ask for. Even when they fought, they were able to quickly reconcile. The third child had bonded to her and Hokura in such a strong way as if they were his stability, which was fine considering Amara didn't have any further plans to put herself in harm's way.

Adam snored a little louder, waking himself up. He blinked twice as he heard Amara's chuckle and remembered that he was in her room from last night. He rolled over and stared at her, sitting up on her couch. "I'm pretty sure you ended up with a better-quality mattress than I got." He pouted.

Amara merely laughed at him.

"No, I'm serious." Adam chuckled. "Since you never sleep on it, I'll happily take it off your hands."

Amara couldn't help but smirk. "It would be a bitch to try and move down the hall to your place." She looked up at him with an even wider smile. "But you're welcome to come over and use it anytime you want."

Adam grinned and shook his head. "How about we catch breakfast and hope for some positive news today? Even if we don't get any, we still have each other," he said, offering Amara his hand, which she happily took.



Doctor Allen had brought the machine to the room just as the professor had asked. He had quickly been asked if he would be so kind as to bring him some coffee just as quickly before he even got a chance to observe his overtired and stressed mentor.

The professor wrestled with the machine, trying to fit it into the room, and in frustration, he kicked the extra gurney out into the hallway with a crash as it hit the far wall. He set to work, trying to see if there was any way he could access the programs inside to what had fed the three children all the information and knowledge they had learned as they slept for so many years. There had to be a way, and he had been determined to do whatever was possible to relay the message to her as she slept that he was there. He would be successful; nothing would stop him from getting Hokura back. If this didn't work, then he would try something else, but dammit, he wouldn't allow things to end like this and be damned to stand by as the years went by, waiting to see if she ever rose again.

The doctor made his way to the cafeteria for the professor's coffee. He had never seen the man so flustered and upset in his entire life. It had been off-putting to see him in such a state of madness. As he turned the corner, he saw Amara and Adam walking side by side, talking to one another. They looked up at him expectantly. At least he had some news to tell them. "Good morning," he greeted them, bowing his head as they returned the greeting.

"I have some news, although it may not be much, and it might be a long shot, but the professor thinks he might have possibly figured a way to wake her," he told them, chewing on his cheek. At least he had hoped that the professor had a solid plan and wasn't grasping at straws.

"Can we at least see her?" Amara asked, grabbing onto Adam's arm for support.

The doctor took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I wouldn't recommend it. The professor isn't even allowing me in the room at the moment, he's heavily concentrating on reviving Hokura, and I'm sure any disturbances at the moment might tip him over the edge." He had caught himself, but it was too late. He raised his hands. "Not saying that you two would be disturbances, but..." The doctor raked his hand through his hair. "This has caused Professor Dorian more stress than I have ever imagined possible. I've never seen him like this before. He's dead set at the task at hand and can't be distracted in any other way."

"It's alright," Adam said, putting his arm around Amara. "He obviously kicked you out too. Thank you for the news, Doctor, at least it's something." With that, the two peacekeepers made their way to their usual spot.

Doctor Allen stared over at them. It looked so odd to only have the two of them sitting there instead of three. He shrugged, hoping that whatever the professor had planned would work, and made his way over to the coffee canisters. He was reluctant to go back and only hoped that the professor's mind was slightly more at ease with the delivery of the TDCS.

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The professor had made his way to his office in a hurry. He unlocked his filing cabinet and grabbed his personal laptop from the inside. He had to be quick before his assistant made his way back to the room where Hokura was. He had locked his door to turn around to face Talon.

"Sir," the night watch commander said. "I know you have your own personal reasons for dismissing the peacekeepers from duty last night, but perhaps tonight I can supervise..."

"Talon, I simply do not have the time to be briefing anything with you at the moment," the professor said, starting his way down the hall.

The commander followed. "I understand that, sir, but I would happily take them on, sir, if you would just..."

The professor turned, giving him a stern look. "I understand you want to help, commander, but at this moment, the peacekeepers will remain off duty until I can brief them back in. The night watch may be yours to command, but the peacekeepers are my sole responsibility and will stay that way!"

Talon stopped; he knew that it was pointless to argue with the professor. "Yes, sir," he answered and then went back the way he came.

The professor scowled and continued on his way, hoping that he would be able to accomplish the task that he had thought of and that it would all be for something.

He had rounded the corner just as Doctor Allen came upon the door with his coffee in hand. The doctor noticed how disheveled his mentor had been.

"If you needed your computer, sir, I would have happily retrieved it for you," he offered as the professor opened the door.

"It was merely an afterthought," the professor lied, taking the steaming cup from his assistant's hand. "Thank you, Doctor, but please, I need to do this alone. I need my full concentration for what I'm about to attempt."

Doctor Allen shifted. "And what exactly are you attempting, Professor?" he

asked, doubting that he would get an answer.

"If it works, I will let you know, but I want to be alone while attempting this," the professor said sternly, hoping that his assistant would back down and allow him to work.

The doctor finally sighed with a nod in hopes this would possibly buy him time to search out the missing answers he had been pondering.

The professor set to work right away, pulling wires from the TDCS. They had been hooked up to motherboards, which held the information that had been fed into the children's minds with electrical pulses that could be viewed as images. When he was sure that they were no longer connected and wouldn't cause any interference with what he was trying to stream, he then grabbed his computer and hooked up a live feed cable that would send information from his laptop into the machine, which would then with all hope send the message into Hokura's brain.

He started hooking the sensors to Hokura's temples as he set the life support system on standby. He couldn't know precisely how or if this was going to work and if there would be any consequence of sending a live feed through the machine. The technology had taken years to perfect, and even then, sometimes the signals sent out weren't received correctly, which ended up causing more issues to those using them.

This machine had been Hokura's when she had first been in her coma, he knew that it worked, and now he hoped that it would still respond accordingly to her brain waves and sync well enough to feed her without causing distress.

Once he was sure everything had been properly placed, he checked the monitors one last time to make sure that everything read normally; after this, he feared there might not be any turning back if something went wrong.

The professor sat beside Hokura, watching the machines blinking lights, his laptop balanced in his lap as the camera screen flicked on and showed him that it was streaming. He looked directly at the screen, which showed himself staring back, then he began to speak. "Hokura, you're in a coma right now. I don't know what happened... you were injured, and we had to stabilize you. Please, Hokura, if you can hear me, please come back to us. You need to wake up."

He waited for a sign. He had no idea how quickly the machine fed the signal or how quickly the brain would respond to it, if at all. He closed his eyes and waited; the monitors beeped on reading normal.

"Please, Hokura, if you can hear me, please give me a sign," he pleaded, watching his face turn in desperation. "Dammit, Hokura, you have to hear me! Please show me that you can see or hear me!" He watched intently for anything, the slightest bit of movement, a stir, a change in her breathing, but she lay there just as she had since she entered the coma twenty-four hours ago. He wouldn't give up; there was nothing else for him to do but continue and wait.



At the other part of the compound, Doctor Allen fidgeted, with his extra set of keys trying to get into the professor's office. He heard the lock click when he heard someone behind him. The doctor breathed a sigh of relief when he had seen Talon. "Commander," he greeted, wondering if he had been caught.

"Doctor," Talon greeted back, "did the professor send you to run errands for him since he seems to be missing half his mind today?"

"He's been with Hokura all night, with very little sleep. He asked me to oversee some files for him since he didn't want to continuously run back and forth between the medical facility and here," Doctor Allen replied.

"If either of you requires assistance, I may not be so inclined in medical knowledge, but I can be an extra pair of hands," the commander offered.

"That's very kind of you, commander, but considering the time, haven't the night watch retired for their rest?" the doctor asked curiously.

Talon sighed. "The first shift heads back into training at fourteen-hundred hours. I usually sleep once the second shift returns after the reports. I found myself restless, though, and wanted to see if there would be anything I could do to help."

Doctor Allen regarded the man and thanked him, an easy dismissal that he hoped Talon wouldn't take personally.



Finally, in the room, the doctor set to work going through the filing cabinet, yet there had been nothing about the experiments or the children involved. The doctor had gone through every cabinet twice; if they weren't in his office, then where in the hell had he been keeping them? He thought as he fell back into the leather armchair. There were only two other possible places: his private quarters or his debriefing office. He cursed; he didn't have access to either.

The debriefing office was off-limits to everyone except the professor. He had remembered the other night that the professor had missed the briefing and had opened it for Talon in order to allow the peacekeepers in to brief them. He doubted that the professor had given him a key or that an extra set even existed.

Now more than ever, he was convinced that something radical had happened with the experiments. They were so widely known about, but yet the actual documentation about them had been scarce. Maybe this went deeper than the professor. He didn't doubt the governor knew about the details and had backed the professor in everything he did because of the professor's promise to protect the city and come out with a super-soldier. Even once the war was over, there was always a push for genetically enhanced soldiers. Now they had the peacekeepers, but they were still being pushed to be stronger, better, and faster even with their extensive training. He puzzled over it.

The idea caught him off guard. Was it possible that they weren't being trained to protect those of the city but to protect the compound in the midst of another war? He had wondered about the night watch. Were they in any way receiving genetic enhancing treatments? Maybe Talon would have the answers for him, then he could come to a solid conclusion, but the theory only posed more questions.

The doctor stopped for a moment; this was all too much to take in. He needed to clear his head. He needed to talk to someone. He rose from the chair, making sure that the office had looked the way it had before he had disturbed it. He then locked the door and made his way to the training facility. If anyone knew about the night watch guards and their training reports, it was Annette.



There was a light knock at the door as the professor had sat unmoving, replaying the clip time and time again, hoping it would reach the first child. He scowled angrily that someone was interrupting him. He opened the door only to gaze upon Governor Larson.

"What is this that I've heard that you kept the peacekeepers off duty last night?" he asked, raising his eyebrow. The man was older than Dorian, his hair was silvering, and his brown eyes held a sharp look to them. He was dressed in a dark suit, which the man always seemed to wear.

"There are pressing matters at hand at this moment. I don't have the time to observe them while out on duty at the moment," the professor said, then turned and went back into the room. The governor followed.

"This wasn't part of our deal Dorian; you were given all the funds we could possibly come up with to get us these enhanced soldiers. You don't get the authority to give them the night off because you can't supervise them!" the governor said, rather upset.

"You have the night watch; they may not be as enhanced as the peacekeepers yet, but they have twenty times the numbers at your disposal. There are only three peacekeepers, and if I can't figure out what went wrong with this one, then, in the end, we might not have any!" the professor yelled. He then turned away, he had never raised his voice to a superior before, but Larson was being unreasonable.

The governor stepped back, glaring at Hokura. "Certainly, you can have your assistant in here watching for any changes."

"No!" the professor continued. "You trusted this entire project to me, and there are some things that even Doctor Allen is ignorant about. Are you willing to let this whole project fall apart? If you want the peacekeeper unit to continue their duty, then you will bide your time and allow me to work with this. Once the first child has re-awakened, then we'll proceed forward. Besides, it's been

reported that rebel and civilian activity has seemed to have halted over the last few days. I'm sure nothing is happening right now that the night watch can't take care of, or you do not think Talon is up to the task of commanding his men?"

The governor could see that the professor was under pressure and had pinned him to the wall, they still needed the peacekeepers, and the professor had been the one who controlled them. He could destroy them as easily as he created them, and that was what had given him such power of authority. He who controlled the peacekeepers and the cell enhancing research held the fate of the compound in their hands. "Very well then," Larson said, giving the professor a dignified sneer. "I expect to be notified the moment they are back in force" he turned away and then glanced over at Dorian, who was rerunning the feed, and decided he wouldn't push the subject again. It would be a shame to see such a brilliant mind slip away into madness if something were to happen to his life's work.

Once the governor had left, the professor sat back on his chair. The feed was silent. The monitors beeped on. He leaned over and cradled his head in his hands. "Hokura, please, you don't know what this is doing to me. I feel like I'm breaking apart."



Doctor Allen made his way to the training facility. He walked past a gymnasium where a specialized combat instructor was going over moves with one of the day watch groups. He stared for a moment at the ferociousness of what was being demonstrated with two guards. He watched as one flipped the other and started pummeling him as the other blocked, and the instructor continued giving orders to the one on the ground on how to stop and buck his opponent off him. The doctor raised his eyebrows and gave his head a shake. He had never seen any of the outside guards in training before. He had heard a few times what had been expected of the peacekeepers, every so often, Hokura would talk to him about her training, but the way she described it was nothing like it had appeared to be.

These men were being hardened.

He walked to the track room and saw Annette working at the far monitoring table. She had been bent over something at the table and seemed to be working intently. The doctor cleared his throat in hopes of getting her attention, which it did. She turned his way and looked surprised to see him.

"Allen, what a nice surprise. What are you doing here?"

He smiled at her. "I was hoping you could give me some information," he replied but then glanced down at the bracelet on the desk. "New track monitor?" he asked.

Annette looked away and then looked back at him. She didn't see the need to lie. "A project the professor has me working on, kind of like an enhanced GPS tracking device."

Doctor Allen could only imagine. He had an idea why there was only one and could only guess that it would be given out as a prototype to the first child if she survived this. Still, for the most part, he was able to watch them under fairly close surveillance when they went on peacekeeping duty, which didn't quite explain why he needed something to tell him her exact location within the compound—just another mystery about the man who was his mentor.

"I wasn't given any details as to *why* he wanted it. He merely told me the components that he wanted to be integrated into it," Annette said, still looking down at the bracelet that still had a few spare wires protruding from it.

The doctor shook his head. "It's not important at the moment. I was here to ask you about something else..."

Annette looked at him and smiled warmly. "Sure, what about?"

He didn't know how to go about asking, so he decided he would be straight and hoped that Annette would give him access to the information he needed. "I was wondering if I could look at the night watch's training reports over the past few months and see how their training was improving."

Annette looked away. "Those files are classified," she muttered.

He had turned away from her scowling.

"Either way, I don't even have the files. Any hard copy of a file that's printed out here is faxed directly to Professor Dorian and the governor and then

shredded."

His eyes widened as he grabbed her arms. "Why, Annette? Please tell me why it's so important to keep so much of this classified?"

Again, her eyes wouldn't meet his as she looked down, she didn't want to lie to him, but she had warned the professor. She had warned Talon as well and had even warned the governor that eventually, the truth would be found out. She stared at the room to make sure there was nobody within hearing range.

"They're being injected, aren't they? The night watch, most likely the day watch, too. They're all being injected with genetically enhanced cells to become super-soldiers like the peacekeepers, aren't they?" he mustered.

"They'll never be like the peacekeepers!" Annette countered in defense. "Not really," she continued. "Their genetic makeup will never be perfected like the three peacekeepers, but their abilities will be enhanced. They'll stop aging once their transformation is complete and the genetic cells have taken over all of their old ones."

"So, they'll be like the professor," Doctor Allen mused, letting go of her arms.

Annette's eyes widened. "Allen, you must never underestimate the professor under any circumstances. And you must not breathe a word of this to anyone that you might know about this. It's highly classified information."

He chuckled. "Apparently so, even if the second in command and heir to the professor's work isn't allowed to know about it."

Annette shook her head. She looked around again to make sure that they were still alone and then placed her hands on his chest and whispered. "Be careful with what you know, Allen, and even more cautious about what you're being led to believe. I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Just one more question, Annette," he continued. "Who else is being injected?"

Annette shook her head. "Not injected, they're putting it into the compounds water supply and food source. Why do you think we all stay so healthy despite our living conditions in a war-torn wasteland? Why do you think everyone around here ages so slowly?"

"Why?" The word hung in the air.

"To create a superior human race inside this compound."

"One more thing Annette," he said, slowly stepping back, taking in what he had just heard, "how was it the three children survived? What made them so special?"

Annette chewed on her bottom lip. "I don't know for certain, but the only logical theory was that they weren't injected right away. That they were comatose at a young age but weren't experimented on until their bodies hit adolescence."

"Thank you, Annette." He bowed his head, "and you have my word that none of this will ever be repeated to anyone." He then hugged her, hugged her because she had answered more than she should have, and because of what it could cost her.



Amara sighed as she walked through the domed Ecco garden with Adam. "I guess we're not going out tonight either," she said, running her hand through her hair as she enjoyed the warmth and humidity of the greenhouse.

"Considering its midafternoon and we haven't heard anything, I'm guessing we're on leave until notified," Adam said, gently bringing his hand to hers to hold. "Under any other circumstances, I would enjoy the time off."

Amara nodded. "Although, I do feel kind of useless not doing anything."

"I offered to spar with you," Adam added but saw the second child shaking her head.

"I don't have the stomach to be back in the training facility right now. Still, you'd think a place this big would have a million things to do. Hokura spent her free time painting, but I'm not creative at all, and I'm not into old-world literature like you are." She pouted.

"Not like there are many old-world literature books out there anymore." Adam pouted. "You've spent some idle time in the garage helping you tune up

your bike," he offered.

"I'm too restless," she complained. "I wish I could look into the future and know that everything will be alright."

Adam walked up to her and took her hands. "Amara, everything is going to be alright; you just have to believe it."

She grinned. "I hope you're right."

The two turned and continued to walk hand in hand through the brick laid trail as they stopped every so often to admire a piece of plant life.

Amara especially loved the wildflowers; it had been the tiger lilies that had especially held her attention. "I'm pretty sure Hokura painted one of these for Doctor Allen." She beamed but then stopped.

"You had mentioned that she had a thing for the doctor," Adam smiled, bending over to give the flowers a closer look.

"Yeah, she did, but apparently not anymore," Amara said, chewing on the side of her cheek. "She didn't really get into it with me, so who knows" she shrugged.

"Do you think it's our business if she did like him? We are human after all, and it's not unthinkable that we form friendships with others," Adam said, looking at Amara.

She didn't quite understand. "I know, but it just seems strange to me, I guess, I don't know, maybe it's because the three of us are so close, her having some kind of feelings for someone else who isn't us is kind of foreign." She looked at Adam, who was giving her a melancholic look. "Maybe one day I'll understand. Hokura just seems to be light years ahead of us some days, like she experiences things differently that we can't quite grasp."

Adam's look warmed. "Well, she is the first child. She awoke well ahead of the both of us. Maybe she's continuing to awaken; maybe she's just experiencing things ahead of us."

Amara grabbed at his hand. "C'mon, let's keep going. I want to go sit by the waterfall, you can talk to me about old-world literature, and I'll try to understand some of it."

Adam happily obliged.



The professor laid his head on the gurney in exhaustion. He hadn't eaten anything all day. He hadn't even touched the coffee that the doctor had brought him. He couldn't even bring himself to move. His feed replayed continuously, and for all he knew, it wasn't being received. His eyes blurred on the sleeping form that was the first child. His back ached as much as his head did, physical pain was something that he rarely endured, but at the moment, it felt necessary. He allowed himself to suffer to remind himself that he wasn't fully immortal, he could have injected himself, but he felt comfortable in his pain.

He gently stroked Hokura's arm. "If you love me, you would come back to me," he whispered, his eyes closed for a moment, it was then that he heard her sigh, he shot up and stared, was it possible or was it just his imagination? "Hokura, can you hear me? Please, I'm here. You need to wake up!" He put his arms around her and held her tightly. "Please, first child," he whispered. "I love you." He felt her twitch slightly.

"Dorian," she whispered in her sleep; his name was like a gentle caress that washed over him.

"Hokura!" he cried. "You're all I ever wanted. Please wake up!" He went back over the computer and stopped the replay. He sat in front of the screen again, his camera coming on. "Hokura, it's Dorian. You're in a coma again. There were some complications, and I couldn't think of anything else." He stopped for a moment, licking his lips. "Hokura, I promise, if you come back to me, I'll keep you safe. We can be together. I'll protect you." He trembled in desperation. "I will show you everything, tell you everything, give you everything..."

She started taking in deeper breaths until her breathing pitched, and she let out a small sigh. He squeezed her hand as her eyelids slowly began to flutter lightly.

"Hokura!" the professor cried out, grabbing onto her. He held her closer. All he wanted to do was hold her and feel her close to him. She let out a light, airy



breath once more as her eyes slowly opened.

"Professor," she murmured as she slowly brought her hand up to brush against his face. She felt exhausted.

"It's alright. I'm here. I'll always be here," he assured her.

She looked up at him. "I feel so tired and weak."

He pursed his lips. "That's just the cells working overtime to heal your body. Once you rest and they've done their job, you'll feel better again."

She nodded and slowly closed her eyes again.

He lowered her back onto the bed, relieved that she was awake but refused to think that she would be well enough until the morning. She needed her rest, and she still needed to be monitored.

The professor walked over to the phone and punched in a few quick numbers. "Talon? You are to meet the peacekeepers in front of the briefing room tonight and let them know that they are still off duty for the night, that is unless you can track them down before then to relay the news. I'm still needed here." He hung up the phone and contemplated alerting his assistant that she had woken up but decided against it.

He would bide his time that he had with her and enjoy it. She needed her rest, and the fewer distractions, the better. Besides, she would most likely join her two friends tomorrow morning and settle into a routine again.

He scowled at the idea and only wished Annette would hurry up with the project he had given her. He sighed as he grabbed two of the syringes. Out of habit, he was going to dose Hokura but thought against it and put one down. The other was for himself. He rolled up his sleeves and dosed himself. That's when his eyes met hers. He hadn't even realized that she had been watching him. He gave her a meek smile.

"We're not so different after all," he said, looking down at the syringe.

She didn't say anything as she just stared.

"You see, I had originally used myself as a guinea pig in the enhanced stem cell project. That's why I was able to go forward and start testing on others." He brought his glasses up and took them off. "These are just for show. They've become part of my identity, same with the beard since it makes me look older. It

helps people forget what I truly am. Then again, the facts that I tested my theories on myself weren't made overly public. In fact, I'm sure that part of the documentation of trials was purposely omitted."

"So, you're just like me then," Hokura whispered.

"Yes," the professor breathed, "although I was older when I started injecting myself, I stopped aging at thirty-two, but yes, I am just like you. I still take the injections every so often."

She suddenly felt so close to him, closer than she thought possible. "Will you stay with me tonight?" she asked, not wanting to be alone.

"Of course," he whispered. He settled himself beside her bed when she stared up at him.

"There's plenty of room," she said shyly, shifting over.

He happily obliged and settled himself next to her, holding her gently, allowing her to sleep in his arms. How he wanted to kiss her, but this was enough. All that mattered was she was awake and with him again. There would be plenty of time for expressing himself once she awoke again.



"Do you want to try and stomach sitting in the cafeteria tonight for dinner, or do you want to do what we did last night?" Adam asked as the two made their way down to the mess hall.

"It feels strange without her being there, at least when she was off duty and being monitored after the blast. She was still here during mealtimes, and we still got to see her in the training facility even though she was back and forth between the medical facility," Amara mused, staring ahead. "The feeling that she won't be there is sickening."

Adam nodded. "So, are you going to steal more lasagna from my plate?" he teased as he bumped into her, smiling as he tried to lighten her mood.

Amara gave a small grin back. She appreciated that he was trying to get her mind off things by making light of the situation. "Only if you let me," she

answered, purposely bumping back into him.

He laughed, putting his arm around her. "I think I might allow that tonight. C'mon, let's get some food and get out of here."

"I wonder if we'll be back on the force tonight or if we get another night off," she wondered.

"Considering the time and that we've heard nothing, I doubt it. After we eat, we can always make our way down to the briefing room to see if anyone is there, maybe Talon will be around, and we'll be able to see if he knows anything."

Amara looked down. She didn't want to think about Hokura's condition and that she had put her there. The guilt had already ridden her hard enough to believe that she would rather it be her in a coma than her friend, that if she could, she would switch places with Hokura so she wouldn't have to have idle moments wondering if the first child would ever wake up again.

"Enough," Adam said, shaking her lightly. "Stop thinking about it. The professor gave you orders, and you followed them. You were doing as your commander had commanded, and it's not like you two haven't sparred like that before."

"No," Amara shook her head, "there was something wrong. Something felt off about it. I hit her, and I already saw bruising. I should have stopped." Amara made a frustrated noise. "I just want to see her. I know I can't, maybe tomorrow we can hound the doctor about it. Maybe I would feel better if I could just say sorry again."

Adam sighed. "Amara, you have to stop doing this to yourself, this is our duty, and there was a risk, things happen, but we just have to try and believe that things will work out. There's nothing else we can do. We can see about seeing Doctor Allen when we go find Talon after dinner." He gave her a gentle nudge. "If you keep it up, I won't share the pasta, and I'll dish your plate up full of yams," he teased.

"You would too!" Amara said, nudging him back but smiling slightly, knowing he was right.



Doctor Allen sat in his office. After seeing Annette, he had locked himself in and hadn't left for the remainder of the day. He was turning into one of them, he hadn't known, but all this time, he was consuming it through the food and water, everyone was. And yet, he pondered for a moment. The peacekeepers continued with daily injections. Maybe it was due to their genetic make-up that they needed the injections, or perhaps they needed a stronger dose since they had always had larger quantities in their systems. He wondered if their systems would ever become regulated or if it would be something they always relied on.

He felt cheated, and yet he felt exhilarated, and still there was the conversation that he had shared with the second and third child telling them that he had not used the injections himself. He shrugged. It hadn't been a lie. He had been ignorant until now. Was it even safe to tell them? Did they possibly know about the people of the compound? Then again, even if they were ingesting the enhancements, they weren't at all versed in any type of combat. Their skills had never been honed for anything like fighting or any further surviving than they already did on a daily basis. That's why the peacekeepers must have been so important. Even if the people of the compound did carry enhanced cells, they weren't soldiers. That brought him back to the watch and what he had seen today. They were being trained just as the peacekeepers were.

The doctor sighed; he could only guess that this information was as well-hidden as the documentation on the seventy children who had undergone the original experiment. He knew that the professor wasn't at all alone in this, that obviously the governor and what was left of the government cabinet was aware of what was taking place; obviously, the GMO scientists who handled and grew the food were aware, same with those who worked at the water facility part of the compound. He wondered who else had known but had kept the secret, and yet Annette had urged him never to utter a word of this, her words continuously replayed in his mind. *"Never underestimate the professor."*

Obviously, Annette had been aware, but she had also been one of the top lab technicians. She would have known something was up when supposedly normal day and night watch soldiers started breaking records and surpassing them with such ease in the training facility.

He looked up at his clock. It was already getting late. He had skipped lunch at the thought of his food being meddled with and processed with genetic enhancements, but after an hour of brooding, he had concluded that it had most likely always been so. Now he was feeling the pang of hunger and made his way towards the cafeteria. He could have dined in the upper level but didn't quite feel like being among those who most likely agreed and carried the notion of turning those of the compound into some kind of genetic experiment. He had fought back and forth with himself about this all day. Back in the old world, there were vaccinations that warded off sickness and disease, people were highly encouraged to take them, and a large amount did. Were they merely trying to ward off the possibilities of mankind's extinction? The doctor didn't know, he wished there was someone he could talk to and get answers from, but he had been so diligently warned against it that he wondered what the consequences would be.

Allen walked into the cafeteria and saw Amara and Adam with full plates making their leave. He wanted to stop them and speak to them. He wanted to know if they had known anything but stopped. He didn't have news for them about Hokura. He doubted they wanted to speak to him about anything else other than their friend's well-being. He wished he could tell them what was happening but lately, the professor had almost seemed to have a tip on his shoulder about him being near the first child.

He had been dismissed from being by his side so quickly. Doctor Allen shook his head. He was the professor's, right-hand man. It's not like there was anyone else helping him survey any of this. He knew the professor had a special interest in the first child, so maybe that's why he had felt so compelled to oversee everything himself.

He helped himself to a few wraps, some of which held chicken and the others, turkey. The third was strictly vegetables.

The day had felt so exhausting as if he had learned too much too quickly, his head held a dull ache, and he considered retiring early since it was unlikely that he would be needed for any duties unless Hokura awoke. It was then that he decided that he would take his dinner to his living quarters and spend the rest of the evening relaxing.

He made his way to the elevator with the impending warning on it and looked around before pressing the button and getting on. With its casual ding, he got off and turned left towards his quarters. They were considered the smaller ones on this floor, surely no match for the professors, but he had been told it had been much nicer than those living on the lower floors. He set his plate in his fridge, made his way over to his plush couch, and stared out the large bay windows. The sun was starting to dip over the city of Meridiana. In a few hours, the horns would blaze. He had always wondered what the sunset truly looked like as the sun-kissed the earth dipping behind the horizons, instead of it merely disappearing behind a wall.



Amara and Adam sat on the floor of her suite as they picked at their food. “I wonder how many different types of food we’re missing out on,” Amara said, picking up a piece of pasta with her finger and popping it in her hand.

Adam chuckled. “Intriguing thought while eating the same thing over and over for years.” He was enjoying mashed potatoes.

“If they can create and make up food in the labs, you’d think they could make all sorts of different tasting things. It seems like everything kind of has the same taste to it,” Amara continued.

“If all you eat is pasta and sandwiches, then yes, it does all taste the same,” Adam smirked.

Amara lightly shoved him. “Enough giving me a hard time.” She laughed and then settled down. “In all seriousness, though, what should we do tonight to busy ourselves?”

Adam stopped for a moment to consider it. He had played more board games than he could tolerate. Amara didn't seem to overly want to spar. That's when the idea hit him. "You did mention the other night that your bike was scratched. We can touch it up, so once we're back on duty, you won't have to deal with having a nasty paint chip."

Amara smirked. "You have no idea how much that paint chip bothers me."

"Oh, but I do, and I heard all about it. It sounds like the entire bike needs a paint job." He winked at her. "I'm sure while we're down there, we'll see Talon. Maybe he can update us on what's happening."

Amara nodded.

The two made their way towards the garage. There was night watch crew mulling around doing safety checks on the vehicles. Some were underneath; others were testing the lights; others were pouring oil into the engines.

"Looks like the night watch is still running at full force," Amara muttered, and for a moment wished that she and Adam were allowed to continue on duty, even if it were without Hokura. They had still been sent out while Hokura was recovering from the blast. Then again, she hadn't been in a coma and was just experiencing horrible headaches, which pretty much rendered her useless for most of the day.

Adam looked up to see Talon, who was making his way over to them.

"What are you two doing here?" he asked, giving them a side glance.

"I take that as we're not on duty tonight then," Adam stated, looking up at him.

"No, the professor isn't back for briefing, so you two will have another night off. I told him that I would happily take you on, but he disregarded the idea," Talon said, rubbing his bald head.

"I guess you haven't seen the doctor around, then have you?" Amara asked sullenly.

"If you're asking about an update on the first child, I have no news for you, sorry." Talon made a face. He liked the peacekeepers. He hated that he couldn't help the two out at the moment.

"Well, another night off just means we can touch up your bike." Adam

smiled, nudging Amara.

"That I can help you with." Talon grinned as he got them some touch-up paint and handed it off to the pair. "Gotta keep the bikes looking good, right?" He chuckled at Amara, who merely grinned at him.

"See? The night isn't a complete waste. We can get this done, go for a walk, and then retire for the night," Adam asked warmly at Amara, who nodded.

At least he was by her side and keeping her mind off things. She couldn't help but feel grateful for him being by her side and never faltering.



Hokura looked around the dark alley. She had been chasing the rebels down, but it seemed as though they had gotten the slip on her. She flipped on her livewire. "Amara, I've lost visual. I'm going to go around the back of the warehouse and see if I can make contact. I need you to back me!"

"I lost them too. I'll be there in a moment, don't continue without me." Amara's voice came over the speakers as Hokura slowly started forward.

That's when she saw one of them. He was an older rebel trying to come up to her, his hands outstretched. "I mean, you no harm." He beckoned as he continued toward her. She heard his comrades calling from behind. "Don't do it, commander!"

Instincts hit as Hokura quickly reached for her revolver at her side. From there, it was slow motion. She could hear them yelling at their commander to stop and not trust the peacekeepers. Something rolled on the ground towards her as they shouted at him to get back. The commander's eyes went wide as he ran closer towards her and pushed her away right before the blast hit. There was a deafening sound, pain, the feeling of her body moving through the air, and then everything went black.



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Hokura woke up in a jolt. She was trembling violently.

Dorian woke up as she started to shake. "Hokura, what is it?" he cried, lifting himself beside her. He grabbed her shoulders and tried to coax her to look at him. "Hokura!"

She brought her hands to her face and rubbed them against her eyes as she gasped for air. "A dream, just a bad dream." She sat up quickly and took a gulp of air, trying to calm herself. She could see the professor giving her a concerned look. She rubbed her hand against her forehead, wiping away the sweat. "It was about the night of the blast... there was a rebel commander. He came towards me; he had his hands open, that's when the explosive was thrown towards me, he pushed me away..." She shook her head, trying to make sense of it. All she could see was his green eyes as they stared at her in desperation as he ran at her and pushed her. Those eyes that she swore she had seen before.

The professor held her tight against him. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that, my love," he crooned. "It's okay now. Everything will be alright."

"I couldn't remember what had happened, I could see bits and pieces of it but not the whole thing... never like that, this was the first time that it's been clear." She continued to tremble.

The professor licked his lips. "It would seem then that everything is back in place. During that explosion, it's possible that your limbic system, which stores memories, had been damaged. With all of these heavy set and constant dosages of genetically enhanced cells, it seems they were able to repair themselves. Thus, your memory returned in the form of a dream. I can only imagine how stressful it seemed. It's very possible that after the blast, we missed that your brain was bleeding. Either way, your body has been repaired," the professor explained.

"The commander must have died... he was trying to get me away from the blast," Hokura said, still holding her forehead. "He took the brunt of it."

The professor only offered her a sympathetic hug. "It's over now, Hokura."

You're safe. I can't say that for the rebel commander that you encountered. The rebels are very dangerous people, we can never underestimate what they're capable of, and that's why we have the night watch... and peacekeepers..." He looked up for the moment. He didn't want to have her out again, couldn't bear the thought of her being hurt or the possibility of losing her.

"That's what I was made for." She sighed, relaxing in his arms.

He wanted to tell her no. He wanted to reveal everything to her, but he had to wait. He would keep her safe while on duty. He would be able to track her every move while in the compound and the city. If only Annette would hurry up with completing her task.

"Let's not worry about any of that right now, my dear, just rest, regain your strength. We're together again, and alone." He smiled, looking down at her as he gently brought his hand underneath her chin and lifted it ever so slightly so that her lips met his.

The kiss started out lightly enough until Hokura felt her body nearly melt into his. She grabbed his shirt tugging him closer as she leaned back. Her head hit the pillow, but his lips never faltered as he went along with her. Her passion heated his own as they became entangled in one another.

He allowed himself to get swept away in her for a few moments until he became aware of his own passion that was about to slip if he didn't rein himself in. He pulled back from her as her body arched towards his. "Hokura," he gasped as he stared at her, longingly, "I know you want more, but you just woke from a coma." He kissed her forehead lightly. "I promise you with everything I am that this will continue, but you do need to rest yourself. When you are feeling better, I will show you more. Somehow I will make time for us to be together."

She couldn't be mad. She wanted to explore these feelings but knew at the same time that he had promised her over and over that he would when the time was right. She didn't know what came over her, but she had felt an incredible need to be close to him. She settled back in place and felt his body shift next to hers as he took his place, wrapping his arm around her. She didn't know how she would ever be able to sleep again without him beside her.

She was half asleep as she whispered to him. "I love you."

The professor could only smile as he felt the warmth of her body against his; everything was going according to plan. He gently put his mouth against her ear and whispered it back, hoping it would reach her dreams.



It was roughly around seven in the morning when the professor's pager could be heard vibrating on the far counter. He opened his eyes and relaxed when Hokura didn't stir. Never in his life had he felt this content. He would happily spend the rest of the day in the uncomfortable hospital bed next to the first child.

The pager continued, and he scowled. He knew it was his assistant and that he would have to break the news that Hokura had come back to them. He would have the other two children alerted in about an hour or so since they typically didn't rise until nine. He knew with telling the others and with alerting Doctor Allen that his time with Hokura would be limited and that he would have to step back to being their commander and mentor. He just wanted a few more minutes to enjoy being close to her, to feel her skin under his hand as it draped over her arm, to listen to her steady breathing and gaze upon her freely as she slept. She was his life's work, and he couldn't help but feel robbed that she wasn't fully his, that he would have to sneak around in order to achieve his initial conquest.

He breathed in deeply and sighing as he slowly lifted himself up, trying not to disturb her as she was still sleeping soundly. The professor stretched as he made his way over to the pager and then grabbed the phone and took it to the hallway. He wanted her to sleep. As much as he wanted her to wake up smiling next to him, she still needed some rest.

"Doctor Allen," the professor spoke into the phone. "Yes, I was here all night, yes... yes, she awoke late last night and then ended up falling back asleep. She's been resting comfortably since." He didn't care about sharing details at the moment. "Yes, the TDC Simulator worked. My theory proved successful." His assistant tried in earnest to convince the professor that he should be there right away. "I must insist that you wait on coming down. I would like to have you

alert the other two in about an hour or so. Hokura is still sleeping, and I would prefer to make sure all of her stats are reading normal before we have a bustle of activity around her." He had wanted just a little more time to satisfy his need to be alone with her. "Yes, Doctor, I shall see you then."

He entered the room again to see Hokura still asleep. He walked over to the sink and washed his face and quickly rinsed his mouth and retrieved his glasses. He looked in the tiny medical mirror. He didn't look overly tired but knew that at some point today, it would be in his best interest to find himself back in his quarters for a shower and a fresh change of clothes. He heard her shift and turned to see her rising as she rubbed her eyes.

"Good morning," he said, walking towards her and sitting on the bed as she smiled sleepily at him. "Your friends will be alerted within the hour that you are awake. Doctor Allen will also be in at that time to double-check your monitored stats."

"And what will you do?" Hokura asked. Her heart ached. She didn't want to think about returning to her regular life beyond this room. She wanted to stay with him.

"I will be here until you're discharged. It won't take as long as it has in the past. Your vital signs are looking good. We won't be giving you further injections and will just continue some weekly checkups. You'll be able to be on your way in a while. I'll need to file some medical forms, and then I will need to go back to my living quarters at some point to change and shower before I think about what will happen tonight for the peacekeepers. I'll have to also brief the governor on your status as well as the peacekeepers' operation status. Plus, I will have to meet with Talon today about the watch details," he continued. He had hardened towards her. He didn't want to be her commander again. He knew the questions on her mind the second he looked back down on her.

"Hokura," he sighed, "we have to wait and be cautious about this still, the others wouldn't understand yet, and I don't want you to feel alienated by your allies. There can't be friction or tension between any of you peacekeepers for this operation to continue."

She bit her lip and nodded sadly. "Yes, sir."

He felt as if he had been stabbed in the heart and was on her before he could think. Before he could ask himself if he had locked the door again when returning after his phone call to his assistant before he could remind himself that he needed to move slowly and tread carefully. He was on top of her, up against her, kissing her heatedly. "No," he said as he held her chin after kissing her. He pinned her down, kissing her neck as she moaned beneath him. "No..." he continued. His hands traced their way up her thigh, to her hip, and gently settled on her ribs as he looked down at her as she gasped.

"I don't want this any more than you do. I don't want to be your commander; can't you see that, Hokura? I don't want that. I want you beside me. I don't want to act as if I'm above you. I don't want to act indifferent because I'm *not*." Again, he took her mouth upon his. "Promise me that you believe me and that you'll remember this, that even when I'm ordering you into the night that you'll remember that I love you and that I *need* you," he continued.

"Yes," she cried as her body ached with sensation. "I promise." She gasped.

He was at her neck again as his hands enclosed around hers, as he took her further, as she moaned even more. "Promise me, Hokura!" he demanded.

"I promise, Dorian!" she cried as her legs locked around him, needing to feel him closer to her.

He smiled down at her as she panted. "Good," he whispered, kissing her again, allowing her hands to be free as they encircled around him. He kissed her gently, more lightly as he started to ease his weight off of her. She whimpered slightly. "Good." He slowly lifted himself from the bed and straightened his clothes. "Now, let's make sure your monitors are on properly and give a good show." He smirked.



Doctor Allen had made his way towards the peacekeepers' living quarters. He had gone to Adam's room first only to figure that the third child was sleeping through his knocking or he wasn't there. He went to Amara's door and knocked

quickly. He thought he heard a mumble, which was then followed by a rather loud, "just a moment."

The doctor stood as Amara opened the door. She was wearing gray shorts and a baggy t-shirt. He had guessed that he had woken her. "I have news," he said and then heard something from inside the quarters as Amara looked behind her.

"It's the doctor. He said he has news!" Amara called behind her. The doctor was surprised to see the third child with mussed hair wearing only black sweatpants show up behind her.

"Yes," the doctor continued, raising an eyebrow, and shaking his head, "Hokura awoke late last night. You would have been informed, but she fell back asleep right away afterward. My guess is the professor didn't see the need to wake anyone since he wasn't going to allow visitors at that time anyways," the doctor lied, shrugging.

Amara's smile spread across her face as she jumped into Adam's arms, hugging him. "She's okay! She's alive and awake!"

Adam couldn't help but share the sentiment as he held her.

"I'll give you two a few minutes to get dressed and ready if you would like to see her," he told them awkwardly as he backed into the hallway. "I'll meet you two by the elevator..."

He then excused himself and shut the door.

He walked down the hallway, shaking his head at the scene. The peacekeepers were all very close. So, it wasn't unreasonable to think about Adam and Amara coming together during such a time of uncertainty. He wondered if there was more to it but knew it wasn't his business to pry, but it was still something that the professor might be interested in. What would happen when the peacekeepers eventually started having emotions of love? What would happen if they were to become intimate or even possibly breed? Suddenly he couldn't help but wonder about the reproduction of the three children. Were the females on some sort of contraception? He would ask the professor, after everything that had been hidden from him; this was at least something he could bring up safely in conversation as a mere observation on his part.

The two met him a few minutes later. They looked more presentable than they had at the door. He wanted to ask about their nights since they weren't out guarding the city but figured that might lead to more questions of why Adam had been apparently sleeping in Amara's quarters.

"When did she wake up?" Adam asked as they entered the elevator.

"I'm not sure what exact time. He was there when it happened. He hasn't left her side since she went into the coma. He was able to use the TDCS to somehow bring her back, how I'm uncertain as I was merely to bring it to him. I haven't been permitted to see her since I saw you both yesterday. The professor was very direct with his orders that nobody else was to bother him while he fought to get Hokura back," Doctor Allen answered.

"Does this mean we'll be back on the force tonight?" Amara asked, knowing that the doctor most likely didn't have the answer but figured she would make conversation.

The doctor shrugged. "That's all up to the professor. Depending on Hokura's condition, he might just send the two of you out tonight and continue to monitor her. Then again, if she's in the clear, all three of you might be out again."

They left the elevator and continued in silence down the hallways of the medical facility. Amara couldn't help but notice that something had seemed to be on the doctor's mind. He appeared to be wearing a hardened expression today as if he was deep in thought. Then again, considering he had been kept in the dark about Hokura's progress, she couldn't blame him since he was the professor's assistant.

They came to the room and stopped as Doctor Allen knocked and then let himself into the room. The professor had been sitting next to Hokura on a chair, writing something on a chart. Amara pushed past the doctor and Adam and ran straight to Hokura, hugging her in a crushing manner.

"Hokura! I'm so sorry! I'm so glad you're alright! I thought I was never going to see you again!" Amara cried as she hugged her friend even harder. She couldn't help the tears as they flowed down her cheeks. A weight had been lifted from her, Hokura was okay, and she was awake.

"Amara," Hokura grunted, "I won't be alright if you keep crushing me."

Amara loosened her arms as she wiped away her tears. "I'm sorry, I don't even know what to say, I'm..."

"Sorry, I know... I'm alright, Amara." Hokura interrupted. "I'm better than alright. I'll be totally fine," she told them. "Now, please don't think about it anymore."

Adam smiled, seeing the two together but wondered what it meant for him and Amara. The past two days had been lovely despite the situation, but the thought of what might happen tonight when they returned after being out, if they went out at all, would he retire to his own room? Would Amara be alone on her couch, plagued with nightmares?

"I know you're all anxious to have Hokura out of here, I know she's also ready to be out of here again, but we still need her for an hour or so," the professor piped up as he continued writing his report.

"That's fine, Professor," Adam said, stepping in. "Thank you for being with her and working so diligently."

The professor looked up at Adam. He could see the sincerity in the third child's eyes. He meant the words of gratitude. "It's my job to look after you three. Your wellbeing is of the utmost importance to me. I will also need to check up and get samples from the both of you to see if what affected Hokura is happening to your systems as well." He saw Amara stiffen. "It's merely a small collection test Amara, it doesn't have to be done in the medical facility, and if the tests are conclusive, it will mean that you two, along with Hokura, will no longer need your injections."

The doctor was shocked by the news of the three children no longer needing their injections. Was there a possibility that they had somehow grown immune to them? He would ask later.

Amara stood and nodded. "Thank you for letting us see her. We know you're busy with reports sir, we won't bother you any longer."

The professor nodded as Hokura hugged both Adam and Amara. "I'll be fine, maybe you can save me some breakfast, and we can catch up on things."

"That sounds just fine to us. We can wait for you in the cafeteria," Adam said as he gently put his arm around Amara's shoulders and escorted her out of the



room. The doctor was about to move when Adam looked up at him and smiled. "There's no need to show us back, Doctor. I'm sure you have plenty to do here. We'll be able to find our way back." And with that, they left towards the cafeteria.

The doctor cleared his throat and brought his attention to the professor, who seemed busy scrolling away at his document. "Sir, I must insist that you tell me what you did with the TDC Simulator, it's miraculous that you were able to bring her back, but I must also know about why the children may no longer need their injections."

"Mmmm." The professor mused as he scrolled one more note onto his paper before turning towards his assistant. "You see, Doctor, I cleared the data that we were using and was able to hook it up to create a new message through video screening. I believe I was able to send it through the machine into Hokura's mind to give her the message that she was back in the coma and to wake up." He turned to Hokura. "Do you have any memory or recollection of my message?"

Hokura thought for a second. "I remember it being dark, and then I heard your voice telling me to try and wake up, I remember trying so hard to open my eyes, but my body was so tired. It was like being underwater, holding my breath, and telling myself to breathe... I couldn't bring myself to do it right away, but it was like seeing a light. I was trying to reach it. Eventually, I did, and that's when I woke up."

The professor nodded and looked over to his assistant as he raised his eyebrows. "I can't be the one to tell you whether or not it worked for sure, but with what Hokura just said, I guess that's a confirmation, Doctor."

"Interesting professor, that's amazing to think that we can communicate a live message to someone using this machine to encourage them to wake up. Quite ingenious on your part to consider it," Doctor Allen said, crossing his arms looking over at the monitors.

"Indeed," the professor said as he wrote something else down. "I had it under control, Doctor; it was just a stressful situation. I didn't want the peacekeepers out while not under my watch, but I also didn't want the first child going without me being here. I know you understand that it was a dire situation for myself, but

it seems that Hokura had been possibly suffering from bleeding on the brain, which could have caused her episode earlier along with the seizure. I also made the breakthrough that her body is now regenerating perfect cells on its own. Hence my hypothesis on why she will no longer be needing the injections, but for the moment, we will run weekly tests and also test the other children," he continued dryly.

"Then hopefully we're out of the clear now sir, I can understand the stress that you've been under," the doctor replied. "Sir, if it's possible to speak to you later, I had some questions."

The professor looked up for a moment. "Of course, Doctor, we can schedule a meeting for later on this afternoon. I'm sure you can appreciate that I've been rather busy, is there anything specific that this is about?"

Doctor Allen pursed his lips. He didn't want to say in front of Hokura. "Just about our genetic testing in the three, there's a few ends that I'm not sure are tied up or not," he answered blandly, looking over at the first child, whose attention seemed to be solely on the professor.

"Very well, Doctor," the professor said, "since it seems like I've done the reports and need to get on with the day. Will you please take Hokura's final vitals?"

The doctor was taken aback by this. It seemed for the past few days that the professor had been trying to keep the doctor busy and away from Hokura, and yet here he was asking him to finish things up for him. "Yes, sir, that's fine."

Professor Dorian then stood up. He looked at Hokura and smiled. "I'm glad your back Hokura, I shall see you tonight at briefing once I figure out what actions the governor wants the peacekeepers to take."

"Thank you, sir," she automatically responded as he took his leave.

The doctor walked over to the monitors. "I've never seen the professor so upset before while you were in the coma."

Hokura lay back in the bed. "He had his reasons." She said, trying to stay neutral.

"He never left your side, you know," Doctor Allen pressed.

Hokura's lips curved slightly. "He cares for us, Doctor; he has put so much

into the three of us he would have been there like that no matter who had been in here."

The doctor nodded, but he doubted it as he wrote down her final vitals.



The professor made his way to his living quarters. Upon entering, he took off his glasses and put them on the side table by the door along with the reports he had filled out. He sagged for a moment pinching the bridge of his nose. He was damn tired but knew that he wasn't going to find any reprieve until later tonight. The best he could do would be to shower and change.

He walked into his rather large kitchen, grabbed the coffee grounds, and poured them into his coffee maker. He didn't know how everyone else in the compound could choke down the sludge that the cafeteria called coffee. He had always made his own. He would be able to shower, enjoy a cup, and make his way back downstairs to the facilities before the governor would be seeking him out since it was still early.

He made his way to his bedroom and undressed. His larger cut suits were able to hide the well-toned body, again another guise to disguise what he truly was, which was fine. He would rather people around him remain ignorant. It would eventually play out in his favor anyway.



Amara and Adam sat in the cafeteria together beside each other. "Feeling better?" Adam asked Amara as she ate her usual.

"Yes," she smiled, "you were right. Everything is alright again."

"I wonder if we'll be back on tonight then, not that I didn't enjoy having two nights off, they really could have been under better circumstances."

"I could easily go for another night off; I've really been enjoying our time

spent together," Amara answered as Adam gave her a look. "I know we're supposed to be peacekeepers, and we were made for this duty, but it's nice to actually do what a normal person would at night," Amara continued, rolling her eyes.

Adam let out a chuckle. "Like having one of your best friends crashes at your place even though theirs is a few doors down?"

Amara placed her hands on Adam's. "Maybe that could become a normal thing for two abnormal people."

Adam looked up at her again with a twinkle in his eye. "I think I'd like that a lot."

They were lost looking at each other that they didn't notice Hokura come up to their table. They had moved their hands but not quick enough for her not to notice.

"That was quick. Usually, it seems like the professor likes to keep you in the medical facility for a good part of the day," Amara said, clearing her throat, and looking up at her friend.

"He spent the past two days not leaving my side. He said he has a lot of work to do. His assistant checked me out, and everything read totally normal," Hokura replied and sat down at the table, grabbing at the extra plate sitting across from both of them. "And if I weren't absolutely starving, I would be asking you two what that was just about, but I'm sure one of you will explain it anyway." She continued smiling, taking a large bite of an English muffin.

Amara looked up at her questioningly. "So we're not going to talk about what happened with you being in a coma?"

"You're not going to blame yourself anymore. Apparently, there was an underlying issue which has now been dealt with," Hokura answered, taking another bite. "Anyways, you're going to tell me what you two have been doing. You didn't go out for two nights, so what exactly did you get up to?"

Adam smirked. "It's good to have you back and acting so casual about yet again being the one on the stretcher and the both of us having to worry about you."

The first child grimaced. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to worry you two."

"I should be sorry," Amara started, but Hokura quickly put her hand up and halted the conversation before Amara could say anything more.

"All is forgiven, and we're not going to talk about it," Hokura stated. "We're going to talk about you two."

"I have something of interest to tell you later," Amara said, ducking her head and whispering lightly to Hokura. "I snuck out of here the first night."

The first child was stunned but nodded and then looked at Adam. "I take it you knew about this."

Adam nodded. "It's something we can talk about later."

Hokura took another bite. "Fine, I guess we'll have the whole day since I doubt there's going to be more training done under the watch of Doctor Allen and the professor."

She wanted to press about the two and why they were sitting so close together suddenly, why it seemed as if they were suddenly closer. Was this what love looked like? Or were they merely closer because they thought they had lost her. She was too hungry at the moment to try and drag it out of them. She would let it slide for the moment. Maybe she would get it out of Amara when they got a chance to simply speak.

"There's no reason why we can't make our way down to the training facility later to see if or when it'll resume," Adam said. "Either way, we can do some light training together since Amara and I really haven't done much of that in the past two days."

Hokura smiled. "I'd like that."



The professor was sitting in the governor's office. It was in one of the compound's deep government corners and had been decorated with salvaged flags from the old world. Governor Larson sat behind his large desk as Dorian sat across from him.

"She has awakened. I have further proof that the enhancements are working.

It appears that Hokura's cells are now regenerating on their own. I'll be testing the other two in the next few days to see if further injections are still needed. It seems there had been an underlying issue that hadn't been caught after the blast. She had amnesia and couldn't recall what had happened until she woke up," Dorian proclaimed.

"I remember," Larson said, leaning forward on his desk.

"She was able to recall the event perfectly after I stopped the injections, and her body fought them off. She said it had been the rebel commander who had saved her."

"Dammit, if the rebels are trying to contact them, this could mess everything up that we've been working towards. If a rebel were to tell them what's going on..." Larson said gruffly, scratching his chin.

"We must tread carefully here," the professor replied calmly.

"Indeed, we don't need the peacekeepers questioning us. Even more so, we cannot allow them to ever be in civilian or rebel hands. Could you imagine what would happen to the compound! Dorian, I need to know that they will trust you completely," Larson said in earnest.

"I'm working on it." The professor sighed. "The first child trusts me completely; she's awakened more than the others, so it's nearly time to step ahead into phase two. Besides, the other two put their full faith in her, so there shouldn't be any issues."

"Phase two already?" the governor asked, raising his eyebrows. "She hasn't even reached her twenty-fifth year."

"No, Governor, she hasn't, but with the improvements with the night and day watch continuing as they are, it won't be much longer until you no longer need the three children; you'll have a small army of genetically enhanced street soldiers."

"You already said yourself that the peacekeepers are leaps and bounds stronger!" The governor raised his voice.

"Yes, I did, and as we have already discussed, there are only three of them, three ultimate mortals that can be the beginning of a new era of the perfect being."

"What of those of the compound? Without injecting them directly, do you think their enhancements will be as prominent?"

The professor smiled wickedly. "I can see it myself through simple observation that they've slowed in aging, that the scientists are becoming more insightful with breaking more grounds on the project. In fact, I just learned today that we're hours away from being able to launch our new combat simulator."

"The combat simulator? I thought that was still at least a month away. That is amazing that it is ahead of schedule...and for phase two." The governor cleared his throat. "Is it the third child that you're thinking will cohabit with her?"

"No," the professor said, "it will be myself; the pieces are already in place."

Larson sat silently for a moment; the professor had lived up to everything that he had promised so far. He didn't really give a damn about what he was going to try and do to convince the first child of such a relationship. "Is this really the time to even think about starting phase two?"

"As I said, Governor," the professor said, standing, "the pieces are already in place. You need not worry about that part of the project." He went to the door. "The peacekeepers will be back on duty tonight. That's all you need to concern yourself with for now." With that, he left the room and made his way down to the training facility.



It was nearly afternoon as Dorian entered the training facility. Between refreshing himself this morning and meeting with Larson, he had expected to have already been done with Annette. The professor knew that he would still have to meet with his assistant sometime this afternoon and go over the briefing reports with Talon. He figured he would take a quick lunch in his office before his assistant showed up. Dorian knew he was going to be in for a long day and scowled as he lifted his glasses to rub his eyes. He could hear voices coming down the hallway. They sounded too cheerful to be either of the watches, which only meant one thing. His grin was quickly replaced with his stern posterior.

"Good afternoon, my children," he said, nodding at Hokura, Adam, and Amara, who had stopped in front of them.

They greeted him in unison. As usual, he looked towards Hokura, who stood just as she had a month ago before everything had happened. He wanted to reach out to her at that moment and tell her that he was happy to see her going about her usual ways, to tell her he was relieved that she was back with them, back with him. Instead, he cleared his throat. "We'll resume with our training again as of tomorrow. I will be back to monitoring Hokura and Amara, Adam. You will be seeing Doctor Allen again."

They nodded at him; Adam then spoke up. "Will we be on duty tonight then, sir? Hokura as well?"

The professor nodded. "Yes, there will be duty tonight. Hokura's vitals and stats checked out just fine, so she will also be joining you." He looked over them at the training facility in hopes Annette would be there. "I'm merely checking on our new equipment and how it's been recording. I take you three are most likely on your way to lunch now, so I won't keep you."

"Yes, sir, we will see you at the briefing," Amara added, and the professor nodded.

He glanced at the first child. He had almost wished he could see a longing in her. She was doing exactly as she was told. She was putting a good face forward with her friends, which made him proud.

He continued down to where Annette was stationed. He needed this device. He could see her working at her desk in the back of the running room. She was typing something into her computer and didn't take any notice of him as he approached.

"Do you have the device?" he asked, startling her.

She gasped, turning around. "Professor," she answered. "Yes, I have it." She opened a drawer to the desk and grabbed a silver bracelet.

"This doesn't look like much," he stated, taking the bracelet into his hand, and examining it; the band was only about an inch wide, the bracelet itself wasn't thick at all.

"It may not look like much..." Annette countered.



"No, Annette, if this does everything I've asked for, then it's perfect," he smiled, "and to monitor it?"

Annette merely handed him a microchip. "It can be uploaded into anything you wish," she answered.

"Perfect."

He was about to leave when he turned back to her. "I've also gotten word that the combat simulator is going ahead of schedule. I would like you to double-check the status for that as well since we'll be running trials in the next day or so."

"Yes, Professor," Annette answered, gathering her things so she could be onto the next project. She was already exhausted, and the fact that the CS simulator was already up and running told her that his little science experiment with those in the compound was making leaps and bounds.



The professor sat in his briefing office. He had ordered himself a quick lunch and then took it there to look over the night watch reports. The past few nights, there had been nothing. He was relieved that the governor had nothing to truly complain about while the three were dismissed from duty. He had paged his assistant about half an hour ago and expected him at any moment. He looked into the drawer of his desk at the bracelet. Soon, he would know where she was at all times, making phase two so much easier.

Once he figured out a pattern, he would be able to stow her away with him without her being missed. He was already aware that she usually ended up in her room after going out on watch. It was rare that she stayed up with the other two, something he had pleasantly noted. There was a knock at the door, and he gently closed the drawer as his assistant walked into the room.

"Good afternoon, Doctor," he stated, lacing his fingers in front of him, and resting his elbows on the desk. "Please sit down."

"Good afternoon, sir," his assistant answered, sitting down. "I was just

wondering about a few things that hadn't really crossed my mind until now. It's about the three children."

"Naturally," the professor said, leaning back in his chair. He was curious about what the doctor had to ask him.

"Sir, well..." he cleared his throat, "today, when alerting the other two of Hokura's awakening, I had found the third child in the second child's room. It appears that he had stayed the night..." he said rather uncomfortably, knowing it hadn't been his business but at the same time might be important to his questions.

Dorian's eyebrows shot up as he smiled inwardly. "Well, Doctor, they are only human. It's natural for them to have feelings. I'm sure with everything that was happening. They took comfort in having the other one around. If stronger emotions are taking part in it, then it's really nothing that I would be worried about."

Doctor Allen licked his lips and leaned in. "Sir, what about conception? Is that possible with these three? Are they all fertile?"

"There's been no evidence that they're not. The two females have regular cycles like anyone their age. Nothing has ever led me to conclude that Adam is sterile. Don't forget, Doctor, that they possess the same parts as any other individual. They can feel the same emotions. We didn't turn anything off on them to make them less human."

"So, they can breed... are the females on any type of contraceptive?"

"I didn't exactly deem that necessary to have them on a type of hormone that would cause them to not get pregnant, if that's what you're asking, Doctor. In fact, it would be quite fortunate if they were to one day breed and continue with an enhanced bloodline. I would be interested to see what enhancements would be passed down, especially since it seems now that their bodies are regenerating on their own without the need for injections," he told him.

The doctor wanted to feel stunned by his words but wasn't surprised. "You knew this all along. This is what you were hoping for, a race of peacekeepers, superior beings."

The professor disregarded the remark for a second, taking off his glasses and

idly cleaned the faux lenses. "Did you really expect them to simply not age and never experience things like love and sex? They may have a duty, Doctor, but we cannot take away their humanity."

Doctor Allen was shocked. He knew what the true plan was, that the compound was using them all to create an army of enhanced beings, and yet the way the professor put it made it sound like it was totally natural. Like he was offering the peacekeepers a piece of a normal life, that he was allowing them what it felt like to be "human." He wanted to address what he knew about everyone in the compound being affected, about the food being genetically enhanced, that he was a test subject of their own experiments. That's when he remembered Annette's warning never to underestimate him.

"It's something we'll deal with when the time comes, Doctor, but it isn't something that I am overly concerned about right now. I thank you for the information about the second and third child, but at the moment, I cannot jump to conclusions. We'll merely monitor the situation, and if the time comes, we can sit down and talk to Adam about it, but for now, let them be," the professor ordered. "Is there anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Tomorrow, we will continue with their training. I want to see where their abilities are sitting still. With the breakthroughs, we've been making with the cell enhancement project and cell regeneration, I want to observe them over the next few weeks and see how they've improved. I'll need you to take a sample of Adam's cells as well in the next few days so that I may test them. You'll be with Adam over the next while. If you're so inclined, you can always ask him about what you encountered with Amara."

"I'll think about it, sir. I guess we don't want to jump to conclusions." He knew the meeting had ended and wasn't going to press any further. He had gotten some of the answers he had wanted and needed. He excused himself and left the professor to the rest of his paperwork. He couldn't help but mull over the fact that the professor had known that the girls were able to reproduce, that it had most likely been in the professor's plan all along.

As his assistant left, Dorian smiled. Another piece of the puzzle had perfectly

settled into place. If Adam was now interested in Amara, then phase two would be able to proceed quicker with Hokura and himself. That made things all the easier if the other two peacekeepers were now spending more time alone together.



The three children sat in Hokura's living room. She said she needed to shower but wanted to speak to the others right away. She came out wearing sweatpants and a loose black t-shirt as she dried her hair.

"So, what have you two been up to?" she asked, sitting on the floor, cross-legged in front of them as they took up the couch.

"I went out," Amara said, chewing on her lip.

"Yes, so you mentioned, and it obviously wasn't uneventful, or you wouldn't have said anything. What happened?" Hokura asked, rocking back and forth, eyeing up Amara.

"I met him, the rebel that you came across the other night," she continued.

"What happened?" Hokura cried, looking at her friend. She seemed okay. She hadn't appeared to be riled about anything, so there wasn't any sort of fight, she had to know.

"He was asking about you. He said he wanted to talk to you since you seem to want to listen to the rebels..." Amara shook her head for a moment. "He also said there was going to be an uprising, but he said it was going to be by the civilians, not the rebels."

Hokura's jaw dropped, she was speechless... her friend who had just fought with her about meeting with the rebels had the same encounter, and he had been asking for her.

"I don't know what to say, maybe if I had been armed, things would have been different, but every time I look back on what happened, I believe him a little bit more," Amara continued; she was now looking down at the floor, trying to find some educated resolve that would make sense of this.

"You let her out unarmed?" Hokura cried, pointing towards Adam, who flinched back.

"I know it was stupid. But what else was I supposed to do? She was going, either way. At least I knew where she was and stayed in to cover for her. It's not like we have access to weapons without approval!" Adam shot back.

Hokura fell back on the floor and stared at the ceiling for a long moment. He wanted to see her. There was going to be an uprising... did the professor know? She had to find out. She had to keep her people safe, had to keep HIM safe. "I'll talk to him," Hokura replied.

"He's been tracking us..." Amara continued. Adam made an irritated sound beside her.

"Then he'll know where to find us," Hokura said. She brought her hand to her head and rested it there. "What do I tell the professor?"

"Nothing," Adam said sternly. "You say nothing until we know for sure. For all we know this could be a rebel story, a decoy to keep us from something else."

"True," Amara answered him.

Hokura was still on the floor, her mind racing. This was too much to take in. How had things suddenly gotten so complicated when only weeks ago she was merely taking inventory of exported weapons and keeping her eyes open for civilians breaking curfew. Suddenly there was a war brewing. The rebels were exporting the weapons to the civilians for an uprising to overthrow the compound, yet they wanted to talk to the peacekeepers. Why was it that suddenly the enemy wanted to speak to them? What could be gained? Maybe it was merely to warn them?

"Hokura?" Amara called, looking up at her friend.

"For now, I guess we just continue with our duty. Whatever we're briefed on, we go out and do it, but we keep our eyes and ears open at all times. We are not to engage in any combat with the rebels at this time if we can avoid it. We don't need any bloodshed," she answered and found the irony in what she had just said.

Amara pursed her lips. "That's what he said too."

Hokura then sat up. "So other than treasonous acts, what else have you two

been up to?"

Amara and Adam merely laughed. "Really not as much as you'd hope," Adam said, chuckling.



It was an hour before briefing as the professor sat in his briefing room with Talon. The large night watch was commander standing over his desk as the professor looked over the reports.

"What you're telling me that all rebel activity has gone silent as of seventy-two hours ago?" the professor asked.

"That's what we've observed, sir. There's been nothing. I sent double the men out last night just to be sure, and there wasn't so much as a peep in the city," Talon responded.

"That's odd," the professor added, still going over the reports. "Why does it seem like they're suddenly backing off? Have they accomplished what they've set out to do?"

"That's the thing, sir," Talon replied, sighing, "it's been weeks since there's been a civilian crime that has been committed with a weapon. The day watch has reported time and time again that, if anything, the civilians are avoiding them more, but there haven't been any issues where the rebels would be concerned. Even the guards on the wall have stated that everything has gone quiet."

"Have you found any new export?" the professor asked, raising his eyebrows.

"The warehouse that Hokura and Amara cleared was the last shipment of weapons that we have found," Talon stated.

The professor smiled in relief but was puzzled that the activity had slowed. It would mean some peaceful nights for the peacekeepers. Nights where he wouldn't have to worry so heavily over Hokura's well-being when she was out on missions. "Very well, we'll continue with the night watch and the peacekeepers. Just because we haven't observed anything doesn't mean it isn't

happening."

"Indeed, sir, we'll keep on it. It would be wonderful to think that after so many years, things are finally quieting down, but I wouldn't hold my breath over it," Talon stated. He knew it was a far hope but wouldn't complain about quiet nights and fewer reports.

"Some easy nights will be good for the watch as it seems the combat simulator will be up and running its first tests in mere hours from now," they told him.

"I thought we were still at least a month away from that," Talon stated.

"Our scientists have been making leaps and bounds the past few weeks. Annette is just going over the new monitors and sensors as we speak."

Talon beamed. "It's always good to hear that we're advancing."

"Indeed, commander. Well then, I'll let you brief the night watch. The peacekeepers are due to be on their way in an hour's time. I'll see about having them merely observe tonight, but I won't have them out all hours," the professor said and then dismissed the commander of the night watch.



The three walked the grounds as the horns blared. Hokura opened her arms and raised her face to the sky. "It seems like the days are finally getting warmer, and the nights haven't been as chilly lately."

"Who knows if the seasons will ever truly return to normal," Amara said, shrugging as she took a large gulp of fresh air.

"Considering where we're based in the world and the old-world stats, we should be coming up on late spring. Apparently, this season is still unstable in its temperatures. Some nights are still cooler, while days can get very warm. This was also a rainy season; I can't remember the last time we had rain. Then again, from what I recall, this part of the world never got a lot of rain," Adam chided.

"When I looked out towards the wastelands, they looked like a desert, just sand, but that could have been from the war. They said sand and dust kicked up

and covered everything from all of the blasts," Hokura added. "There have to be bodies of water still out there other than the ocean. Wouldn't that be a sight to see?"

"I'm sure there's still plenty of water out there. It's whether or not it's contaminated from radiation," Adam answered, "but to see anything other than these walls would be a sight."

"Well, I'm sorry to be the killjoy, but it's nearly time for us to start getting ready for briefing." Amara sighed.

"I wonder what'll happen tonight," Hokura said more to herself.

Amara walked beside her and placed her hand on her shoulder. "Whatever it is, we'll just have to see and stay on guard."

"We'll see what the professor says," Adam added.



James loaded up his jeep with a canteen and ration pack as he listened to the horns blare in the distance. He wiped the sweat from his face and looked towards the horizon. The city walls were well beyond the dunes. He would have to drive for several miles before he could see them.

"Going out again alone?" Barack asked him as he walked past the line of jeeps, kicking up dust as he went.

"Yes," James replied. "Even if I see nothing, there's always a chance that the one peacekeeper that I spoke to the other night might be out again and have news or will want to talk." He smiled to himself as he stared off. "I can't give up on this, Barack. I've gone too far to stop now."

"You warning them about an uprising in hopes of getting them to side with us might be in vain, sir," Barack replied. "If they alert the professor, what's keeping them from pursuing us? What if they came out beyond their walls and to our tent village?"

James hadn't thought of that. "We can retreat easily enough; we have enough supplies to go back to Samilian City," he answered.



"The city is a wasteland, just like this..." Barack countered.

"But... it's further from here, and we know it's there," James said. "Besides, over the years, you've been the only person to breach those walls. I don't believe the day or night watch alike would know how to track us, besides one good windstorm and this entire desert changes. I'm not worried, my friend, and if I were, then I would be setting us up to retreat instead of going back into Meridiana. If I have any luck tonight, I'll report it, but as I already told the men, the civilians have enough arms and weapons to go to war as is. We no longer need to concern ourselves at the moment about bringing anything else into the city. If they want more, then they can wait."

His friend nodded. "Be safe, commander. I hope you fare with better news tonight."

James nodded as he realized the horns had finally fallen silent in the distance. "I as well."



The three stood in the briefing room, the professor put his papers down the moment they walked in and greeted them as usual, and as usual, they responded in unison.

"I've gotten reports that there has been a supposed halt in rebel activity in the past seventy-two hours. I want you to remember that just because we don't see them doesn't mean they're not out there. You are to merely observe tonight, take the bikes out and check the larger warehouses that we've ignored in the past. If you come back with something report in through the livewire, if not this mission should be completed by one hundred hours, I understand that's an early night, but I see no reason to exhaust ourselves if nothing is happening," the professor instructed. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir!" they answered in unison, and then all turned to leave.

That's when he piped up. "Hokura, if I may have a quick word with you, I promise it won't take more than a moment."

Hokura looked at Amara. She nodded, closing the door.

"Yes, Professor?" Hokura asked, turning her body towards him.

"You're playing this out quite well," he said as he opened his drawer and grabbed something from it. He then walked up to her. "Almost too well...I have something for you."

Hokura stared as he clasped the bracelet onto her wrist.

"It's merely a stats monitor. I thought it would be better if it looked like a basic bracelet instead of a large sensor. I would appreciate it if you would continuously wear it. It's the prototype," he lied, smiling down at her.

"I'd be honored," she said, returning the smile. "Thank you."

He leaned down and kissed her lips softly. "Please be careful tonight."

She hugged him. She needed to feel closer to him but knew their time here and now was limited. She returned his kiss. "I will, Dorian."

Hokura walked out of his office to come face to face with Amara. "You're looking a little flush." She grinned accusingly.

"And you haven't exactly told me what's going on between you and the third child," Hokura countered.

Amara raised her eyebrows and nodded. "If I say the same thing that's happening between you and the professor, will you drop it?"

Hokura blushed even more to the point that she could swear her cheeks were burning. Did Amara know something?

"We're just enjoying being close at the moment," Amara said, turning to walk towards the locker room. "Maybe it'll be more eventually... so what did the professor want?"

Hokura braced herself for the response but had to say something. "New prototype," she said, holding up her wrist.

"Uh-huh." Amara rolled her eyes. "Keeping saying you're not the favorite." She chuckled. "It doesn't matter, c'mon, let's get ready..."



The three met at the garage as the professor guided them in. "As I said, this mission will be observing and checking in. If you find anything, you are to livewire back to me, and I will have the night watch deal with any stored weapons. You may take the bikes and travel together since it's a good exercise to have you three synchronized as a group. It will be a good opportunity for you three to do that tonight and work together as a unit, consider it part of your training."

"Yes, sir," the three added, mounting their bikes.

"So, have you gotten to that scratch yet?" Hokura chuckled, looking over at Amara.

Amara smiled warmly. "Adam helped me touch it up the other night."

"I think it would have looked better if we would have found a decal to put on it." Adam laughed with a wink.

Amara cursed at the third child's joke as Hokura joined in the laughter. Amara smiled. The three of them would be out together tonight. It felt good to have them both by her side. The thought of the rebel commander watching them from the shadows slowly drifted into her mind. He wouldn't dare approach them when they were all together. As long as Hokura wasn't alone, they were all safe. She didn't want to believe him about any kind of uprising. She was thankful for tonight; they would all be safe. They revved the bikes in unison and took off into the night as the professor stood watching.



Once they were gone, the professor made his way into his control room and brought up a separate screen. He watched as a map of the city loaded, the panned-out screen then zoomed in towards a blinking red dot that was making its way up main and then turned right on 3rd. He smiled as he brought up his headset and linked it to his livewire. "Hokura, I would like confirmation on your current status and direction." He waited a moment as it clicked.

"Just turned onto 3rd, sir, heading up to Tore to inspect the industrial block

and then back down West Ave,” she answered.

"Thank you," the professor replied as the readings on her GPS were confirmed to be accurate. He had only wished that he could have somehow linked in a device to be able to hear what was happening, but as Annette had told him, it would interfere with the livewire feed. He wasn't too concerned about that at the moment. He could contact her through livewire when she was on her missions. A smirk came to his face. He would be able to observe her in the compound now as well. He had uploaded the program to a handheld tracker to have access to her whereabouts at all times.



James sighed in heavy relief as he watched the three bikes exit the compound. He had never thought he would be happy to see the peacekeepers on duty. The rebel commander crouched on the old apartment rooftop, observing. They were working in unison tonight; he had hoped that with all of the rebel activity being suspended that once they returned to the force that they would be traveling separately, but that didn't seem to be the case. He used his old binoculars and tried to keep them in view as long as he could. He knew it was Hokura on the blue bike. He could tell by the long brown hair trailing from behind the matching blue helmet.

"She's awake," he whispered but then sat back and relaxed. He wasn't about to confront them when they were all together.

"Dammit," he wondered how long he would have to wait to speak to her. There was a better chance of even talking to her if she was with the other female, but he wasn't sure about the male. It was too much of a risk to do it when they were together like this. He was unarmed and would be no match for them; indeed, he would either be brought in by the night watch or executed.

He shook his head. He couldn't afford to sacrifice himself like that. He had to be careful, and yet he couldn't bring himself to leave the city and head back to the camp just yet. He wanted to observe them, to observe *her*. He moved

quickly. He knew where they were heading, and luckily, he knew that going through the alleyways was much faster.



The bikes stopped in front of a large warehouse. Hokura took off her helmet and shook out her hair. "There's a large loading dock at the side. We can stow the bikes in there while we're close and see if we can find anything. Amara, can you livewire the night watch and get a confirmation on where they are?"

Amara nodded. A few moments later, she took her helmet off. "South and Emanuel, they're looking at a few large garages and sheds to see if there has been anything stowed away."

"Night watch won't be any help if we need them in an emergency. Keep your eyes and ears open and stay alert," Hokura ordered.

The others nodded.

"Do you really think we're going to find anything? Considering the last search and destroy mission was only a few blocks away, do you really think the rebels are stupid enough to continue to hide things in the warehouses?" Adam asked, scratching his head, and fluffing his hair as the sweat made it stick to his head.

James had just made it onto the rooftop across from the warehouse. He strained to hear as he brought his binoculars to his eyes.

"Honestly?" Hokura asked, kicking at the cement at her feet. "I doubt it. I think whatever civilians were importing weapons already have them in their hands, and whatever weapons that have continued to come in are now in their living quarters."

James smiled, smart girl. He stared at her for a moment, at her stance and beauty, he found himself in awe of her. She was a born leader among the other two, the way she stood at command, it enticed him.

"That might be true, but that doesn't mean that there aren't rebels out there right now," Amara reminded. "That commander has been watching us."

"If only you knew how close I was watching you," James whispered. He saw Amara glance upwards and ducked down. Even if she had looked right at him, he had well enough hidden in his dark clothes but wasn't about to test how well the peacekeepers' eyesight was.

"Let them watch," Hokura said, turning as she wheeled the bike towards the loading dock.

"Doesn't it bother you that the enemy might be out there observing us? That we might be telling them everything they want to know in order to win this supposed uprising?" Adam asked in a stern tone.

"Do you think they want to fight us? Why would he say something about a civilian uprising? You said earlier to throw us off track, off from what?" Hokura answered.

"Maybe to turn us against the civilians that we're supposed to protect!" Adam countered.

"Civilians that we never see from rebels who don't attack them," Hokura replied, looking back to him with a sympathetic look.

"You think it's true then?" Amara asked.

James leaned in forward, holding his breath, trying to hear what she would say; he could feel his heart beating in his ears.

Hokura deflated. "I don't know... honestly, I don't know what's true anymore. If the civilians were going to go to war with the compound, would we know it?" She raked her hands through her hair. "What evidence have we seen other than weapons? Nothing! So, where is the proof other than what we've been told? Besides, wouldn't the compound have told us if something was happening?"

"Maybe the compound doesn't know," Amara stated, stepping towards Hokura.

She hugged herself. "I can't think that the people that we're trying to protect would want to harm us. That we would be in such danger, that everyone in there would be in danger." She couldn't bring herself to think about the professor being in danger. She would protect him with everything she was. "We have a duty, and we need to stick to it until there's more proof!"

James groaned. He lay back on the cold concrete of the roof and looked up to the starry sky. Hokura wanted evidence, and yet she was so blinded by what she was taught that she couldn't, wouldn't question her duty... she just told him what he needed, how would he give it to her? The civilians were working with the rebels. It was the civilians that wanted the weapons... the rebels could have easily taken their weapons and started a war, but that wasn't what they had wanted. They already had the freedom that the people of Meridiana had so desperately yearned for. It was the compound that kept the civilians in and kept them from leaving.



The professor stared at the monitor. She had stopped and had been in the same place for quite a few minutes. He wished he knew what they were talking about. He cursed at himself. If only he could somehow hack the livewire, yet in a way monitoring their conversations would be such a breach of trust, and he wasn't going to take away her private moments with the other peacekeepers. Suddenly the night watch livewire came through. He picked up his receiver. "Talon?"

"There's not a soul out there tonight," Talon said over his feed. "Three days of nothing, and yet we feel that this is the calm before the storm."

"Don't start feeding theories," Dorian replied. "Keep the watches on as usual. If there's anything more at hand, we can't give away that we suspect anything."

"Yes, sir," Talon stated.

"And Talon..." the professor continued, "tomorrow, you start hardened training on both watches. No matter what happens, we need to be prepared. I will meet you in the training facility first thing tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," Talon replied as his side of the livewire went silent.

The professor sat back, still watching the red dot. Tomorrow hardened training would start for the peacekeepers and the watch. They were another step closer to what the governor had wanted. With everything looming about, he couldn't help but smile. He had to wait, he had to be patient, but everything was

going exactly to plan.



The night continued; James had heard enough of the conversation after Hokura had stated what she had needed in order to be convinced. He had quietly snuck back out of the compound by scaling down the wall, which the rebels had continuously climbed over. They had been able to make foot holes in the decaying cement, and since the watch was never on the outside of the wall, they were oblivious to it. He needed time to think. He wanted to speak to Barack and possibly plan. Now there was no need for him to be here until he came up with a solution.



"Another warehouse fully secured with nothing but old parts," Adam said, patting dust off his hands.

"I wonder if we were actually expected to find anything," Amara said, kicking at an old gas can.

"Who knows." Hokura sighed, taking a quick drink of water from her canteen, and leaning up against her bike. "We can't complain about quiet nights," she continued, putting on her helmet. "Professor?"

"Yes, Hokura, do you have anything to report?"

"Nothing sir, we fully searched several warehouses tonight and found nothing." She sighed.

"It's nearly time to report back to the compound anyway," he stated. "You three might as well start back this way. Just keep an eye out."

"Yes, sir," Hokura stated and took off her helmet, looking at the others, "we're to head back. No need to report anything in."

The three drove back together. Hokura closed her eyes as she felt the wind



against her body. She silently wondered if the rebels had been there tonight, watching her, listening to what she had said. Her heart skipped slightly at the thought that the commander might be doing so. She hadn't lied, but the thought of there being an uprising scared her. The war had already destroyed this world. What would they have to do for peace? Her heart ached, she was experiencing love, the thought of something happening to those feelings upset her, she wondered if he would be waiting for her when she arrived. She felt her cheeks redden as she thought about kissing him. She wanted to have time to be with him but was worried about brushing off the other two.

Once the three parked their bikes and made their way to the locker rooms in silence, it wasn't until they were in the private walls of the locker room that Amara finally spoke up.

"I think I'm going to turn in early tonight." She yawned as she stretched.

"That's unlike you," Hokura called from the shower as she freshened up.

"I know... but I just want to get a good sleep in tonight and feel refreshed for tomorrow's training. The last few days have been a little trying," Amara said.

Hokura walked up to her, toweling off. "I'm sorry, been having trouble sleeping again?"

Amara couldn't help but grin. "Actually, I think I've resolved my sleeping issues; I've been enjoying getting a good night but could still use some more."

The first child smiled; she didn't have to brush Amara off after all since she was deciding to call it an early night. "Then, don't let me keep you. I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast."

Amara bid Hokura goodnight and quickly left the locker room to see Adam standing at his changing room door a few feet down.

"You didn't tell her?" Adam said.

"I didn't have to," Amara admitted, looking up at him slyly. "You still staying over?"

Adam blushed as he offered her his arm, and they walked down the hallway together.

Hokura changed into her jeans and tank top and brushed her hair in silence. She gently re-adjusted her bracelet and left the locker room only to come face to

face with the professor.

"I saw Amara and Adam already leave," he stated. "Were you to join them?"

"No, sir," Hokura replied, looking up at him with a blank face. She balled her hands into fists, trying to control her urge to run to him.

"Good," he stated. "Then follow me..." He turned and started walking down the hallway. Hokura followed obediently, staying a step behind him, unaware of where he was taking her. It wasn't until they were in the familiar hallway with the supposed defective elevator that her heart started to race. He pushed the button; she stayed perfectly still until he ushered her into the open door. Even once inside, she was still, and his voice continued to be firm.

"I want to show you something. When the elevator stops, just wait silently," he instructed. As it dinged and the doors opened, he peered out both ways before motioning that she was to continue with him. They walked quickly down the hallway until they came to a door that the professor opened with a key. Taking her hand, he led her in.

"These are my living quarters," he said, turning on the main light. As he did so, everything seemed to come to life in color. Hokura was taken aback by the size that seemed to be an entranceway and living room simply. "Hokura," Dorian said, stepping up to her, gently bringing his hand to her back and tracing down her spine, "I want to share these feelings with you and to slowly show you everything. Do you still want that?"

"Yes," Hokura whispered as she stared at him.

He smiled at her. "Good, then let me show you." He kissed her as he lifted her in his arms and brought her to his large plush couch.

He continued kissing her as he cradled her face in his hands and leaned over the top of her. He allowed her arms to encircle him and pull him closer. He ran his hands through her hair as he kissed her neck. She let out a small moan to his satisfaction. "This is important," he coaxed, looking down at her as she trembled, "to experience these feelings. To know what love is, Hokura, to experience it not only in here," he said, pointing to her heart, "but to also experience it physically."

"Yes," she breathed, "I want to feel more, Dorian; I want you to show me

everything."

"And I will," he said, sitting up and staring at her, "but slowly. I've actually been extremely rude, Hokura. I haven't asked about your night or offered you anything. Are you hungry or thirsty?"

Hokura blushed at the thought. How could the professor think himself rude towards her?

"Another thing about love, Hokura, is putting others before yourself, of caring for others' well-being and going out of your way to make sure the other person's needs are met," Dorian continued, getting off the couch and walking to his kitchen.

Hokura sat on the couch exasperated. He brought her a tall clear glass with light brown liquid.

"I remember how much you enjoyed the sweetened iced tea." He had planned this; he had learned what he could about her and made sure that she would be comfortable here. She thanked him.

"How was your night out?" the professor asked, sitting back down beside her.

She merely shrugged. "It was uneventful, just another night of dusty warehouses. At least the weather is starting to warm up." She smiled; she was telling her commander about something he must consider boring.

"I haven't left the compound since the walls went up; I've never seen the city blocks other than maps and images from the day and night watch," the professor mused.

Hokura's eyes widened. "I guess I've only seen it in the dark, but something is freeing about it. The streets are wider than the hallways here in the compound. You feel such a rush when you feel the wind against you while driving the bikes..." Hokura trailed off. "The moon is beautiful when it's full, the air can be so sweet, or it can sting..."

He leaned in, smiling at her. "I must confess though, Hokura, I did bring you here tonight because I don't think I could spend the night without you by my side," he said, running his hand through her hair.

"I had thought about that too," she admitted, "when I awoke this morning,

and you said you had work to do. I had wondered how I would ever sleep again."

He grinned. "Well, you don't have to worry about that tonight." He kissed her again. Her hands ran over his back, ran through his hair, and down his jacket sleeves. He had wanted more of her; he had wanted her that night but knew that he needed her to need him more. He needed to know that she would continue to trust him without any doubt before he proceeded. As much as he wanted her body, he needed her mind.

"Hokura," he moaned, "it's getting late. We can continue this on something other than the couch." He couldn't take it anymore. He wanted to feel her on his bare skin.

He led her to his bedroom, where his large plush bed had already been pulled down. She looked at him nervously. "It's alright," he said. "Can I offer you something to sleep in?" He had seen her naked form before, but this was different. There had been enough reason for her to suddenly shy away from him.

"What do you sleep in?" Hokura asked, suddenly fully aware of her body and its heat.

"Personally," he replied, "I prefer to sleep in my boxers, but if you would prefer, I could wear something else." He had to tread carefully. He didn't want her to feel uncomfortable. He needed to guide her and be as accommodating as possible.

"If you would like, you can freshen up in the washroom and then join me," he offered.

Hokura nodded and walked carefully and quickly into the washroom. Dorian merely smiled as he stripped from his suit and hung it carefully in his closet as he waited for her to emerge from the bathroom. "If you like, I do have a large men's undershirt that you can wear," he called.

Hokura trembled as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. What was happening to her? Suddenly she was so nervous, and yet her body ached for more. She wanted him to touch her, to be close to her. She took a deep breath and undressed.

When she opened the door, she stood and merely stared at him, staring at her. She had never pictured him as he was standing in front of her. His build was

toned and firm. His suits had hidden what he was so well. "Professor," she whispered as she took him in.

He smirked at her. "Yes, my dear, I'm not exactly what meets the eye. Again, the suits are part of the facade that keeps people remembering what I am."

She stood perfectly still, fully aware of her own body, totally unaware where to go from here, trusting him to guide her.

He had known. He raised his hand towards her. "Do you love me, Hokura?"

She had trembled out the answer as she took his hand.

"Do you trust me?"

Again, her answer shakily came, the answer that made him grin even more.

"Tonight, we'll merely be close to one another and enjoy some new sensations." He allowed her to crawl into his bed first. He allowed her to rest herself up against him as he soothed her. When he kissed her, he felt all of her hunger come crashing into him as his own desire fueled the heat between them. He had touched her, teased her, but held back in taking her all the way. She had cried his name as he indulged himself in her essence and enjoyed every moment of it.

They had fallen asleep entangled in one another's arms as Dorian smirked to himself, exhausted but also feeling exhilarated that everything was going as planned. He hadn't a doubt in his mind that she would never think of betraying him when he was all that was on her mind.



Hokura woke up to his arms wrapped around her and the warmth of his body against her back. She sighed, pushing herself closer to him. She didn't want to ever leave this room. She wanted to be fully entangled with him. She wanted nothing more than him, than what he had to show her.

She looked up to see the sun was starting to filter through the long drapes that hung at his window and only wanted a few more minutes when there was a light chime at his side. Dorian shifted lightly as the chiming continued. His one

arm moved as he turned the alarm off behind him and then settled back over her, squeezing her, and bringing her closer to him. He groaned and then brought his lips to her neck, causing her to arch into him as she brought her hand up to his face. A moment later, she was kissing him passionately until the chime went off again. She inwardly cursed it as it continued. His arm once again reached the clock and came around her one last time.

"I hate to do this," he muttered as he brought her closer.

"Then don't," she replied as she kissed him harder.

She heard a husky chuckle as he pulled back. "You're going to be late for breakfast, and your friends are going to be looking for you, Hokura. If they don't find you in your quarters, then there are going to be questions."

Her eyes widened as she looked up and saw the time on the clock. She rushed out of bed and ran to the bathroom, quickly dressing and readying herself. She could hear his laughter as her cheeks burned. She had indeed overslept. She had been so caught up with him the thought of the others waiting for her hadn't even crossed her mind. She burst out of the bathroom to see him standing in front of her with a smile, still undressed. He walked up to her and kissed her roughly. "Remember," he said in a husky tone, "they can't know yet."

"Yes," she panted as she wanted to wrap herself around him again.

"And what would you say to me in the line of duty?" He smirked, kissing her again.

"Yes, Professor," she said once more.

He straightened up and took a step back with a firm look. Again, he had changed from Dorian back to the professor. "You're ready for your day Hokura. I expect to see you in the training facility after breakfast to continue on where we left off the other day."

He smiled at her wickedly. "I expect you to keep up with this front. I'm sure after last night, it won't be easy, but it's of utmost importance for now."

She nodded and put on her shoes, making her way as quickly as she could down the hallway and into the elevator. Luckily, whoever had lived in this part of the compound had already made their way downstairs. Hokura then ran down to the cafeteria. She was out of breath when she finally reached it but couldn't

help but be thankful that Amara and Adam weren't there yet; that in itself didn't make sense to her.

"Amara went to bed early last night. She's always the first one here," she mused, deciding to make her way to Amara's living quarters. Even though it was usual for Adam to be late, Amara was always there.

Hokura knocked on the second child's door. She could hear someone inside rustling around and decided to wait. She made herself comfortable and merely crossed her arms. Amara finally opened the door and peered out as Hokura raised her eyebrows at her best friend. "You're late for breakfast," Hokura said dryly.

"Yeah... I know," Amara said, running her hand through her messy blonde hair, trying to soothe it. "Can you just give me a few minutes?"

Hokura smiled. She wouldn't take the bait. She knew someone else was in the room with her friend. She then shrugged. "If you want, I can go get Adam. He wasn't at breakfast yet either..." She looked up at her friend, who seemed panicked. Hokura turned around to head down the hall.

"That won't be necessary!" Amara cried.

Hokura turned casually and stared at her. She already knew.

"Dammit, Hokura!" She sighed. "Adam's here... and you damn well know that"! Amara then cursed.

"I'll give you two a few minutes to freshen up... I'll meet you downstairs" Hokura winked at Amara.



Hokura sat at the table, sipping cold water. She had wished it were something more, but she didn't want coffee this morning and was never one for milk. Her breakfast was already in front of her as she took small leisurely bites thinking about the night before. Dorian had driven her needs further than she had ever felt, and yet he promised there was still more to come. Thinking about it made her feel restless; she didn't know when they would possibly have another chance

to be together.

She had been lucky last night that Amara had given her the slip with going to bed early but now that she had discovered why she wondered if it would continue. She would have to see him at training. Hokura felt her insides light on fire. How was she going to face him at training today? She imagined him in front of her without his suit and how he looked like a completely different person, and yet he was able to slip back behind his mask of being the professor.

She clenched as yearning warmed her. She didn't want to be here... she wanted to be wherever *he* was. Her thoughts had been broken when she saw Adam and Amara sheepishly make their way towards her. They were walking side by side but weren't making any physical contact; their cheeks were both crimson as they sat down.

Hokura went back to drinking her water and taking a bite of her eggs. She then looked up at her two flushed friends. "Are you two not eating?" she asked.

Adam seemed to swallow inwards as he looked at Amara hesitantly. "I'll grab us something," he muttered.

Amara sat perfectly still as he left. She started to feel annoyed that Hokura was sitting so casually in front of her, acting as if nothing happened. She waited for her friend to say something, but she continued chewing and eating, which made Amara bristle even further. "What do you want me to say?" she cried out.

Hokura looked up. "What do you *want* to say?"

Amara made a sound of annoyance and then looked at her friend. "It's not what you think," she protested.

"I don't think it's anything, Amara. You're the one who's making a big deal out of it. If you want to clear the air, then by all means, but I'm not judging you."

The second child sat back and scowled. "Why are you taking this so well? After everything I said was happening between you and the professor, you're not pointing the finger back at me."

Hokura could hear Dorian's words echoing in her mind. "I already told you that nothing is going on between the professor and myself. You said the same was happening between you and Adam, so why wouldn't I believe you?"

Amara looked like she was about to explode as Adam came back with a tray



and placed it in front of her. "Fine! We find it more comforting when we're together at night. We both sleep better side by side!"

Hokura looked up at them both. "I'm not judging either of you. I know that you've always had an issue with sleeping, Amara, so if Adam being there helps you, then what business is it of mine?"

Adam finally looked up at her. "You mean that?"

Hokura sighed, frustrated. She had hoped that it was more than that. That maybe Amara and Adam were sharing something more, that perhaps she would be able to identify with them, that they would understand what she was going through herself with these new feelings. She felt isolated from them. "If it works for the both of you, then that's fine," she answered rather uncomfortably. "It's not worth discussing any further or having you two feeling embarrassed about it."

Amara grinned as she nudged Adam, who shared the notion as all three began to eat again.



The professor walked into the training facility and approached Talon as he stood watching some of the watches go through combat steps.

"I got a report that the RTC simulator is ready to be tested. We have ten men coming in for this round, but we can have up to twenty people in the simulation at a time," the professor said dryly.

"What's so different between this simulation and our real-time combat drills against one another?" Talon asked, crossing his arms.

The professor pinched the bridge of his nose. He wasn't in the mood to be questioned this morning. "Because commander, it's been proven that the watch fighting their own will hold back no matter what, this simulation puts them up against the enemies. It will be as if they've been dropped into a real-time battle. They need to be sharp and, on their feet, or they'll feel the repercussions."

Talon's eyes widened. "Nothing so drastic to cause actual injury, will it?"

The professor chuckled. "No, they will enter the simulator room, which is a

very large block in the training facility. They will be hooked up to simulator goggles, which will project a life-like world around them. There will also be electrodes hooked to them that will send signals to their brains when they are "hit" by the enemy. They'll feel the pain, but no damage will occur to them physically. The scientists who have been working on this for the past eight months have done an excellent job with the simulations."

"I just had no idea that they were among completion with this yet. I was told that the project would take over a year..." Talon stuttered.

"As I said, Talon, we're making leaps and bounds in the compound lately in our science departments. Those leaps and bounds made it possible for this project to be done ahead of schedule. Now, if you'll please make your way to the northern block, the facilitators will get your men set up. You're even welcome to enter the simulation to see how effective it is."

Talon pursed his lips. Was it possible that this new simulator meant they were going to war? The commander called in his men, and they were dismissed to begin their new training methods.

As they left, Annette entered the room and walked up to the professor. "Did the tracker work to your standards?"

He pulled out his tracking device and watched the red dot as it moved in the second hallway and descended the elevator. "Yes, it indeed did, Annette."

"We're working on a new livewire program, but it'll take some time. Unfortunately, it seems we're getting issues with signal jams in the city, plus there's so much interference here in the compound itself. We're looking into creating a new frequency and channel to run it on," Annette stated, glancing over at the professor who was still watching his tracker.

He looked up at her sternly. "I have full faith that your team will be able to figure something out, Annette. I'm pleased the simulator is up, and I know that most of the team has exhausted themselves getting that up and running as well."

It was then that Doctor Allen popped his head into the room. "Ah, I thought I heard both of you in here."

"Doctor," the professor greeted with a nod, hoping that his assistant hadn't heard anything incriminating. Even if he had, he didn't have a clue about the

peacekeepers' nightly watch and what happened with it, especially when it came to technicalities with things such as the livewire system.

"I was hoping to meet the third child here so we could continue where we left off the other day. I wanted to jump straight into training with him today after I got a sample from him and give him an upped dosage of proteins," Doctor Allen claimed.

"Of course, I would like to see the three of them enter the RTCS once the watch goes through it once. The simulations last anywhere from fifteen to forty-five minutes depending on how many enter," the professor stated.

"The Real-Time Combat Simulator is already up and functioning? Allen asked, shocked.

"Yes, Doctor, the first official run through is being recorded right now. I'm eager to see what the watch thinks of it. It'll be our new grounds for training. There are several levels of difficulty to these simulations, so once a group is able to conquer one of the levels, they will continue to advance."

"That's unreal, Professor," the doctor exclaimed. "So, we'll never have to have them go hand to hand with one another again. We'll never have to deal with watchmen being injured during training!"

"That was the plan, Doctor, along with training them in different combat situations. Just because we've never dealt with any type of full-scale attack doesn't mean our watch shouldn't be trained for one in case it was to happen." The words hung in the air...

The doctor wondered why it seemed that everything was suddenly being increased, from security to the peacekeepers to the training being received. Was there a possibility of some sort of war breaking out? Or was it simply because they now had the technology of creating simulations that the compound wasn't about to let such an idea go to waste and wanted the program designed for the use of training? He wanted to talk to Annette some more but knew that the professor had her working on some personal side projects for him. He had been worried that they involved the first child in some way. He wanted to speak to Hokura as well but knew that wasn't going to be easy since he had been pushed in the direction of Adam.

"The three will be here at any moment. Once they arrive, you can quickly take Adam to the medical facility and then bring him back for the simulation run. If you can also bring me what I will need to get a sample from Amara so I can test her bloodwork as well," the professor stated.

On cue, the three walked in, the professor studied Hokura as he greeted them, and they returned the greeting in unison. The professor smiled; would she break? Would she possibly falter, or would she continue to lie to her friends?

"I have wonderful news that the RTC simulator is now up and running. Talon is taking a few men through it now, but I want to see how you three would do in it. Doctor Allen is going to take Adam to the medical facility quickly and will be back momentarily. I want you two to get some stretches in and do some warmups while we're waiting for his return," the professor commanded. The three bowed their heads and answered back.

Hokura and Amara walked away, making their way to the training facilities gymnasium where they usually stretched and did light drills. The professor scowled slightly as she so casually turned away from him and went on her way.

"We'll be back shortly," Doctor Allen stated, leaving with Adam in tow.

The professor watched Hokura from a distance as she warmed up with Amara. Annette looked over at him but didn't say anything. His hard stare was more than enough to tell her that his concentration was solely on the first child. She didn't dare question him nor interrupt his thoughts.

It was around fifteen minutes later that the doctor returned with Adam, who joined the two. The doctor stood beside Annette silently as the professor continued his watch.

"The watch will be finishing up their simulation in a few moments. I'm going to check the stats and ask them how things went. If there are any flaws in the system, I don't know how keen you are in running the peacekeepers through it," Annette voiced.

"I'm hardly concerned about flaws, but go see to it Annette, when you return, you may brief the peacekeepers and set them up."

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Annette walked into a large control room and read off the status reports of the drill. Talon had gone in with nine other men. They had been placed in the first level. Out of the ten of them, six survived but were injured, three of them were fatally wounded, and only one came out perfectly intact. Annette checked the papers one last time and then pocketed the report and left the room to meet with Talon.

"So," she asked, looking at the men who seemed to have been through one heck of a workout, "how did it go?"

Talon gave her a disgruntled look. "It felt real alright, just ask them. I'm pretty sure I heard every single one of them cry out." He chuckled.

"I'm safe to assume that you're the one who came out unscathed." Annette chuckled.

"That was unreal!" one of the watch soldiers said, coming up to Annette. "I felt like I had been shot in the shoulder." He patted his shoulder as if making sure that the injury wasn't there.

"Did any of you notice any flaws in the system? Any kind of distortion or interference with what you were experiencing?" Annette asked, ready to mark anything down.

"Not at all," Talon said, taking a deep breath.

"I knew I was dead when everything turned black on my goggles," one of them said. "There was a quick pain, and then everything faded."

Annette merely nodded and wrote notes. "That's what the death simulation is supposed to feel like. It's supposed to be quick and not linger."

She looked up at Talon. "Well, it seems like some of you were able to get through this stage. The professor wants this to be the new training method so your men will have plenty of access to this in order to continue on through the levels."

"It's tiring," Talon breathed but knew that was the wrong thing to say when

he looked up at Annette.

"Those were the orders, not only by the professor but the governor as well. He wants everyone in tip-top shape for this."

Talon pursed his lips and nodded.

Annette made her way back to see the professor and others waiting outside the simulator room. She fingered the report and slowly handed him the results of the simulation. "There were no flaws, sir. The watch did mediocre for their first time in the simulation but understand that suddenly being put into realistic combat can be disorientating for anyone. I'm sure in a few weeks' time, they'll be making great progress."

The professor nodded. "Please brief the peacekeepers on this simulation. I would like to watch from the control room and view what happens in the simulation."

Annette merely nodded. He got up and left towards the control room.

"Doctor Allen, if you would be so kind as to start attaching the monitors on the peacekeepers, they're all color coordinated."

The doctor went to the task.

"You will be entered in a real-time combat simulator; it'll feel like you're in real combat with the enemy in the streets of Meridiana. You won't be able to scale any of the buildings, but you must be aware that the enemy can shoot down from the buildings. You need to be on guard at all times. You'll be given replica weapons that are programmed into the computer. Use them as you would the real thing. When you aim, there is a laser sighting that locks in with the enemy. You will either hit them or miss them. You'll know that you were successful because you'll be able to physically see them. These sensors that are being attached to you will let you know when you've been hit or hurt, they will send a shock of pain equal to the blow you are receiving; but not to worry, none of these wounds are at all physical." Annette looked up at the three who were listening intently to her every word. "The simulation ends when either all of you are dead, or the enemy has been wiped out. You will start on the first level just as the watch did before you. Since there are less of you, there will only be nine enemies inputted into the level. However, not all enemies will be shooting at you. There's a

possibility of all attacks from bombs going off to hand-to-hand combat. It will feel very real until the simulation is over. The goggles you are putting on will transport you to the dimensional field that will become your battlefield. You'll know your dead if your screen goes black. The professor, doctor, and I will be watching and monitoring all of you from the control room. We can see everything you think you're seeing. This way, we can work on different combat techniques and continue to upgrade this system. You are not to hold back. Any questions?"

The three shook their heads; they were ready.

Hokura took a deep breath as she entered the large white room and put on her goggles. "You two ready for this?"

"I don't know about ready, but I'm curious," Adam replied.

"Just don't get shot," Amara chimed as the landscape around them started to change.

Hokura heard the gunshots first and ordered the other two to get down as they followed her lead behind a corner. "Shooter on the roof across the street," she called as Adam swung around the side and shot twice to see the shooter fall from the building roof, hit the cement, and then disappear. They continued around the building's side, where there was a sudden blast that sent dust and debris flying upwards towards them. Hokura felt herself falling back as someone came crashing into her. Before the figure could get its hands around Hokura's neck, she brought her hands to the side of their head and snapped her wrists at lightning speed. Her eyes widened in dismay as the perpetrator's head dislodged in her hands, blood dripping onto her shoes. She let out a gasp at her own strength.

Hokura looked back to see Amara wrestling on the ground with another on top of her. Instincts quickly took over as she quickly brought her gun up and shot them in the back.

Amara flung the body off herself and got up. "I was about to lodge my knife in his head, but you were too damn fast! She pouted. "Where's Adam?" Amara yelled, looking around. That's when they heard three gunshots towards the way they had just come.

The two ran back to where they had started to see Adam running towards them at an incredible speed shooting behind him as he went. "There's three of them!" He let out a cry as a simulated bullet skimmed his shoulder.

"Run!" Hokura ordered as she shot past Adam taking down another.

The three rounded the corner as everything around them went silent. "What do you think that means?" Adam asked, rubbing his shoulder.

"Maybe they're regrouping... how many have we taken out?" Hokura asked.

"I've gotten one..." Adam answered.

"You've taken out two, Hokura. I haven't landed one yet," Amara said.

"Six left," Adam answered. Something then bounced in front of them.

"Grenade!" Hokura yelled, diving out of the way. The blast rolled her. She choked on dust as her eyes watered, and her ears rang. Looking up... she thought she saw someone walking towards her. She tried to make sense of what she was seeing. He had looked like the rebel commander who had disarmed her a few nights back. She shook her head to see the simulated enemy coming towards her. He was faceless. She brought her gun up again and got him in the side, enough to take him down but not kill him. He hit the ground, his weapon falling in front of him. Hokura quickly brought up her gun again and let the bullet hit him right between the eyes before his body even hit the ground.

"Amara! Adam!" Hokura cried; she could hear gunfire in the alley beyond her.

"Five left." She coughed to herself as she brought herself up as she ran towards the gunfire.

She again turned to see Amara on top of another enemy, a dead one at her side. She was about to pull her gun out again when Amara slashed their throat, a crimson spray showered her face, and she cursed loudly.

"Bastards, was the blood necessary?" She shoved the body off of her so hard that it hit the far alley wall. She then wiped the red from her face. "That makes two for me," she grunted as she went to kick the enemy's body but missed as it disappeared.

"Three left," Hokura said, "and we're missing Adam again."

"I think they want to see how well we work with being separated." Amara



chuckled as they continued forward.

They saw Adam across the alley and in the street ducked behind a dumpster. He was aiming and shooting vicariously.

"There's a sniper on the roof," he cried. "Stay there!" as another bullet clanged against the bin. Hokura was about to step forward when he told her to stop. "This one is mine," he said, taking another shot. From the cry that came out, she knew Adam had found his mark.

The two ran to the third child. "Two left," Hokura panted. She heard the hastened footsteps of someone running up behind her. She opened fire and dropped the simulation. "Make that one."

"This doesn't seem to have taken long at all," Amara said, lifting her head as if straining to hear if anyone was coming.

"Keep your eyes and ears open. There's one more out there. This one might be programmed to be a little cleverer since we haven't killed him off yet," Hokura said as she continued walking forward. The two followed behind her.

They had walked a block without hearing or seeing anything. Hokura felt a chill down her spine as she remembered Amara's words. They had been watching her. She spun around quickly, took aim at the nearest building rooftop, and fired. The bullet silently sliced through the air as it made its mark home, right between the eyes of the enemy, who had just fired off a shot at the same moment. Hokura felt a shooting pain at the side of her neck where the bullet had just grazed her. The simulation went quiet as the screens went black and then white. Hokura gasped as she brought her hand quickly to her neck and rubbed the spot which had been hit. She looked at her hand in shock not to see blood. For a moment she had forgotten that it hadn't been real.

The three took off their eyewear and exited the room, following Annette's instructions.

"Wow, Hokura, way to kill them off like nothing!" Amara congratulated as she patted her friend's back.

Hokura was still rubbing her neck. "Thanks, but it's amazing how real it feels when you get hit!"

"Yeah..." Amara said. She lifted her tank top up part ways and examined

herself. "I hit the cement pretty damn hard when the second one took me down. No road rash here, though!"

"I can still feel it in my shoulder," Adam added, rubbing his shoulder, and kneading the muscle.

"All three of you did great," Annette said as she walked up to them while reading off a report. "You did much better than the watch did. Eighty percent better, which is honestly not much of a surprise."

The professor stood back and read the report when Annette handed it to him. "All three of you have done well, but that was merely the first level. Your training sessions will continue with using the RTCS, in group training, as well as singular. You need to work together, but you also need to know how to fend for yourself when you are alone."

"You should be proud, though; you cleared the simulation in just under thirty minutes." Annette smiled.

"Nearly half an hour?" Adam asked in surprise. "It really didn't feel like that at all."

Doctor Allen stepped up. "The simulations will never quite feel like the exact time. There is a slight distortion in the program when it comes to time. It seems that every thirty seconds in simulator time is around sixty seconds in real-time."

"Either way, wonderful results. I want you three to continue running the simulator for the day with the other groups. Doctor Allen, you are to monitor Adam. I'll continue with these two." The professor turned to Amara and held up a syringe. "I promised I wouldn't take you back to the medical facility, so if you're comfortable with it, I can get your sample here and now."

Amara merely gulped as she walked up with her arm out. She did admit she felt more relaxed with her friends around her than something formal in the medical facility and at that moment appreciated the professor for trying to ease her nerves.

The doctor nodded at the professor as he proceeded but looked at Hokura, who was still rubbing her neck. "You took a bullet that grazed your skin there. You can be sure that there's no actual damage," he assured.

"It was just a shock," Hokura said. Again her fingers were examining the

spot where the simulated bullet had grazed her. "I wasn't expecting the pain to feel so real."

The professor finished the sample and stared at Hokura, his expression was cold, but he wanted nothing more than to inspect her closer and close his lips around the specific spot on her neck that she was holding her hand to.

"Adam, I would like to bring you in to train with some of the night watches while they're doing their drills in the simulation. We can use you as a tool to help them step things up. You'll be wearing some additional monitors." The professor looked at the third child.

"Yes, sir, of course," Adam replied.

The professor spoke. "Amara, I would like you to accompany Adam in the next simulation. I would like to check on Hokura's vitals to ensure there are no underlying issues that we might have missed and take another sample. I want to be doing check-ins with her daily for the next week." He turned to Hokura. "I would hate to have overlooked anything that might have caused your distress the other day in training. By the time I've finished, the others will be done the simulation with the next group, and you'll be able to continue on with your training. Besides, I need to get Adam's sample to the lab." He continued looking up at Doctor Allen, who just nodded.

Hokura stared at the professor in earnest but merely nodded at him.

"Annette, please brief and ready the next group and have the peacekeepers included. I want a full report on stats. I'm sure the two children will have a higher success ratio, but I'd like to see the numbers so we can make adjustments."

The two merely nodded as the professor turned towards the first child. "This won't take long, Hokura."

She could feel her heart pounding. "Yes, sir."



The two arrived at the medical facility, where they walked into what Hokura had

recognized as the room she had woken up in. The first child walked in and sat obediently on the gurney as the professor seemed to look around the hall before closing the door. He locked it, turned around, and held his stance, staring at her and let it slip away as he sighed.

"Are you alright?" he asked, coming up behind her, brushing her hair away from her neck to examine it.

"Yes, sir," Hokura stuttered as she felt his breath on her neck.

"I can't bear to think about you being in pain," Dorian said, pressing his lips against the spot where she had been stimulatingly shot. His arms wrapped around her from behind as his hands held her tight. Hokura merely moaned as she melted into the sensation.

"This is too much for me." He groaned. "I can't stand knowing that you're going out there every night, that you're not here beside me, safe in the compound."

"Dorian," Hokura gasped, "it's my duty as a peacekeeper to protect and serve. That's why you created us!"

He wanted to tell her to hell with the peacekeepers, but they weren't ready for that just yet. Another reason why he had pushed the RTCS to get finished ahead of schedule, soon there would be no need for the peacekeepers. The night watch would soon be enough for the duty, and the peacekeepers could be put to their next task.

"I don't want to think about that," Dorian said, spinning Hokura around to face him. "Now, let me kiss you the way I've wanted to kiss you since I walked into the training facility," he said, cupping her face. He wasn't sure how much longer he could hold his cold facade around her, not when he yearned for her. It hurt that she was able to act so indifferently towards him and that he had to do the same to her. He wanted to praise her for it, but at the same time, he wanted to see her feelings start to crack. "Hokura," he pleaded as his lips continued down her neck, "I need you to swear to me that you'll be safe out there, that if at any point there is any danger that might come unto you that you get out alive." She was about to protest when his hand cupped the back of her head and pulled her in deeply. He wasn't going to allow her to say anything when he was done. He

merely stared into her eyes. "If you come across any rebels, you will radio in and get back to the compound as fast as possible. You must swear to me that you will always come back safe."

"Professor," Hokura moaned. She wanted so much more. She no longer cared about what was happening with the others. She had simply wanted him. She shook her head, she had felt so confused, thinking about her duty, and suddenly her maker was telling her that it wasn't important, that her safety was now his concern and that her well-being was a priority. His voice brought her back to the present.

"We have a few more minutes before we need to return. We've reached our limit for now..."



James sat in his tent, he knew his comrades would be up mulling around the camp, but he couldn't bring himself to leave the confines of his quarters. He was waiting for Barack. The rebel commander had spent most of the night pacing across the sands of the rebel camps. Nobody had approached him as he cursed at himself. His men had known that he had needed his space; it wasn't until early morning that he had left a note on Barack's tent asking his friend to meet him a few hours after mid-day.

James had tried to sleep but found himself restless as the truth bounced off his mind; the civilians were going to war with the compound. It was a matter of time; the compound was going to use the peacekeepers as their shield... they would end up casualties to something they had no clue about. It wasn't until mid-morning that James had the idea. It rocked through him like a wave and crushed his heart all the same.



Barack's head poked through the canvas door as he raised an eyebrow at his friend, who looked as though he was sleeping at his desk with his head resting on his steepled fingers. "Do I need to come back later?" Barack's gruff voice boomed but faltered.

"I need to get her out of the city, all of them if I can..." James' tired voice cracked. "But her... and if she's gone, they'll follow."

"Yeah, they'll follow, with an army of night watch guards. Are you insane, man?" Barack cried.

"Don't you get it?" James asked, rising from his desk. "If all three peacekeepers are out of the city, that's when the civilians will attack. When the compound no longer holds its strongest! They have insiders telling them what's going on!"

Barack merely crossed his arms. "And how the hell do you suppose we get the peacekeepers, or even just ONE peacekeeper out of the city walls?"

"I don't know that yet." James deflated. He raked his hands through his long hair, breathed in, and then let out an exasperated sigh. "I need to talk to her; she wants proof, and I can give it to her if she will just listen."

"You want to bring her back here, and then what?" Barack asked, stroking his beard.

"I'll show her that we're not the monsters the compound makes us out to be, that we're free people... that there are still free people out there!" James cried. "I'll show her anything that she wants, the world beyond the four walls of Meridiana."

"And you think that'll be enough to convince her?"

James smirked. "If it's not, then by that time, I'll pray her friends are on the way looking for her and that the war in Meridiana will have already started."

Barack merely shook his head. "You're gambling a lot here, my friend." He paused to eye up his commander, his friend, his former best friend's son... "And let me ask you, why is it so important to you that the peacekeepers stay out of this war?"

James stepped back. He hadn't overly thought about why the thought of the peacekeepers agreeing with the rebels and siding with them had been so critical.

Why suddenly had they ceased all their activity inside the walls? Why they were no longer transporting weapons to help the civilians. Ever since that day that he had met her... it was because of her. Could he possibly admit it? What would his people think of him if he sided with the enemy? He wanted to pick the peacekeepers' brains and find out all of the city's dirty little secrets. He wanted to use the compound's resources for the greater good instead of sealing them up and away from the people, but why was he suddenly thinking of this? He then realized it; he hadn't gone to sleep without thinking about the first child since he first laid eyes on her. When he found out she was in a coma, he had felt sick to his stomach with the thought of never seeing her again. Was he stupid?

"I'm..." James started but paused and then licked his lips as he stared at the floor. Why did he suddenly feel flustered? He curled his hands into a fist as the realization washed over him.

Barack only smiled at him and clapped his large hand on his shoulder. "I know, my friend... so the next question is how are we going to do this?"

James looked up at him. "That's why I asked you to meet me..."

"I'll do the best I can," his friend said, stepping towards the desk, which had a map laid upon it.

"Barack, this needs to stay between us for now..."

"Of course." Barack folded his arms. "You're going out again tonight, aren't you?" He didn't need an answer.



Hokura ducked down the alleyway. She had lost the other two when the first grenade had gone off. She was about to call out for Amara when suddenly a body crashed down on her, putting her in a chokehold. "I'm getting really sick of you simulations crashing into me!" she yelled, bringing her hands up to the rebel and taking hold of him. With brute strength, she pried his arms apart, snapping them as she did so. She angrily grabbed hold of him, throwing his body hard into the alley wall. The force alone was enough to kill him, causing him to disappear.

She then dodged left, hoping she could find the others as dust kicked up around her. Gunfire rang behind her as she rolled behind a dumpster and quickly returned fire. She stared to her right to see a night watch guard with his hands over his ears. At that moment, she heard the clang of metal hitting the cement. She moved with lightning speed towards him, grabbed him by the collar, and rolled with him as the grenade sent shrapnel flying towards them as they continued their roll on the hard ground. Hokura was then up again before he could catch his breath, grabbing him and dragging him along. Hokura was wrong in her assessment. He wasn't a night watch guard. He was one of the day watch. It was incredibly rare for a day watch to come upon gunfire and grenades being thrown at them. This guy was a rookie. There was no way he'd survive this simulation on his own. Even with knowing it was a simulation, Hokura felt the need to protect him.

"What are you doing?" he yelled, tearing away from her grip.

"Trying to keep you alive!" Hokura cried as she pinned him up against a back-alley wall. She then reloaded her clip and shot again with amazing precision to see a body fall and then disappear.

"I was doing just fine before you pulled me along," he said again, swatting away from Hokura's grasp and turning away from the wall and was about to walk away.

Hokura's mouth gaped open as a bullet found the middle of his head, and he fell to the ground; his simulation was over. Hokura cursed to herself and opened fire again. Her aim was true and took down the simulated rebel. She then found herself running the other way. She was clueless about where she was going until she heard a familiar voice swearing loudly.

"Having fun?" Hokura smirked as she kneeled beside Amara, who was behind a crate watching the rooftops.

"We've been doing this all damn day, and they keep adding more rebels. All the while they're also adding these day watch bitches who can't seem to keep themselves alive," Amara huffed.

"Well, I see you're still alive. What are you doing squatting here?" Hokura asked, brushing her hair from her face.



"There's a sniper up there that's been taking down the rookies as they've been crossing the street. He's taken down four of them so far. I'm trying to get a view of him and take him out," Amara said, straining her eyes as she stared up at the roof.

"You know we could always just get this over and done with quickly," Hokura said, rolling her eyes.

"Who gets to be the bait?" Amara asked with a smirk.

Hokura let out a small chuckle. "Since you've been sitting here cursing him out, I'll let you put the bullet in him..." she said as she got up.

"Right... don't get shot," Amara said, watching Hokura get up and walk towards the open street.

Hokura stared up at the roof. A sniper could easily crouch down to take the shot without barely even being seen. She took a breath and ran out into the street. She crossed and dodged as a bullet flew at her. She pointed up quickly. "Amara, take the shot!"

She heard Amara's gunfire, but the shot didn't hit home as another bullet flew past Hokura, causing her to spin as it missed her. A third fired as she tucked and rolled. She quickly regained her footing and started back towards Amara.

"Amara!" she yelled at her friend as another bullet missed her.

She could hear Amara cursing as she fired her gun and missed. At this point, he'd take out both of them. Hokura listened as another bullet bit into the ground. She had enough. The first child front rolled onto the hard ground, grabbing her gun, and aimed as she twisted upwards. Her eyes quickly locked on the figure who had finally stood up on the roof. When her bullet took flight, so did Amara's. The figure fell onto the ground and disappeared.

Amara let out a shrill of a celebratory yell as she whooped.

Hokura grinned back at her.

"Teamwork!" Amara cried right before the simulation stopped, and all went dark and then white again.

"So, whose bullet do you think actually did him in?" Amara asked, nudging Hokura.

"Considering you missed so many shots, I think it was mine." Hokura

laughed.

"Oh! Ouch, Hokura, my pride!" Amara chuckled.

"So that was you two that ended the simulation with the final kill?" a familiar voice came from behind them.

"Yeah, after I lost your ass, I was left all alone," Amara joked as Adam came to join them.



The professor stood in the command room with Annette. He glared at the monitor with hard eyes and a clenched mouth. "That was pathetic," he sneered. "You're telling me two day watch guards made it out injured, and that was it!"

"I don't know what to tell you, sir. They're not hardened like the night watch. I'm pretty sure only a very few of them have ever been fired upon," Annette replied, looking at the stats as they printed out.

"That's no excuse. They've been doing the same training that the night watch has," he continued, he took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "This won't do."

"Sir, if it's any consolation, they've been consuming higher dosed foods now. They should come up to speed with the night watch soon enough."

"How long?" Dorian commanded.

"Sir, I can't tell you exactly. Today is only the first day of simulation training. It might be weeks or even months until any of the watches can compare to the efficiency that the peacekeepers are... if that's even possible."

Dorian scowled even harder. "Then you and Doctor Allen have something to look into. I expect results and sooner than months Annette." With that, he left the room. He was upset, again he removed his glasses, this time massaging his eyes with his fingers. Not only was he discouraged and disgusted by the day watch's performance, but that stunt that Hokura pulled in the simulation had him on edge. She was so stupid to pull something like that and make herself bait. Did she do it just because it was a simulation? Would she be so incredibly reckless

out on her duty? His hands had been clenched in such tight fists during those few dragged out minutes that they now ached. Even worse now, he was going to brief the group on their simulation.

The three peacekeepers stood away from the ten-day watch guards sitting on a bench in the middle of the room. He swallowed hard as he noted that Hokura and Amara were smirking at one another. He was sure it had to do with the last shot that ended the simulation. It had been Hokura's bullet that had officially finished it as Amara's went through a very close second.

"Out of the ten-day watch guards who were in the simulation, only two of you made it out. The reports, though, conclude that the two survivors were heavily injured," Dorian said, clearing his throat and then continuing. "The three peacekeepers made it out unscathed." He looked to Hokura. "Out of the ten-day watch, you killed a total of fifteen simulated rebels. The peacekeepers took out thirty-five of them. Hokura, you alone took out fourteen of those thirty-five, Adam took out twelve, Amara took out nine... well done you three." He paused for a moment and held Hokura's gaze. He would have words with her later about her actions. "You three are dismissed for the day since it's an hour before dinner. You can all shower up and relax for a bit before briefing. We can continue tomorrow." Dorian shifted; he didn't care to see any more of the day watch's pathetic excuses for fighting. "As for the day watch, you may continue on with one more trial, which will be overseen by Annette, but as for myself, I am retiring for now." With that, he turned away and started his way out of the simulation briefing room.

"Well, I feel like I've done nothing but roll around in dirt today," Adam said, stretching. "I need a shower."

Amara chuckled. "Yeah, all that simulated dirt."

"I second the shower notion. I feel like I've just done three-night shifts back-to-back," Hokura continued.

"Alright then, say we meet for an earlier dinner then? I know we had a later breakfast, but missing lunch has me starving. Meet in about half an hour to forty-five minutes?" Adam asked.

Hokura nodded, and the three made their way making small talk to their

rooms. Hokura was the last one to hers. She shut the door and started stripping down in her room when there was a knock at her door. She shook her head in annoyance. "It's open, Amara!" she called out and then heard the door open. "You know you don't have to keep coming over here every time you're out of shampoo. You can get your own from the supply stock," Hokura continued. That's when she looked up to see Dorian standing in her bedroom doorway.

"Am I intruding?" he asked pointedly as he crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows.

Hokura blushed. "Not at all. I thought you were done for the day and heading back to your quarters."

"I was going to; I know this is the second time today, but I wanted to see you," he admitted, leaning up against the door frame. He didn't want to be upset with her, but he couldn't help but feel sick to his stomach, thinking that what he saw in the simulations today was a close reality for her. He had been there every time she had been injured on duty, from the early days of simple cuts and bruises to when she had been blown back from the explosion. He had to look away from her for a moment to keep his anger from rising.

"Dorian?" she asked, stepping closer to him.

He grabbed her and held her away from him, he wasn't hurting her, but there was a certain pressure on her arms where his hands grasped her. "How could you be so damn reckless?" he whispered at her, his eyes boring into hers.

"Dorian," she whispered, backing away from him as he still gripped her, "that's what I've been trained to do, to flush out the enemy if that's what my duty calls for me to do."

"Hokura!" he cried, bringing her naked body crashing into his and holding her there. "You can't do that!"

"It's why you created me, Dorian." She struggled to understand.

"No," Dorian said, bringing his lips to hers, "I don't want that anymore. Don't you ever do something so negligent while on the field of duty!" He kissed her, pouring his soul into her as he let her essence flood over him. He gently picked her up and placed her on his bed as he continued. His hands held onto her tightly as he pressed against her. Again, this was too soon, but he was so drawn to her.

He shouldn't be here at all. There was a chance the others would show up. "I don't want you to be a peacekeeper, Hokura. I don't want you out there anymore," he said between kissing her and tasting her neck.

"I don't understand." She gasped.

"Soon..." Dorian continued, "You and I can be together, and we won't have to worry about these secrets any longer. We can live together and be together, and I will show you everything there is to know," he promised. He kissed her one last time; he was still angry, but he then straightened himself into a sitting position. "Hokura," he said in all seriousness. She was still on the bed, wanting more, which is precisely what he needed. He needed her to want more so she would listen to him. "Promise me that you will never do anything as reckless as you did in the simulation today."

She merely nodded at first, then took a long breath. "I promise." Her voice promising such a thing was soothing. He smiled down and kissed her lightly one last time.

"Again, I am keeping you and making you late. I apologize for coming in uninvited."

Hokura sat up and wrapped her arms around him. "You're always welcome, Dorian... anytime."

He smirked to himself, he enjoyed having her in his bed, in spoiling her in his luxuries of his living quarters, but there was something even more enjoyable about being allowed in hers now. He cleared his throat. "I do need to get myself dinner and get to the briefing office tonight," he said, standing. "And you need to quickly shower and meet your friends before they come knocking at your door."

He had inconspicuously left, allowing her enough time to shower quickly.

She wished he was still with her there now, how she wanted him to stay with her. Dinner with the other two now seemed like a chore. She blushed at the thought of having to face him in the briefing room later. She had woken up beside him, and now twice today, she was granted time alone with him.

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"You're sure quiet tonight," Amara said to Hokura as Adam shoveled food into his mouth faster than he could chew.

"Unlike him, I'm trying to actually taste my food," Hokura said, staring at the third child.

Amara waved off her comment with a fork. "You came up ahead of everyone in the simulations today. You must be pretty excited about that."

"I am..." Hokura started, "but at the same time, I remember that they're just simulations. I'm more confident in them because I know they aren't real, that they're pretty much no more than a game."

Adam stopped for a second. "Don't keep that mindset while you're out doing duty. It'll make you reckless. You should treat the simulations like it's the real thing."

"I wonder why suddenly we're even bothered with simulations," Amara piped up as she bit into her food.

Dorian's words echoed through Hokura's head. Was it possible that the peacekeepers weren't going to be needed any longer? What would they do if they were no longer required for such a duty? Dorian said he no longer wanted her to be a peacekeeper, and now it seemed so important to train the day and night watch in armed combat with the simulations.

"Do you think something is happening that we don't know about?" Hokura murmured.

"Like what we were talking about the other night?" Amara answered in a hushed tone. "Do you think they think there's a war that's going to start?"

Adam listened carefully as he chewed.

"Why else would the professor have pushed the simulator? Why are we doing these simulations with the day and night watch? Especially considering the day watch is a bunch of rookies who merely keep civilian peace and never deal with rebel activity?" Hokura continued.

Amara sat chewing on her lips, contemplating.

Finally, Adam broke the tensed silence. "So, there's a possibility that the rebel was telling the truth, and we're going to be under attack?"

"We're not jumping to conclusions," Hokura countered.

"Nobody said we were," Amara sighed, "but what other reason does the compound have for creating this simulator and having us train in it?"

"The same reason we're alive and here today, besides they started work on the simulator months ago," Hokura considered.

The three sat in silence as they ate, chewing more over the words that had been said than their food as they made their own conscious conclusion.

"Any idea what you two want to do after dinner?" Adam finally chimed in.

Hokura leaned back, stretching. "Nothing physical." She groaned.

"I think I might know a certain garden that is in full blossom at the moment." Adam smiled.



Hokura walked behind the other two, she couldn't exactly figure out how, but they seemed closer. They were walking closer together than usual. They seemed more in sync than usual. Hokura even caught Adam glimpsing over at Amara as the two made small talk, which the first child hadn't been paying any attention to at all. In fact, she hadn't been paying attention to anything since they left the cafeteria. Her mind was wandering and wondering if she would spend the night with Dorian again if somehow, he would sneak her back to his room or at least away so they could have a few more private moments together... then again, he had already been with her twice that day. She wished she could be with him now.

"See, it's like the one you painted, Doctor Allen," Amara piped up.

Hokura noticed they were standing in the greenery next in front of a flower that very much looked like an old-world tiger lily. There was something off about the flower itself. It seemed that the petals weren't exactly right and that the leaves didn't quite fit what she had remembered from the books she had studied.

"It's beautiful," Hokura mused but could tell by Adam and Amara's face that she wasn't fooling them at all.

"You're doing it again!" Amara huffed while crossing her arms. She could see that Hokura was about to say something before she raised her hand and cut her off. "You're allowed your own private thoughts; you just seem to be spacing out a lot lately."

Adam nudged against her. "Give her a break. She's probably just tired. We did those simulations for a good portion of the day. Heck, I feel like it'll be an early night tonight for myself when we get back."

He and Amara shared a look that Hokura couldn't quite decipher.

"How about we just go out to the yard and relax a bit," Adam suggested. "The fresh air might perk us up a bit more than standing here in the humidity of the greenery."

"Might help clear my head," Hokura murmured.

"You know you can talk to us, right?" Amara said as they started towards the doors which lead outside to the yard.

Hokura hadn't answered when Amara grabbed hold of her arm. "Hokura!"

"I'm sorry," the first child sighed. "I do have a lot on my mind, maybe I'm overthinking, and that's what is causing this mood that I'm in."

The three walked into the open air. Hokura filled her lungs with the fresh air, flopped on the grass. "It's hard to explain." She sighed, sitting down, and joined her. "It's hard to think about it, either way you spin it, the rebels are the enemies, the civilians are the enemies, the compound is the enemy. It's so hard to think what might still be out there, but it's also exhausting to think about never seeing or doing anything more than being peacekeepers, but then again, what on earth would we possibly do if we weren't."

Adam chuckled. "I try not to think about it, but I've been finding other things to occupy my thoughts and time with."

Amara smiled, and that's when she knew.

"You two are falling in love!" Hokura piped up but then quickly shut her mouth and eyes, wishing she hadn't said anything.

Adam didn't say a word, neither did Amara. They merely looked at one



another, puzzled.

"And how would you know the signs?" Amara asked as she looked away from Adam.

Hokura could feel her throat tighten. She wanted to say something about her and the professor but had promised him that she would keep their secret.

"We've been spending more time together; we've become very close and find comfort in having one another around, but it's different now," Adam said, clearing his throat. "This is different than what we've been taught."

Amara bit her lip, looking up at Hokura. She was lost for words, not only because of her feelings, but how did Hokura know about any of this?

"It's..." Hokura started and then stopped trying to remember what she had been told. What could she reveal? "It's like when your body physically responds to someone's presence, like feeling that your heart is racing, or your palms get sweaty." She stopped for a moment as they both stared at her. "You both want physical contact with one another and enjoy it; you're experiencing love."

Amara stepped up to Hokura and raised an eyebrow. "So, what you're saying right now, where did you learn this from?"

"Amara, just leave it," Adam coaxed, taking her by the hand. "She knows what we're feeling and offered an answer."

"No, " Amara stated and then crossed her arms and looked Hokura dead in the eye. "Did the professor tell you this?"

Hokura felt as if her heart was being squeezed. She would keep her promise to him but hoped that now that the other two were experiencing the same thing that she would soon be able to come clean to them as she hated keeping secrets from the other two. "Doctor Allen had explained it to me back when Amara had been making fun of me being flushed when I spoke to him. What I was experiencing was just a nervous reaction, and that's when he explained the function of love."

Amara backed down and grinning slightly. "Maybe it's true, maybe Adam and I are experiencing love."

Hokura said nothing as the two walked in front of her, holding hands and casually looking at the plants as they slowly made their way to the exit. She

stared at their clasped hands and felt envious, so she held back. Suddenly she felt like none of this was fair. As happy as she was for her two friends, she now felt like an outsider more than ever.



Professor Dorian sat in his office, staring at his screen, watching Hokura's steps through the greenery. He had wondered about those steps, why she had stopped and then slowed her pace. He was silently dreading sending them out tonight. He had wanted to reprimand her for what she had done today during the simulation and suspend her from duty but knew it would cause a rise out of the others and that she likely wouldn't take kindly to the gesture.

It had been ninety-six hours of silence. There had been no activity reported by both the night and day watch. Was this the calm before the storm? He pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. Even if he kept the peacekeepers in, the likelihood of him getting Hokura to himself this early in the evening was doubtful. He would have them stay together and do scouting, either way, they would find nothing. If they were together, then she would be in no danger. He would find comfort in that until he found a reason or way to keep her in the compound.

He played with the idea of merely ending the need for peacekeepers, but the simulation scored for the night watch needed to be higher. He needed more time, as did the watch. The professor merely stared at the blinking red dot as it moved towards the outside grounds of the greenery and found the peace that at least she was safe here.

Dorian quickly typed up the night's scouting mission. He then got the signal that the curfew horns were about to go off and started mentally readying himself for briefing.



"We are now at ninety-six hours of silence," Dorian stated as the three sat in front of him. "We don't necessarily know what to make of this lack of activity, but I want you all to be on guard at all times. There's no telling what the rebels are up to at this point or if they're out there. Tonight, you three will stay grouped together and scout the city. You are to report if anything out of the ordinary catches your eye."

"Wouldn't we cover more ground if we were to split up?" Amara stepped forward, asking.

"No," the professor stated abruptly. "Under no circumstance are any of you to leave your grouping. We don't know what is going on out there or if you're being monitored by the rebels. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," the three answered.

Amara and Adam walked side by side to their bikes as Hokura followed a few feet behind. The professor made a note of this. If he could, he would talk to the first child about this later tonight. Maybe there was something more happening between the two of them than he had first thought. The professor had been slightly concerned as Hokura had seemed sullen at the briefing tonight.

"Remember to radio in if you see anything. Start on the outskirts and work your way in," he commanded as they all assembled on their bikes and nodded. With that, the door opened, and they were off into the night.

Hokura stared at the two as they raced in front of her. She purposely stayed back. The professor came over her livewire. "Hokura, is everything all right?"

She didn't want to answer; she clenched her teeth. "Affirmative, sir."

He didn't want to press, so he simply clicked off the livewire and watched on the screen as she drove along on her bike. He was trying to find the resolve to send her out but had been drawing a blank. He hoped that tonight was another dead night and that they would come back empty-handed.



James had left his camp early to come to the city. He again scoured the city walls and watched as the three left the compound. He held his breath tonight to see if luck or fate were on his side. He sighed in annoyance as they all seemed to be heading in a direction together but wasn't about to give up scouting the peacekeepers. He watched as the blue bike followed the other two. He figured they were doing a city sweep and were going to start on the far sides. He had hoped against the chance that they would eventually split up.



"We'll start off on the far west and make our way east," Amara called. Adam nodded at her, and Hokura only followed as she tried to lose herself in the possible warmth of the night. The air felt a little fresher, as if it were filled with different scents other than just dust. She suddenly needed to away from the other two.

"You two go ahead," Hokura called over her device. "I'll head east, and we'll get this night done faster."

"You heard the professor; we're supposed to stay together in a group," Amara said dryly.

Hokura made a noise as she rolled her eyes and fell back a bit, she rode on for a few more blocks, and once they weren't paying attention, she took a sharp turn and headed the other way.



James couldn't believe his luck as he watched Hokura veer off. He quickly changed his direction and followed after her as he dodged rooftops. This was his

chance, and he had to seize this opportunity as it wasn't likely that he would get it again.

He made sure not to lose sight of her as his emotions ran high. If he couldn't speak to her, then his efforts at holding off his men would be for nothing. He didn't quite understand these feelings that he held for her, but he knew he needed to get through to her in order to protect her.



Hokura came up to the border wall of the city and dismounted her bike. She took off her helmet and left it with the bike. She had wondered if Amara had noticed her absence yet and radioed it in or if she would simply leave it. It wasn't like Hokura not to follow orders, especially when they were given directly from the professor. "I'm sorry, Dorian," she said, touching the cold stone wall and sagged against it.

"Who's Dorian?" a voice asked from the shadows.

Hokura quickly stood up and raised her gun to see James step out of the alleyway. He put his hands up with open palms to show her that he wasn't armed.

"You again," Hokura said, lowering her gun. She wasn't sure why her instinct was to drop it, but at that moment, she had felt safe.

"I'm unarmed. I wanted to talk to you." He chuckled. "Seems like I'm always the one saying I don't mean you any harm," James said, stepping closer. "I spoke to the other one a few nights ago. I'm glad to see you're alright."

"And why would the rebel commander want to speak to a peacekeeper?" Hokura asked, raising her eyebrow.

"You have us all wrong. We're not the real enemy here. In fact, I'm trying to talk to you to warn you," James continued.

"Civilian uprising," Hokura muttered, turning away.

"Why would I make that up? Do you think people want to live in this city? They're sanctioned here by your government. They're here as test subjects and to repopulate. The government keeps them under lock and key in this city." James

stared at her for a moment, taking her in as he did the first time, remembering the curve of her lips, the color of her eyes.

Hokura stepped back. "The government keeps them alive."

James rolled his eyes. "With curfews, with strict laws, with only the information and education that the government feels fit to allow them. There are no media other than city news, the people here don't know anything other than what they're told, and it's a load of lies."

She couldn't help but feel intrigued as her heart skipped a beat. The way he looked at her, the way he was stepping closer to her. "And what have we been told that's a lie?"

The rebel commander took another step closer to her. He was only a foot away from her now, his eyes piercing hers. He needed her to believe him at this moment. This moment was absolutely crucial. "Meridiana isn't the only city left in the world. There are plenty of parts of the world that are still green. Places that have thrived after the war because they didn't have substantial damage. There are still open cities and open governments out there. There are free people out there who thrive," James explained.

"Then why would they do this?" Hokura asked, her voice a mere whisper. He was so close to her now, his hair wildly brushing over his face. He was like no one she had ever seen before.

"My guess is that this is more of a science project to create some kind of superior race," James smirked. "You're evidence enough of that, my dear."

"I was created to protect the city from the rebels," Hokura countered and then stopped as the words left her mouth, created, not born like this.

"Rebels that didn't exist until not that long ago when we began exporting weapons to those enslaved in the city. Sure, we got some rations out of it, but we can grow and come by food on our own" James shrugged. "Sure, there have been some rotten people who have caused some issues, but they have been dealt with since."

"Rebels exporting weapons that would be used against the peacekeepers" Hokura stared hard at him.

"Weapons to liberate and free the people of Meridiana," James countered.

Hokura stepped back, stunned. "Can you show me?"

James was the one who was taken aback by her question but considered it. "Possibly, but taking you out of the city is a huge risk factor. How can I trust you?"

"How can I trust you to keep your word that you'll return me to Meridiana?" Hokura countered, shifting herself. Her heart raced at the thought of possibly leaving.

James stepped up to Hokura. He was inches away from her. He gently brought his hand up and brushed a few stray hairs from her face as he smiled at her. "You, my lady, have my word as a gentleman that I will keep you safe and that I would return you, but what do I have to go off of?" His pulse suddenly felt electric. "I need two days. I will move my base camp to a temporary area. One of my commanders will come with me for back up if that is alright with you. More to drive the jeep, but I'm sure your cell enhanced body could easily destroy a man..." James could no longer help himself as he then brought his hand up to Hokura's chin and gently lifted it as he stared at her. "As I see, those eyes can already cripple one dearly." He smirked.

"Two days," Hokura said, shifting as she stared hard into his eyes. "I will meet you here alone. You have my word that this will stay between us, but I can only be out of the city limits for a few hours. I must be back inside these walls by three hundred hours."

James couldn't believe what was happening, what he was suddenly agreeing to. Everything his father had worked so hard on was suddenly in arms reach. He merely had to grasp her hand. He raised his hand as she took it and shook in agreement. He didn't want to let go.

"I'll let you get back to your scouting, but I can promise you that there's been no new export." James paused, "and I'm not telling you where I've been breaching the walls either or where the jeeps are being stored, so you might as well just call it an early night," the commander said with a bow and walked away from her back into the shadows.

Hokura's heart raced. What on earth had she just agreed to? This was treason. She sank to her knees and looked at her bike in horror as her helmet's livewire

was flashing.

The professor had gotten the call from Amara about ten minutes ago that Hokura had gone off on her own. He had told her and Adam to carry out their scouting for the night. He had watched through her bracelet as she paced back and forth and stood still. He had wondered what on earth she had been doing. He had tried to leash his temper that she had gone against a direct order from him. He had made it to keep her safe, and she had ventured off on her own anyway. He had wanted to wait her out, but after fifteen minutes, he signaled her livewire and let it continue to ring until it went through.

"Did I not give you a direct order that you were to stay together and that under no circumstances were you to leave the group?" Dorian said sternly.

Hokura breathed deeply. She couldn't even be mad at Amara. She couldn't even feel upset about being caught; it had been her own fault. They had been told to stay together in case they were being scouted by the rebels, which is precisely what had happened. Even worse, she had agreed to go with him. "Yes, sir," she breathed airily.

"You are to return to the compound at once and come to my office," Dorian ordered.

"Affirmative." Hokura's voice cracked. She drove back her mind racing with how upset the professor had been with her that she had forgotten about her encounter. She knew she had gone against the order, had even felt bad about it, and yet for a moment, she felt a pang against Amara and Adam. Something she hadn't felt before towards her fellow comrades. That was no reason to do what she did. She couldn't help but feel angry with herself.

She parked in the garage and saw that the other two bikes weren't back yet. She didn't know whether she should shower and change first before being reprimanded. The thought of the professor being angry with her actions hurt. She felt tears prick the back of her eyes. What if this act of betrayal would cost her his love? She had walked to his office in her full peacekeeper suit, struggling to keep herself together as she knocked on the door. The stern "come in" broke her as she trembled and walked into the office.

Dorian sat in his chair behind his desk. The moment he looked up at her, the



anger that had fueled him suddenly diminished. "Hokura," he said, his voice soft as she stood at the door not moving, yet he could see that she was fighting with keeping her composure.

"Something *was* wrong tonight," he said, standing up and moving towards her.

"I disobeyed your direct order, sir." Her voice trembled as she looked down. "I acted on my own. The others didn't know I was gone. Amara ordered me to stay, and I disregarded her as well." She stared up at him wanting to read his expression.

He walked up to her, put his hands on her shoulders, and looked at her. "Why?"

Tears made their way down Hokura's cheeks as she looked away, unable to face him. "I didn't want to be around them. They're falling in love. They get to be open about it. I can't tell them anything. I lied to them about who told me about the emotion. I... for a moment I hated that they could be so free! We're a unit, and I'm the one who is breaking away from them. All these lies and secrets, and yet when I saw them so happy together, I felt so angry."

The professor took her chin in his hand and lifted her face to look at him. "Hokura, it's natural to feel jealousy." He then brought his lips to hers, kissing her deeply, wishing he could take away the pain and confusion until all she could feel was him wrapping his arms around her pulling her closer to him.

"I understand that what you and I are doing and the secrets that we're keeping might be hard on you, and I know that I keep promising you to show you everything... I think maybe the time has come." He sighed, trying to read her gaze. "But being jealous about Amara and Adam is no reason to put yourself in danger. Remember, you three are a unit. You are out there together as a team to keep each other safe."

Hokura had looked away, which had stirred him. "Hokura!" he said sternly, giving her a shake. "Don't ever do that again!" He locked her in a hug. "What would I ever do if I lost you?"

"I'm sorry, Dorian," she said, hugging him back tightly.

"I will tell the others that they are to return to the compound and will meet

them upon their arrival. I will let them know that you have been dismissed for the night and wish that they follow your request to be alone,” the professor said, still holding her. “That will give you enough time to shower and clear your head and meet me back here before they get back, then we’ll be together.”

Hokura merely nodded. She still felt raw from the encounter with the commander, but now a new excitement flowed through her along with relief. She made her way to the showers; the night had been too much for her. She thought about the rebel commander, how he smiled at her, how he cupped her chin and was so close to her... was she really going to go along with him? How could she have been so careless to leave the group? Why had he told her those things? And why would he even do so? What did he care about her or those of the city? Should she tell the professor? Would she go along with him? She still had two days to plan, two days to think.

What the professor had said flashed in her mind. The time had come. What more was there for him to show her? She rinsed her hair and changed before quickly making her way back to where the professor was waiting by the briefing room.



Dorian opened the office door for her. “The two will be here in a few moments. Please make yourself comfortable in here until I return.” He kissed her as he left.

The professor stood in the garage as Amara and Adam entered and parked their bikes. He could recognize instantly that the chemistry between them had indeed changed. It would be something he would have Doctor Allen address with Adam. He nodded as they both approached him.

“Sir, what happened with Hokura?” Amara asked, stepping up to him.

“I have spoken with Hokura. She has asked that you both respect her wishes to be alone tonight, and she will meet you tomorrow morning at the briefing that all three of you will attend tomorrow at ten hundred hours,” the professor said. “She had also told me what had set her off tonight. She had mentioned that the

relationship between the two of you has changed. She wanted to give you both some space, which was honorable but against direct orders. Is that true, Amara and Adam?"

Adam shifted. "She had said that we were falling in love, that Doctor Allen had spoken to her about the emotion and its effects."

Dorian silently congratulated Hokura for keeping their relationship so under wraps that she outright lied to protect their secret but felt a pang of guilt for what it had cost her.

"Amara, do you share in those feelings?" the professor asked, raising his eyebrow at the second child.

"I do, sir," she answered.

Dorian smiled faintly; his plan was coming together perfectly. Indeed, he would have Doctor Allen speak to Adam tomorrow. "Then I wish you both to enjoy its effects." He bid them both goodnight and walked away as his smile brightened.

The professor entered his office and stared at Hokura. "Your friends won't be seeking you out tonight. In fact, I told them that we would be briefing tomorrow morning at ten-hundred hours. Therefore, you are mine for the night." He offered Hokura his hand and silently lead her towards the familiar hallway, up the elevator, and into his brightly lit corridor.

He shut the door to his suite, took her in his arms, and kissed her again. "Hokura, do you want this? I want your full consent."

"Yes," she breathed, "I feel like I've waited for this for so long."

"As have I. I love you," he whispered hoarsely. "I have ever since you awoke, I knew that you were meant to be mine and that one day I would finally have you."

She trembled slightly as her heart raced. Her senses were so aware of him, of how he held her so close to him, how his body was seeming to radiate heat into her own.

"We'll take it slow, but tonight I will take you all the way. I will show you the physical love that I have always wanted to show you but had to wait until the time was right." He kissed her again. "Do you love me, Hokura?"

"Yes." She kissed him. "Yes, Dorian, I do." Her heart was pounding at the thought of what was about to happen. She had only wanted him and couldn't deny how much she was in love with him.

He took her to his bed, undressed her, and continued kissing her until he could no longer hold back. He took her to new heights; he savored every piece of her that he possibly could as she cried his name. It had been music to his ears as he explored her and enjoyed every possible inch, and finally, when it was time, he kissed her one last time. "Hokura, are you sure you want this?"

"Yes," she gasped as need filled her eyes. Her arms wrapped around his body, pleading for more. "Dorian, please. I want to be with you."

"There will be pain, but there will also be pleasure." He smiled, and then he took what was left of her.

Hokura was lost in his essence as his body enveloped hers. He had been so gentle with her as he kissed her watering eyes and moved slowly. He had soothed her lovingly, and when she begged him to continue, she found herself feeling things she never had before, wishing the night would never end.



Amara and Adam had met outside the locker rooms. "Do you really think she got in trouble?" Adam asked, toweling off his wet black hair.

"I doubt she was overly reprimanded, not from the professor. I still don't understand why she wants to be alone," Amara said, allowing her wet hair to drip onto the towel that was around her shoulders.

"I suggest you just leave her be tonight, let her be with her thoughts. You and I can enjoy ourselves and get a good sleep. The past few days have been trying," Adam told her. He took Amara's hand and held it tightly. "Does this seem strange to you?"

Amara looked down at his hand as they walked down the hallway towards the elevator, which would take them to the living quarters. "It's only strange when you ask if it's strange." She stopped and mused for a minute. "In a way, it

feels nice and kind of natural."

They boarded the elevator in silence. Amara leaned and placed her head gently on Adam's shoulder until it dinged.

Adam couldn't help but enjoy himself as they continued down the hall and to Amara's room hand in hand, so this was love.



James arrived back at tent city with a wide grin. There were murmurs among his people as he parked the jeep and strode towards the fires. He didn't care what they had to say about him sneaking back and forth into the city. They no longer needed to export weapons to the civilians and had enough food to last at least three months with how they had rationed it up. If all went as planned, they would be leaving this area soon anyway. He scanned over the groups to find his friend; he couldn't remember the last time he had felt this way.

"Barack!" James called, spotting his friend standing by a fire having a drink. His friend turned to him and offered up his mug.

"I can tell it was a successful night by that dumb look on your face," he laughed. "What has you so worked up?"

"I spoke to her," James said in a hushed tone leading his friend away from the crowd towards his tent.

"Well, spit it out then!" Barack continued as they walked.

"She agreed. She said she would be willing to listen to us. Now I just have to get her out of the city walls. I have two days' time to figure this out, and with that said, I want to move where we're facilitated back about ten miles," James said in a hushed tone.

"Well, my friend, you're going to have to go out and address your people about that," Barack said, scratching at his beard.

Worry suddenly gnawed at him. "Do you think they'll listen?"

Barack smiled. "Do what you always do, what your father always did, give them a choice, allow them to fall back or stay with you. You're their leader, and

you want what is best for them, let them know it.”

James mulled over what Barack had said and looked up at him. “I’ll do that, thank you.”



Hokura opened her eyes and stared at the clock. It was only for three hundred hours. She rolled back over to face Dorian as he wrapped a strong arm around her. She let out a small moan.

"You alright?" He lightly smiled at her.

"A little sore." She blushed slightly, bringing her body closer to his.

"To be expected, the first few times anyways."

Hokura lay in silence, thoroughly enjoying the warmth of his body beside her. His scent as it engulfed her and the new sensations that had washed over her. She wondered what would happen next now that they had taken such a step. She wondered when she'd finally be able to be open about being in love with the professor. When the lies and sneaking around would stop, she decided that right now, he was the only thing that mattered as she shifted closer to him and drifted back to sleep, the man she loved holding her.

The sun had lazily risen into the sky as Hokura stirred gently to see Dorian's eyes watching her. She gave a small smile as he combed her hair back from her forehead.

"Good morning," he said in a husky voice as he edged closer to her.

"Good morning." She sighed happily as her lips met his.

He brought his body over top of hers and enjoyed the sensation between them for a few moments before the alarm started to chime. He brought his hand quickly over to turn it off and went back to giving the first child his full attention bringing his hands over her body.

"Briefing isn't until ten, so we still have some time to enjoy each other this morning," he continued, another reason why he had made the briefing slightly later. He had full intention of re-enacting the night before he had to send Hokura

on her way and adjourn to his own tedious act.



Amara opened her eyes to see that the distance between her and Adam had closed during the night. He was right beside her, now breathing softly. Her thoughts went back to what Hokura had said about love. The professor had told them to enjoy its effects, but she was having trouble with what that had meant. Amara licked her lips slightly as she got closer to Adam and placed her lips upon his causing him to stir.

Adam quickly became aware and shot up, looking at Amara. “What was that?” he asked, lightly brushing his fingers against his lips.

Amara merely sat up next to him. “I wanted to try something,” she said casually, shrugging.

Adam smirked. “How about you try it while I’m awake enough to enjoy it,” he said and then gently brought his lips back to Amara’s. The kiss didn’t last long. It was simple enough that they both enjoyed it.

Amara let out a chuckle that surprised Adam.

“What?” he asked, confused. “Was that strange?”

She laughed again. “It’s only strange when you ask if it’s strange.”

The two both shared a laugh until Amara composed herself. “It seems like we really don’t know what we’re doing at all.”

Adam wiped at his watering eyes. “Do you think we should ask someone?” He let out another chuckle. “Or are we just supposed to figure this out ourselves?”

Amara stopped and stared at him lovingly. “Well, I know that I like being around you more often.” She grabbed his hand. “I know that I really like this,” she continued as she held it, “and that kiss didn’t feel that awkward... maybe you can ask the doctor about this?”

Adam’s eyebrows rose. “Not the professor?”

Amara fell back with a few good laughs. “Could you see the professor

actually having these feelings or acting this way? Now that I think about all the times, I teased Hokura about the professor. He just doesn't seem the type," she said, shaking her head. "Speaking of Hokura, do you think we should grab her before we head down for breakfast?"

Adam shook his head. "If she wants to see us at breakfast, then she'll be there. If not, then we'll all see her at the briefing."

Amara chewed on her cheek, not liking his reply but knew it made sense. She had been unrelenting with Hokura lately with continuously asking if she was okay and that she hadn't been herself. Maybe her friend just needed some time to herself. Amara sighed. "I wonder what this briefing will even be about?"

Adam helped her up. He gave her a look. "I would guarantee that it has something to do with the samples we gave him."



Amara and Adam made their way down to the briefing room. They saw Hokura already standing in front of the door waiting for them. Amara had been discouraged when she didn't show up for breakfast and wanted to find her, but Adam kept her from seeking out the first child. He knew Amara wasn't going to let it go.

"We missed you at breakfast," Amara stated, looking at Hokura, who was about to knock on the door now that they were all present.

The first child merely shrugged. "I wasn't hungry."

"Dammit, Hokura, when are you going to let up?" Amara raised her voice.

The door in front of them opened as the professor stared down at the three of them. "Is there a problem?" he asked, tipping his head.

Amara looked at Hokura and shook her head. "No sir, I apologize for my outburst, I was merely hoping to see Hokura at breakfast this morning, but I respected her wishes."

The first child had been indeed kept busy under his presence this morning. It wasn't until shortly before the said briefing that they had parted ways in the



hallway after he instructed her to wait outside the briefing room door until the other two arrived.

“Come in then, you three,” the professor offered as they entered the room and sat at his desk as he made himself comfortable across from them. He steepled his fingers as he eyed all three of them. Each one different in their own way, each personality unique, each with their own personal strengths and weaknesses, but now each one of them held the same genetic perfection. “As I’m sure you all might have guessed, this briefing has to do with the tests I ran the other day. I was quite impressed by my findings.” The professor adjusted his glasses. “The tests were conclusive that all three of you have reached the point that your cells have genetically evolved thanks to the injections you’ve continuously received. Our trials have been completed as your bodies are now able to create new cells once ones started to weaken.”

Amara looked up at the professor, bewildered. “That means?”

“You will no longer be needing injections.”

Adam puzzled for a moment. “What about Hokura, who was being given the injections frequently after the incident?”

Hokura glanced over at him and looked ahead.

The professor continued on as he straightened and brought his steepled fingers under his chin. “It seems that what had caused Hokura’s body to go into distress was her cells were fighting off the ones that were being injected into her, leaving her vulnerable as the injected cells are now seen as inferior.”

“Doctor Allen has received the report on this and will continue with supplementing you with better nutrients, Adam, but as far as we can both tell from our studies, your cells will continue to enhance themselves over time. You were the last child to awaken, and you have not reached your twenty-five-year mark. We will also continue with your training and conditioning for now. If any of you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them. If not, then Adam, the doctor, was asked to meet with you after this briefing in the training facility” He then looked over at Hokura and Amara. “You two will also be heading to the training facility. Annette wants to try a hardened trial through the simulator. I will be there in a bit to oversee it. Do any of you have any questions?”

The three shook their heads in unison.

The professor stood dismissing them as they filed out into the hallway.

“Ugh, another day in the simulator with a hardened trial?” Amara whined, stretching.

“Can’t say I envy you.” Adam let out a small chuckle. “I’m sure I’ll be in for the next one.”

Amara glanced at Hokura, who was walking silently, and then turned back to Adam. “Are you going to talk to the doctor?”

Adam felt his cheeks redden slightly. “Yeah, I’ll do that.”

Hokura looked up to see Doctor Allen waiting for Adam in the hallway. He wore a concerned look. “Good morning,” he said to the three of them. “I got the report that you three are now off your injections, which is an amazing step forward. Adam, I’ll be taking you quickly, just a few rooms down to give you what you need, and I’ll get you back as soon as possible, so you don’t have to miss too much.”

Adam grimaced. “Take your time, Doctor. I’m okay with missing a few minutes of training.” They both turned and started down the hall. The doctor turned to a room that looked like it was used for minor treatments when the watch was injured during training.



“We will get you on creatine, which will help with muscle mass. We’ll also get you on some protein supplements as well,” Doctor Allen said as he started piling different pill bottles and powders into a bag and marking them off on his chart. “You’ll take these two pills with every meal, and this powder here can be mixed with water after you finish your training. Hopefully, you’ll notice a difference in a few weeks,” the doctor continued and turned to look at Adam. “Do you have any questions?”

Adam cleared his throat and looked up at the doctor. “Actually, Doctor, I do, but it’s not about this... Hokura had mentioned that you had spoken to her about

love, and the professor had made a comment last night that Amara and I were possibly in love and that we should enjoy the process. I have no idea what that means, I don't know what you told Hokura about these feelings, but I don't know at all what I'm doing!"

Doctor Allen sat and took in all the information for a moment. He hadn't spoken to Hokura about these feelings and could only guess who had fed her this information but wondered why she had said it was, in fact, him. He had found it strange that he came upon Adam and Amara sharing their room and going through these motions before Hokura as a few weeks ago Hokura had already been showing such signs of emotional maturity. It was evident that she had gone to the professor about this, but why lie? The doctor took a deep breath. "Adam, as you and Amara are coming into yourselves and maturing, you're going through these emotions and feelings that are usually felt once one hits puberty. Since all three of you slept through the physical changes that came about your body, your feelings, emotions, and hormones are now catching up to you." He stared at the third child, who seemed to be trying to process the information, so he continued. "You'll find that suddenly physical touch feels different, that it means more, you all know how reproduction works..."

"Yes..." Adam said in a strained voice. "I know how all that works. I know where babies come from, Doctor." He ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "What I don't understand are these feelings. Are you saying that these feelings exist to encourage reproduction?"

The doctor couldn't help but chuckle. "I'm sorry, Adam, I shouldn't laugh. Love is a hard emotion to describe because it has so many different levels. You surely feel love for Hokura, but what you feel for Amara is heightened. You want it to be physical, which is fine. I suggest you simply do what feels good and what feels right. You're both new to this and are going through the motions of seeing what you're comfortable with. One day this may lead to more physical acts, and "reproductive" acts as you've said, but it's something that is done out of enjoyment and pleasure, not to simply breed."

Adam sat mulling over this information, it seemed less complicated when it was laid out the way the doctor was explaining, but at the same time, the

thoughts and feelings he had were so much more complicated. He took what the doctor said to heart and would be able to tell Amara.

As Doctor Allen watched Adam, he cleared his throat slightly. “If you don’t mind me asking, what made you come to me instead of the professor?”

Adam looked up sheepishly. “Amara had suggested that I come to you since I was already seeing you this morning. She didn’t think the professor was a man who was greatly well versed when it came to love.”

The doctor merely pursed his lips and made a noise. Well versed enough that he was the one who had spoken to Hokura about this. He also wondered if that was why he had suddenly pushed him to work with Adam in an attempt to have him avoid all contact possible with the first child. “I hope this was helpful. I want all three of you to feel comfortable coming to me with any of your questions,” the doctor reassured him.

Adam thanked him, bundled up his bag full of supplements, and headed back towards where Amara and Hokura were.

The doctor sat for a moment rubbing his forehead. He had figured the professor had wanted this, and why not? He had stated about the peacekeepers eventually forming such bonds, but now there were possibilities of them procreating. His stomach twisted; this is what he had wanted, but the doctor couldn’t help but feel sick in his realization that he had intended for Hokura to be his from the start.



“So, are we not going to talk about it?” Amara asked as the two sat waiting for Annette to fire up the simulator.

Hokura shrugged. “What is there to say? I messed up. I’ve been over-emotional lately, and I felt jealous of you and Adam. I felt like I was suddenly not part of the group.”

Amara looked at Hokura and threw her arms around her friend. “Don’t be stupid!” Amara cried. “We’re a unit. You’re one of us now, just as you’ve always

been!” She pushed Hokura away, holding her at arm’s length. “From now on, just follow the damn orders!”

Hokura couldn’t help but smile at her friend. She always had a way with words.

“Are you two ready?” Annette asked the two peacekeepers. “The professor wants you two to run this simulation. It’s been upped a few levels in difficulty.”

Amara stared at Hokura and grinned. “We can take on anything as long as we’re together.” With that, they entered the simulation room and were transported into the city. Already explosions started going off before they could take a step forward.

“Nothing like being knocked on your ass before giving your mind a second to settle,” Amara cried as Hokura grabbed her, helping her up.

“Remember, this simulation is going to be harder than any of the others,” Hokura called, ducking, and had Amara follow her quickly behind a building.

“How many did Annette say were in here?” Amara asked, crouching down as gunfire rang out in the background.

“Fifteen,” Hokura answered, grabbing her clip.

“We can’t take them all on at once,” Amara muttered, biting her lip.

“No, we can’t, but we can try to take them out one at a time as best we can,” Hokura said, getting up and firing her gun down the street. She saw one rebel go down out of the group of five that were advancing.

Amara took a position at Hokura’s side and fired beside her. Another two went down as they shot when something rolled toward them from behind.

“Roll!” Hokura yelled. They tucked and rolled into the street to come face to face with three men with guns. The explosion kicked up dust, distorting their view of what was among them. Amara was fast enough to disarm one as she kicked his leg, easily snapping, which brought him toppling down, his gun sliding away from him as Amara shot him.

Hokura shot upwards as she came out of her roll, but her bullet only caught the rebel’s shoulder. She cursed at the miss and fired again. This time her bullet found a home. The third rebel had Hokura in his sight. Amara was able to knock him off guard before the bullet would have found Hokura’s forehead. It just

missed her as she swayed quickly to her side.

Suddenly something large crashed into her. The simulation was on top of her with its hands around her neck. Hokura brought the butt of her gun crashing into his skull hard enough that he flew off her as his blood splattered her face. She pulled the trigger, and nothing happened. Her eyes widened. “Are you kidding me?” the first child growled. How was it possible that her simulated gun had jammed? She fought with it as she stared at the rebel on the ground who was bleeding profusely, struggling to get up. “Useless!” she cried as she put the gun back in her holster and ran up to the rebel kicking his head with such a force that it broke free from his neck with a sickening crack and rolled down the alleyway before disappearing.

“I just took another out, but I’m out of bullets!” Amara yelled, running towards her.

“My gun is jammed!” Hokura yelled back as the two started again behind the building.

“Apparently, these upgrades to harder levels were meant to downgrade our weapons.” Amara coughed, trying to catch her breath. “And the dust is worse.”

“We have seven left,” Hokura panted. She was sweating profusely, something she wasn’t used to since her catsuit always kept her regulated. “It feels like Annette turned up the heat in here too.”

“Then let’s make it rain.” Amara smirked.

“Rain what? We have no weapons.” Hokura smirked.

“We have fists,” Amara replied, starting down the back alley.

The two ran and then crouched as they struggled to hear. They had no idea where the rest could be; everything had gone silent. Hokura stared at a piece of re-bar in the simulation, I wonder... she touched it, and to her surprise, she was able to pick it up.

“That’s using your head.” Amara chortled as she scoured for something else. Suddenly bullets rang out above their heads.

“Find something quick. I’m going to go out there!” Hokura cried. She took off in a dead run.

The two rebel guards didn’t know what hit them as she barreled into them

with full speed and force, knocking both of them back. She took the bar to one of their heads, which nearly exploded on impact when she heard Amara beside her stomping. She stopped for a moment, and her gorge just about rose as she looked over. Amara had apparently been unsuccessful in finding a melee weapon and had used her boots instead.

“I gotta give them points for realism and graphics,” Amara stated, taking her boot down one more time over what used to be a rebel’s face.

Another grenade rolled to the middle of the street; this one didn’t explode but let off a noxious gas. “Cover your nose and mouth.” Hokura coughed as the two dispersed. She dropped her weapon.

Hokura crashed hard against a large trash compartment. Her eyes watered as she continued her coughing fit. That’s when a fist landed at her side, knocking her to the ground. She gasped, bringing her fists up as she struggled to breathe. She was able to muster enough force to swing her leg up and connect with the assailant’s face causing them to crash to the ground as well. She crawled over and straddled the rebel before they had a chance to get up as she wrapped her powerful hands around their neck and squeezed the life from their eyes as she broke his neck.

Amara had gone the other way. By luck, she ran headfirst into a rebel knocking them down as she went down with them as well. Amara tried to catch her breath and choked as she coughed violently. “Stupid simulated gas!” she yelled as her fists rained down on the rebel beneath her, turning him to mush. “Stupid simulated rebels!” she screamed even louder. “This is absolute bullshit!” In Amara’s tantrum, she didn’t hear the rebel approach behind her as they grabbed around her neck, trying to put her in a chokehold. Amara came up at the speed of lightning and threw them over, bringing them to the ground. “You simulations really suck at hand-to-hand combat,” Amara screamed as she started kicking the body to a bloody pulp, breaking bones, and shattering internal organs.

Hokura had finally regained herself after a moment to breathe. Her throat felt raw. She had to find Amara and started her way back to where they were separated. She just wanted to be done with this simulation. The heat was

staggering enough without having breathing complications. She saw Amara a block down coming up on the street just as another made a run for the second child.

Amara had just seen Hokura when the rebel had appeared from across the street. Amara rolled her eyes. “Dammit,” she muttered as she met him in the charge and brought her elbow to his face, caving in his skull. He was faster than the last one and was able to bring his fist to her stomach as Amara lurched forward, her temper rising.

Hokura had started running towards them, but Amara was too fast with her hands. As she leaned forward, bringing her hands up to the rebel’s head and twisted them in a fashion that nearly made his head turn 180 degrees.

Hokura sighed in relief as Amara jogged up to her to meet where the grenade had initially gone off.

“Are we done yet?” Amara moaned with a rasp.

Hokura closed her eyes for a quick moment. She opened them, and she saw a rebel running up the road towards them. She quickly looked down to see the piece of re-bar at her feet. With incredible speed, she picked it up and let it sail through the air. It made a sickening sound as it made contact and pierced through the rebel’s eye socket. He fell back, and the simulation went black.

Amara fell to her knees, and Hokura bent over as she continued to cough as they both took off their goggles.

“Well done, the both of you.” The professor beamed when the lights returned to the room, and the two peacekeepers exited. “Annette, get them some water. I saw that the gas caused quite a distraction, which is exactly what we were looking for.”

Amara coughed slightly. “Why would you want that?”

The professor looked down at her. “You never know what kind of situation you might be caught in. Having smoke grenades thrown at you is just another reality someone might face while in the line of duty.”

“That’s fair enough, but did you have to make it so potent?” Hokura wheezed.

The professor’s smile faded. “What was used in the simulation won’t have



any lasting effects. I can assure both of you that it'll wear off in a few minutes."

Annette brought the two peacekeepers water bottles, which they both drank down greedily.

"Did you notice that simulation was more advanced? I want to hear your feedback on it," she stated as she started jotting down notes on her clipboard.

"I guess the situation with the weapons was... unique," Hokura said, clearing her throat. "I know we keep our weapons in good order, but I guess there is a possibility of them jamming up or not having enough rounds."

Annette merely nodded as she continued writing.

"The hand-to-hand combat was more intense. I've never seen a rebel or anyone other than a peacekeeper move as fast as those simulations did," Amara added.

"Being able to pick up things was useful," Hokura said, wiping her mouth.

"Did you see that throw?" Amara cried. "Right through that bastard's eyehole like it was nothing!"

The professor's eyes widened in shock at Amara's words but composed himself quickly. Hokura caught the change of expression and let out a small giggle. "Amara... language," she stated.

The second child sank back and pursed her lips but couldn't help but smile. She saw Adam enter and ran over to him in excitement. "You wouldn't believe the simulation we just went through!"

The professor cleared his throat and stared at Hokura. "Do you think the watch would be able to complete this simulation?"

"Not a chance!" Amara laughed.

Hokura and the professor looked over at her.

"You dropped us in there, and before we were even settled, we were hit with a grenade and sent flying! There's no way the watch would be able to get through that hell!" she continued.

Hokura stepped forward. "She's right, sir. I'm sure you watched the simulation. There were a lot of close calls for both Amara and me. We got lucky on a lot of them."

The professor's stature went gruff. "Luck isn't something you can count on

when it comes to being on a battlefield.”

Hokura looked down. She suddenly felt tired. She had no idea how long the simulation had lasted, but she felt dusty as the sweat still clung to her. “Another thing was the heat; it was unbearable as we were choking and trying to breathe.”

Annette looked up happily. “Noted. I was wondering if you would notice a difference in there.”

“It isn’t something we’re used to when we’re on patrol, considering the suits we wear regulate our temperatures,” Hokura added as she smoothed her hand over her neck, remembering the simulated hands that were wrapped around it.

“I wonder what the watch will say against the heat considering they go out in uniform; their gear doesn’t regulate, so they’re left to the elements,” Annette wondered, still writing.

“There’s still no way the watch will be able to complete that simulation,” Amara chimed in.

The professor only grinned. “Then that’s where we’ll start today, and we will run them through it continuously until they can.”

Annette nodded solemnly; this meant another day of Talon’s men constantly complaining to her about the simulations’ severity. She didn’t understand why suddenly there was such a need to push the watch considering the combat simulator had just become operational.

“Once the watch gets here, run it again with the peacekeepers. I want the three of them to do it once more before lunch,” the professor commanded.



The three left the training facility together after their last round in the simulation. Amara and Adam walked ahead hand in hand.

“Looks like it’s going to be a late lunch.” Amara pouted.

“Don’t complain too much. The professor was impressed with us and let us have the rest of the day off.” Adam smiled, looking at her.

Amara laughed. “Impressed? I must have missed that part as he was yelling

at the night watch about how pathetic they were.”

Hokura had never seen that side of Dorian. He had many harsh words for the men as they came out of the simulation that only the three peacekeepers had survived. He had even yelled at Talon for them being soft.

“I’m glad we tend to stay on his good side.” Amara chuckled as they continued. She looked back at Hokura and raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t you think it’s odd that we’re suddenly doing such hardened training when there hasn’t been any rebel activity for days?” Hokura asked, chewing on her cheek.

Amara and Adam shared a look. All three of them were thinking of the conversation they had in Hokura’s room about the rebel commander. Could it be true?

“So... lunch?” Adam chided, breaking the silence.

“Honestly, you two.” She looked directly at Amara. “I think I’m just going to relax in my room for a bit. I’ve had enough looking at rebels and killing them for one day.” Amara was about to say something when Hokura spoke up. “I promise you I will be at dinner, but right now, I just don’t have the stomach to eat.”

“That’s fair,” Adam said. This way, he’d get a chance to finally speak to Amara about what the doctor had told him. He had wanted to do so since he came this morning but had to wait until their training was done.

Hokura nodded at Adam and felt relieved that Amara seemed to understand too. She had felt a need to simply be back in her own quarters after such a long night. She opened the door and found her way to the couch, recalling the night before. She had shot and fought simulated rebels all morning, and each one of them seemed to wear the commander's face. She rubbed her eyes, contemplating, she had said she would go with him, that she wanted to hear him out, which was true, tomorrow night he would be waiting for her. Would she actually go? How could she possibly breach the walls and make it back without anyone noticing she was gone? There was no way it was even possible after her screw up the night before when she went against orders. Hokura knew Dorian would have her in a group at all times now. There would be no way that she would be alone. She shook her head. Unable to find an answer. Maybe if she slept, the world would

seem clearer, her eyelids drooped and closed as exhaustion took over.

Hokura heard the click of her door as it slowly opened. She mentally prepared to have Amara hovering over her, but when she opened her eyes, she saw him instead.

“Were the simulations too much for today?” Dorian asked, kneeling beside her.

Hokura smiled lightly. “You’re playing a dangerous game being here if you don’t want the others to find out.”

Dorian scoffed for a moment. “The other two are down in the cafeteria. When I didn’t see you with them, I figured you had retired here.” He bent down, cupping the back of her head, and kissed her deeply.

“I figured you were still busy yelling at the night watch,” Hokura breathed airily as he kissed her neck.

He brought his face to hers. “I’m sorry you had to see that. There are reasons for all of this, and everything has to be perfectly in place for everything to move forward. Part of it is that the watch’s need to be up to task with completing hardened simulations.”

“But why...” Before she could question, Hokura had a finger placed on her lips. Dorian’s mouth was on hers as his body rose over and gently on top of her.

He didn’t want her thinking of such things or asking such questions. He didn’t want anything else on her mind other than the way he was making her feel. “Do you trust me,” he whispered into her ear.

“Yes.” Hokura gasped as he moved his hands over her body.

“Then you don’t need to question me.”



Doctor Allen peeked into the room where Annette was sitting with her hand resting on her forehead as the screens around her showed the simulation running time. He watched as night watch men were fired at and took damage.

“Not going well?” he asked, stepping inside.

Annette raised her head and shook it lightly. "I even took it down a few notches, and still they're having a tough time. The last thing I need is the professor back in here, screaming at them and getting into some sort of fistfight with Talon."

"Tension is running that high?" Doctor Allen asked, sitting behind Annette, and gently rubbing her shoulders.

"Something is coming. This isn't typical at all." Annette sighed.

The doctor turned Annette's chair, so she faced him. He held a worried look. "Did the professor tell you that the peacekeepers are no longer taking injections and that their bodies are developing and replacing superior cells of their own?"

Annette's eyes widened.

"Obviously not," the doctor muttered. "Something is going on. Annette, this needs to stay between us." He walked over to the door and locked it. "Adam came to me, asking about love. He and Amara are apparently in a relationship now. He said Hokura had gotten information about it from me, and yet I had never spoken to her of the subject, and suddenly he's passed the third child off to me to oversee. There are too many secrets around here."

Annette nodded. "The way Talon's been pacing around, he might know something about the simulations. He might already know about the food and water supply."

"I need to talk to him, Annette!" the doctor urged. "I need to get him away for a few minutes and know that whatever is said is said between us. I hate to think that there's something more to all of this, but things just aren't adding up anymore." He suddenly felt anxious. "I've been his right-hand man for years, but it seems like I'm finding more holes in everything lately."

"I can call Talon in for you right now," Annette said.

The doctor paced. "I need to know that Dorian isn't going to be back. I have no idea where he went off to!"

Annette bit her bottom lip. "He'll be gone for a bit..."

The doctor gave her a questioning look.

She breathed out a heavy sigh. "I believe he's currently pursuing the first child." She put her hand up quickly. "I don't know anything more other than he

asked me to make a prototype tracking bracelet which he gifted to the first child. He checked his GPS tracker rather inconspicuously before he left here ten minutes ago.”

The doctor shook his head, just more questions. “Fine, bring Talon in.”

Moments after Annette left, Talon came into the surveillance room and looked relieved to see the doctor as he looked back at Annette. “I was worried for a second. I thought Dorian was in here ready to rip me a new one.” He shook his head. “I’ve been in there. It isn’t easy at all. It’s a complete warzone, I should know.” He stared at the doctor and licked his lips as he raised his eyebrows. “You want information...”

Doctor Allen folded his arms and cocked his head to the side. “Well, that right there tells me that there *is* information, so tell me, Talon, between us, this goes no further. Why is the training suddenly being pushed?”

Talon chuckled. “His right-hand man, and he hasn’t said a damn thing to you about the project, the test subjects, anything. He only told me a few weeks ago when I asked about the training and how my men were suddenly improving at rates that just weren’t humanly possible.” Talon stopped and looked at Annette. “I know about the genetically modified food. I know why they’re getting stronger. I’ve known about the project since before it took root.” He looked down and scuffed his boot against the floor. “And I know why we’re suddenly training like madmen. There’s going to be an uprising.”

The doctor’s eyes widened as Annette gasped. “He’s preparing for war.”

“It’s not just him, he’s a deviant, but this is bigger than just him. It’s the government, the whole lot of them.” Talon stared at the screen as more of his men were shot down. “Months ago, the compound came to completion with being fully self-sustained for everything we’ll ever need. It was then that Larson planted government moles inside the city, trying to rally the civilians into the idea of an uprising. We were told to start pushing them around, to really start putting fear into people so they’d want to retaliate against us. We started harder punishments for curfew breakers. The moles were able to somehow recruit a rebel from the outside to start exporting weapons. We made it look like a game of cat and mouse. The watch was sent out to look like we were doing our job.

There's a reason why we've never actually captured a rebel. There are reasons why the watch guards on the wall never see them! The governor even paid off the soldiers watching the wall to look the other way when it came to the rebels. Dorian and I always sent the men and peacekeepers to the wrong end of town. We knew exactly where the weapons and their jeeps were being stored. Unfortunately, there were instances of bad rebels retaliating and occurrences, where we needed to keep up the charade. We needed weapons, too, so we blew up a few warehouses while we were at it. In the end, the compound wants a reason to destroy the civilians." Talon then sighed. "The government doesn't want them just leaving the city and possibly bringing others back to loot or raid the compound. They figure it's easier to simply eradicate them."

The doctor couldn't believe what he was hearing. "When is this supposed to all take place?"

Talon looked up at the screen again. "That all depends on them." He pointed. "And the peacekeepers. If anything were to happen to the peacekeepers. We're months away still."

"What about the peacekeepers? What could possibly happen to them? Are you telling me they don't know?" the doctor cried.

"No, they don't know, and everything that was just said needs to stay in this office. It's the governor, the higher-ups, the professor, and I that know." Talon clicked his tongue, staring at the screen as the simulation ended. "I don't want this. It's not right, but I'm just a drill sergeant, and every one of those men in there is innocent just like you two, just as the peacekeepers. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to let these men rest before they go out again tonight."

The doctor and Annette both sagged as Talon left the room. "He didn't say who the mole was..." Doctor Allen muttered.

Annette placed a hand on his shoulder. "He likely doesn't know."

The doctor brought his hand to hers to reassure her. "We still have time, we can think, there's a possibility we can stop this!"

Annette squeezed his shoulder. "Don't," she stated, "don't go up against him. Who you think he is and who he truly is are two different people, Allen. How do you think he persuaded government officials to allow him to run the stem cell

experiments? How do you think he's been allowed to do everything he's wanted this entire time with pretty much nobody opposing him? He's head of the science department for a reason. He's helped create a society of super-beings without anyone knowing. We're proof of that! He's created an army, and we're his soldiers."

"He's a monster," Doctor Allen whispered, "and he has the peacekeepers wrapped around his little finger."



Dorian had left Hokura's suite with a satisfied grin. He knew she would be content for the night with nothing else on her mind but him. He scowled angrily at the idea of going back to view the results of the simulations. It had been an arduous day watching Talon's men fail the missions one after another and sighed in frustration. The compound had enough weapons to wipe out the civilians. Still, Governor Larson was diligent that it needed to look like Meridiana's people were going to wage war against them.

As he walked down the corridor, the professor came across the doctor and smiled at the distraction. "Doctor," he stated, stopping. "How did everything go with Adam today? I got your report, but I haven't had time to look it over yet."

Doctor Allen steadied himself. "We are starting him on the supplements as suggested. He did come to me with some questions about him and Amara."

The professor's eyes widened. "And?"

"Well, it as you had predicted, sir, there is a relationship there, and it seems to be becoming physical. It might be at a slower pace as they're merely enjoying the motions, I guess," the doctor stated.

"I'm glad you cleared this up with him," the professor continued, just another step forward in his plans.

"Sir." The doctor took a moment, bracing himself for his question. "I find it odd that Hokura hasn't come forward yet with the same notions."

The professor stared up at him for a moment. Was he reading into



something? Or was the doctor setting him up to reveal something about the first child that he wasn't ready to discuss with him yet? "Everyone moves at their own pace, Doctor; I appreciate you taking Adam under your wing as you've done. Now, if you'll excuse me, I am to check in on Annette. The watch shifts have changed over for running the simulation, and although I'm not eager to be disappointed by their poor performance, it still needs to be done."

The doctor nodded and continued down the hall. The professor chuckled to himself about how easily he had eluded his right-hand man. There were things about this project that the doctor had been kept in the dark about. He gave the man credit, he was a genius, but it was thanks to the professor's superior knowledge that Doctor Allen had excelled in the field.

It was just a pity that the man didn't share the same morals that the professor had. More than ever, life had become about the survival of the fittest. Mankind had always been weak and stupid, but not anymore. He had been the father of the new superior race, and where others had failed, those in the compound would excel. Years from now, they would have a flourished high society, and it would all be because of him.

The professor came to the viewing room as Talon and Annette stood watching the new trial as men tried eagerly to stay alive. He clenched his teeth as he watched them fail miserably.

"You know that the day watch is less hardened," Talon stated before the professor could say anything.

The professor looked away in disgust, he hated failure more than anything, and this was merely showing him that the soldiers' training wasn't up to his satisfaction. He didn't feel like fighting Talon on this right now, so he changed the subject.

"Talon, if I could have a few moments alone." He then looked over at Annette, who excused herself and left the viewing room. "We're sitting at one hundred twenty hours of silence; I'm almost beginning to wonder if things have stalled."

Talon couldn't help but feel relieved if that were the case. "It might be that the rebels are simply regrouping, sir. They might be off scavenging for more

weapons. Who knows what goes on beyond the walls or where they get their supplies?” Talon stopped for a moment. “Or they’ve gotten cautious.”

“The civilian activity has been at an all-time low as well, which might be to our favor. If they’re truly afraid of the watch, then all the more reason for them to want to push the uprising.” The professor smiled.

Talon looked away; he was part of this science experiment as well, had been for some time now. He had gotten what he wanted but was still against this war that the compound had been pushing. He was thankful that they didn’t have their hands on anything nuclear, or they would just simply eradicate the civilians without a fight. No, that seemed too easy. The compound wanted to be seen as a hero to everyone who lived here. Along with the governor, the professor had wanted to claim the throne as the people’s savior.

“Sir, what would you have of the watch tonight.” Talon hesitated.

“I’m sure your men are all going to be tired after a hard day of training in the simulations. Tonight, I want you merely scouting but have them on guard too. There’s no telling how things might go at the moment. The rebels might be planning something beyond their exporting. There’s always a possible chance that they’ll turn against the idea of bringing the civilians weapons for an uprising and might just start one themselves.” The professor thought, was that possibly the case? He would have to talk to the governor and see if any of his intel had any ideas.



Hokura hurriedly made her way down to the cafeteria. She had fallen asleep after Dorian had left and had ended up oversleeping. She had dreamt of him as she slept and woke up yearning to have him beside her. She felt raw until she looked at the time and raced to splash some water on her face and get to her friends as quickly as possible. She was relieved to find them sitting at their usual place, closer than ever, holding hands above the table. Her heart felt like it was being squeezed.

“Why are you so out of breath?” Amara asked, looking up at the first child.

Hokura blushed. “I ran here.” She chuckled at the notion itself. “I overslept and didn’t want you two thinking that I was avoiding you.”

“You promised you’d be here; we knew you would,” Adam stated. It seemed like it was always that black and white to him. Hokura would say something, and Adam would listen. Her word was written in stone, but lately, it seems like that stone had been crumbling, and it had been her fault.

Hokura loaded up her plate and then sat back down with her friends. “What did you two get up to this afternoon?” she asked, taking a bite of potato salad. To her surprise, it seemed to taste a lot better than it did a week ago.

“More so, just sat around talking.” Amara smiled.

“I spoke to the doctor just as you had about love,” Adam continued.

Hokura’s heart sank, had Adam mentioned to Doctor Allen that she had said she had gone to him? She had been busy lying to protect the professor that she didn’t consider it coming back at her when she had said it had been the doctor that she had spoken to about the emotion. “And?” Hokura was able to choke out.

“He told me to enjoy the motions. He spoke about the eventual possibilities of reproduction if we were comfortable in the act,” Adam continued.

Amara nearly spat out her water that she had just taken a sip of. “Stop making it sound so textbook already!” she said, wiping her mouth. “It’s not like Hokura wants to think about us having sex!”

Adam’s face reddened just as Hokura’s did. “Amara!” they both cried in unison.

“You really need to learn to keep your voice down,” Adam hushed, looking around the cafeteria.

At least Hokura had an idea of what the two had and hadn’t done, again something that she seemed to be lightyears ahead of them with. Her relationship with Dorian had been more physical. She wanted to explain the motions to them but couldn’t help them in any way because she had been sworn to secrecy.

“Either way, Amara and I talked about how we want to proceed with things, that we wanted to take it slow but that we also want to continue with our sleeping arrangements...” Adam continued.

Amara nudged into him and gave him a face. “You make it sound like we made a schedule and some kind of flow chart.”

Hokura chuckled at the thought. Adam was so technical, whereas Amara just did things in the moment. She was sure in his mind that the third child had everything already mapped out. She was curious how Amara would end up going above and beyond his notions when she felt the time was right.

She sat back for a moment and caught a certain air in the cafeteria. It seemed that there were more hushed conversations tonight. People were looking their way and whispering. Hokura shrugged it off since it most likely just had to do with Amara’s outburst.

“I wonder if tonight will be another scouting mission,” Amara chimed. “It seems like we aren’t getting much action lately. There have been no signs of rebels anywhere since my last run in.”

Hokura held her breath. Just because the professor thought they were going onto possibly one hundred twenty hours of silence didn’t mean they weren’t out there. Hokura knew he wouldn’t be out tonight but would be back tomorrow. Her heart felt like it had stopped.

Tomorrow night she was supposed to leave with him, a wave of worry washed over her. There was no way she could. She would simply have to tell him that they would have to figure something else out. She finally spoke up. “With all the training we’ve been doing, I’m fine with some quiet nights.”

“I think that’s something we can all agree on,” Adam stated, chewing as he looked over at Amara, who was seemingly enjoying her meal. He raised an eyebrow at her. “It’s been a while since I’ve heard you complain about the food.”

“They must be doing something different,” she said before taking another mouthful, “or I’m just hungry after training that I don’t care what it tastes like anymore.”

The three made small talk as they finished their meals. Hokura had agreed to meet up later and walk the grounds, she didn’t want the others thinking she was avoiding them, but her mind had been split between thoughts of the rebel commander and the professor.

She walked back to her room in silence. She was hoping that Amara and

Adam saw her absence as more of a gift. She knew if she had been allowed to be with Dorian in the open, she would love to spend as much time as possible with him. He had already snuck into her room that day. She chewed her lip, wondering if she would be with him again tonight. It seemed that he could always find her lately, yet she hadn't a clue where he ever was. She considered the time; he was either dining or in his quarters since it was too early for him to be briefing with Talon.

She couldn't just seek him out, so she went to her room and mulled about what she was going to do. Hokura decided that she hadn't painted for a while, so she cleared an area and sat down in front of a canvas. She had wanted to make something for the professor, but he never expressed anything that he truly enjoyed. The doctor had always spoken about the beauty of nature and different plants, but the professor seemed to be only a man of science. She sat perplexed, so she merely let her hands guide her. The background was done in abstract blue tones as the foreground was littered with Amaryllis and Begonias. She studied the painting; it wasn't entirely done, but the colors reminded her of him. There was a knock at the door, followed by it being opened. Hokura was about to call out but considering she had been wrong lately with who had been visiting her. She kept her mouth shut. It had been Amara and Adam coming to fetch her for their evening walk.

"The sun is staying up later," Hokura commented, looking at the sky, "and the air smells so sweet tonight," she mused.

"I'd love to see the sunset over the horizon for once instead of it dipping below the wall." Amara smiled.

Adam kept walking; the future suddenly seemed so unknown. The only thing he did know was that Amara would be by his side, which brought him some comfort. "What do you suppose would happen if the rebels just stopped breaching the walls?"

Hokura turned for a moment; the term civilian uprising rang in her mind. "We would do what we did months ago before the rebels started breaching the walls. What we've been doing for the past few nights, just scouting."

"If the nights are getting easier, why are we training so much harder?" Adam

continued.

Amara looked up at Hokura, who just sighed. “We’ll always be training, don’t you think? Just preparing for the unknown.”

Again, the words rang through her mind. Hadn’t she just asked Dorian that very question this afternoon? She remembered it, his words as he kissed her so deeply, as he told her not to question him.

The curfew horns blared, breaking her from her thoughts of him. She had wanted to see him, but not to stand in front of him as he acted as the professor. The three bided their time enjoying the outdoors before they made their way towards the changerooms.

“Are you going to be okay tonight?” Amara asked Hokura as the two changed.

She looked at her friend and wondered how long and hard she had tried not to say anything about the previous night. “Just get it off your chest now, Amara,” she muttered.

“I’m just asking. The professor seemed upset and had said you wanted to be alone. I just want to make sure that you’re okay.”

Hokura pursed her lips. “I wasn’t overly reprimanded.”



The three sat in front of the professor. Hokura was finding it hard to meet his eyes tonight as he greeted them.

“It’s been one-hundred and twenty hours since there’s been any noticed activity. With that said again, you are not to take any risks tonight.” He looked hard at Hokura. “This will be a scouting mission. Check warehouses and sheds for anything that might look suspicious. You’ll start in the industrial district and work your way over and back up. We want to be diligent with this and make sure that we aren’t missing anything.”

The three nodded.

The professor turned to Hokura and gave her another hard look. “There are

to be absolutely no insubordinations tonight, do I make myself clear?”

The two children looked at Hokura as she leaned back, taken by his hard words. “Yes, sir,” she whispered.

“Good,” the professor continued. “You are to take the bikes tonight, and all three of you are to radio in once you get to your location.”

“Yes, sir,” the three answered; Hokura’s words faltered.

They made their way to the garage in silence. Amara gave Hokura a worried look. She had never seen the professor call one of them out like that before, especially the first child.

The three mounted and were off, Hokura’s livewire clicked on.

“I hope I made myself clear,” the professor’s voice came through.

“Yes, sir,” she managed. She then heard him chuckle.

“When you come back tonight, I’ll make it up to you for reprimanding you so hard.” Hokura felt a lump in her throat as her heart started to race as she thought about the night before, that morning, and again that afternoon. How on earth was she supposed to concentrate on her missions when he was doing this to her?

“Did you say something?” Amara called back from her bike as she led the way.

Hokura shook her head.

The three disengaged and started their way through the industrial district and individually livewired in.

“Making contact, sir,” Hokura said after Amara and Adam both confirmed themselves.

“Now stay with them tonight. I’m sure you have enough on your mind and won’t be paying much attention with the promises that I have made for you once you get back. Just get through this night and get back to me safe in a few hours.” The professor then clicked off.

Hokura breathed airily. How would she ever be able to think about her duty with him saying such things to her? Her heart fluttered; would she be able to stay with him again tonight? Would he have her in his quarters again? Her body warmed as she thought of him. She would do as he commanded of her, she

wouldn't stray, and she would come back safe to him tonight and be with him. She silently followed the other two, who were already scoping out an abandoned garage.



The professor sighed as he watched his GPS tracking on her. He knew for sure that she was safe tonight, so he could leave the notion of her being in danger at rest for now. Phase two was going perfectly. He merely needed the watch to hurry up and become adequate to give him reason enough to pull the peacekeepers from their duty.

Until then, he could only hope that the next few weeks would be quiet. The uprising would eventually happen. He would keep all three of them behind the lines. The watch would do as they had been trained for, and the peacekeepers would be safely tucked away for their own safety. They would have nothing to do with what was happening between the compound and the civilians. He smiled deviously. Hokura would carry his seed; they would become the faces of the new Meridiana. They would flourish and live forever. He wanted her in every way possible and wanted everything she stood for, power, perfection, the ultimate being who was untouchable by anyone but himself. She belonged to him.

There was a gentle knock at the door. The professor had figured that the governor would make his way down to him eventually tonight.

"You were asking about the silence," Governor Larson had said.

"Yes, five days of nothing seems out of character," the professor replied.

"I spoke to our mole. The rebels seemingly ceased bringing in weapons five nights ago. He wasn't able to make any contact with them as it seems they haven't been breaching the walls these past five nights," Larson continued. "It's been marked that the civilians do have enough weapons to start their uprising at any time, though."

"We need more time," the professor said, clenching his teeth. "The watch is tolerable, but they could be better. There's no doubt we could wipe out the



civilians, but we want fewer casualties on our side.”

The governor shrugged. “What’s a few day or night watch guards? There’s more than enough willing to take their places here in the compound.”

The professor glared at the man. “Do you want this done your way or the right way?”

“I’m hardly concerned, Dorian. We have enough firepower either way to finish the task,” the governor countered.

There had been something bothering him. “This mole whom I have never met who is simply doing this dirty work, he can be trusted?”

The governor smirked. “Trusted or not, Dorian, what are you so worried about? We have enough explosives to level the city if we so choose, and we also have the peacekeepers.”

The professor glared at the man. “As I have already told you, we’re moving forward with the peacekeepers; they won’t be part of this.”

Larson raised an eyebrow. “And how fast is this stage actually moving, Dorian?”

The professor licked his lips, smiling at the governor. “I have the first child, and to my delight, the second and third have matched themselves naturally to one another. It’s already in play, so I suggest governor that you start getting your fellow men to start advancing everything else because, before long, you’ll be without the peacekeepers since they’ll be moving on.”

The governor stepped back. “You’re a mad man to continue this evolution going at this pace. You’re playing God now and then some...”

“I’ve been with her, she trusts me completely, and the others are doing their own thing much to my approval. This is human nature.”

“Human nature that has been pushed by your hand,” Larson countered.

“You’ve got what you wanted, Governor. Your army is growing by the day and getting stronger, not to mention the advances that are happening within the compound. You have a society of super-beings; the three children will be under my watch. Soon there will be a rebirth of a new age as the peacekeepers reproduce.”

The governor grinned. “You keep up your end. I’ll keep up mine.” With that,

he left the room.

The professor flipped open his GPS device and stared at the small blinking light as it moved. It was his lifeline to watching her as she continued moving through the night and through the hallways of the compound. “You haven’t a clue yet, but I promise I will tell you everything soon enough, my love.”



Hokura wiped the sweat from her forehead, her body felt comfortable, but her hair tonight had bothered her to the point of wrapping it in an elastic while she was out. The season was starting to change, and soon enough, the warmer months would be among them. She smiled as the three exited the empty building.

“Another dead end!” Amara cried as she stretched. “Where in the hell are the watch getting their intel from lately? Everything has been dead!”

Adam walked next to her. “Maybe it’s because we’ve already swept the city, and the rebels are tired of losing weapons.”

“Or they’re already in civilians’ houses, and we can’t just walk into them and search them,” Amara spat back.

The words hung in the air between the three of them, uprising.

Hokura felt a lump in the back of her throat. James wanted to prove it to her. He wanted to show her everything. Show her that the rebels weren’t the enemy, and she had wanted to believe him so much, but at the same time, she couldn’t simply leave. Her heart ached at the thought of Dorian being in danger. She would protect him with her life. Even if he was like her, she would keep him safe.

“You coming?” Amara yelled.

Hokura shook her head. “Yeah, sorry.” She then looked at the two. “I promise I am paying attention.”

Adam let out a laugh as he shook his head. “It’s alright. It’s kind of like a night off anyway. I’m pretty sure we’re not going to find anything.”

Hokura instantly felt better. She knew the rebels weren't out there tonight. She knew the commander wasn't watching her. Suddenly a wave of freedom washed over her. She smiled at the two. "So, are you two going to tell me all about what has been happening between the two of you?"

Adam's face went red. Amara blushed but cleared her throat. "I guess it happened when you were in the coma. We just became closer, and things kind of happened."

Adam coughed. "You said you had gone to the doctor about the feeling. Why did you ask him?"

Hokura was taken back again. She had to lie, but she couldn't help but blush. "I thought I was having feelings, but they were feelings of fondness and not feelings of love. I was merely confused."

Adam nodded.

Amara piped up. "Are you talking about the feelings you thought you had for the doctor?"

Hokura nodded. "I had it wrong, but I'm glad you two were able to figure it out and that you're happy together."

Adam and Amara shared a look and grinned at one another. Hokura was envious but remembered what was waiting for her once she returned to the compound.

The night held no surprises as Hokura had figured as much. She breathed a sigh of relief when the professor's voice came over the livewire and told the three of them to come back. He had explicitly told her that he had wanted to brief her in his office.

She showered, making small talk with Amara, and had hoped that she and Adam would go on their own way, wanting to spend more time together. She had held her breath waiting for Amara's answer but couldn't help but feel excitement well up inside of her when Amara asked if she would be okay with her and Adam having some time to themselves. Hokura nodded and assured Amara that she would be fine.



“I was worried that they would want to spend some time with you after your watch,” Dorian said, embracing her in his office.

“No, they have plans for tonight,” she replied, walking into his open arms. She laid her head on his broad chest as she ran his fingers through her hair; she never wanted to leave. She wanted to feel his gentle touch for the rest of her life.

“You know that I didn’t want to reprimand you in front of the others. It was merely for show,” Dorian whispered as he embraced her and held her. “I would never speak to you in such a tone,” he said, kissing her passionately. “I promise you; you are the only one that I want. I love you more than anything.”

Hokura couldn’t help but let her mind slip as she embraced the fact, she was his. She only wanted to make him happy. She would happily die, keeping him safe.

Again, he had led her to his quarters. He had held her, kissed her, undressed her, and took her in ways that would only ensnare her mind and body and ensure that she would be loyal to him for the rest of her days. She had called out his name several times as he took her deeper and drove her desires for him further. She was so deeply embedded in him that she barely heard the chime of his clock the next morning when her eyes lazily opened to realize she was late for breakfast with the others.



It had been another grueling day of hard training in the simulator after lunch. Only the professor had told the peacekeepers to continue for another round after their regular lunch. Hokura was so exhausted as she made her way to her quarters after her training was finally done, again only to find Dorian standing over her as she tried to sleep.

“You might actually need your sleep tonight after I’m done with you.” He smiled menacingly and took her again.

Hokura fell asleep to the sound of him leaving her room, satisfied that she wouldn’t be able to think straight for the rest of the evening.

The day had gone by like a blur. Hokura was barely able to hold a conversation at dinner time as she then retired to her room to try and sleep before she had to go to briefing. She had felt exhausted as dreams of Dorian swam in her head; she had become so completely enveloped in him the past two days that she didn’t snap to attention until briefing.

“Adam, you will be joining the night watch tonight. I want you to help oversee their operation and keep your eyes out for anything they might miss. Hokura and Amara, you two are to scope out an area on the city’s east side. We have reason to believe that rebels are keeping jeeps in this vicinity. If that’s true, then I want you to radio in as soon as you spot any vehicles that don’t match civilian records.”

Hokura’s eyes widened, she was supposed to meet the commander tonight, but she had been so wrapped up in the professor that she had blanked on an entire day. She had been running on autopilot ever since the first night that he had taken her to his quarters. Now it seemed every extra bit of her being had been enveloped around Dorian and the man he was.

“The night watch will be dropping you ladies off at your destination. Once your mission is complete, I will call you in for the night. You will radio back to the watch, and they will return you to the compound,” the professor said as the three nodded, Hokura’s mind barely picked up the briefing.

“Hokura,” he stated after he had dismissed the three, she had turned to him automatically, “can I have a word?”

She nodded and closed the door. She walked up to him and crashed tiredly in his arms, wishing she could merely walk away from being a peacekeeper and spend the night in his arms.

“You seem off tonight,” he stated, holding her.

“Dorian,” she whispered lovingly in his arms, “I’m just so tired. You’ve been the only thing I have on my mind lately, especially today. It almost seems like a

blur. I don't know what's wrong with me. I can't think straight," she had stated.

He held her close. He knew he had pushed her this week especially hard with training but had resolved that today would be the final day and that the peacekeepers would be able to have a break from the simulations. They had exceeded in all their time trials. Even working with the watch, they had gone above and beyond what even he had expected of them. They were indeed in need of rest, and he had realized that.

"You just have to get through tonight, and then training will lessen," he coaxed her. "When you come back tonight, I'll simply hold you and let you be in my arms. I won't make any physical demands of you tomorrow."

Hokura merely nodded. "I love you." She sighed.

He brushed her hair and breathed in her scent as he kissed her. "And I, you."

She left the office to meet Amara in the garage. "Adam just left with his shift; we're just waiting on you." She smiled, cocking her head towards the waiting night watch jeep.

Hokura could only give her a tired look and nodded. She was looking forward to being in Dorian's arms again at the end of the night. "It'll be nice to just be the girls again." She grinned, but she saw that Amara was obviously thinking of Adam. "He'll be fine," she offered, giving Amara a reassuring look. "We've all worked with the watch. I'm sure it'll be good for him, a real confidence boost!" she continued.

With that, Amara finally nodded, and the two were off in the back of the night watch jeep and then dropped off at their location.

Unbeknown to Hokura, James had watched her as she exited the compound and followed the jeep. He had brought whom he had been training to be his right-hand man Anthony, to drive them back to tent city. He had stationed rebel lookouts at the walls so they could radio back any activity that might cause a stir in his plan.

James crouched watching. "Just keep low and follow me. It looks like tonight might be a little more complicated than I had originally thought. It seems like she's with the other female," James said as he spied down on the open canvas jeep.

“This is the spot,” Amara chimed as the two jumped out of the jeep, “and it seems like a strange place.”

Hokura breathed deeply. “It looks like a large garage. They obviously have the means to believe that the rebels are storing jeeps here so they can get around the city.”

“Well, I doubt they drive them through the wall.” Amara chuckled.

“I want you to go around the front. I will check out the back,” Hokura said, looking in the darkened windows. “This is a civilian garage, so who knows exactly what might be waiting for us around the corner, if you see anything or need back up, contact me.”

Amara nodded; she didn’t like the idea of not having Hokura in her range of sight, but this had been an exercise they had done regularly while staking-out buildings.

James had already followed behind her. He had been watching from a rooftop and had scaled down in hopes of being able to talk to Hokura.

“Be careful, boss. You never know what these peacekeepers might do,” Anthony stuttered.

James gave him a severe look. “You’re the driver, don’t worry about me talking to the peacekeepers. You are to stay back at all times, do I make myself clear?” he shot back.

“Sir...” Anthony jittered, “what if something happens?”

James gave him another stern look. “Nothing is going to happen; you will not engage with them, is that clear?”

James had climbed down as Hokura had sent Amara to the other side of the building.

Hokura had heard a clattering and raised her gun only to see the familiar face. She sighed and lowered her weapon, thankful that Amara was on the other side. She walked up to the rebel commander. It had been another hot night. She slowly brought her hand through her long hair wishing that the breeze would cool her again.

James took her in. She was perfection walking towards him. His heart swelled at the idea of finally being able to bring her beyond the wall. To show

her the truth and to free her of everything she had been told.

She walked towards him with a solemn expression. "I can't do this," Hokura said as she heard a rush of footsteps coming towards her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Amara rushing towards them. James had looked towards Anthony, who was standing behind him as he screamed. There was a bright light as everything then went black.

"Noooo!" James had screamed at Anthony, but it had been too late as the grenade had gone off. Luckily, it had been old, and the damage from the explosion it caused was minimum. "Are you fucking dense?" James screamed at the top of his lungs as he looked at the two unconscious peacekeepers and shook his head.

"She was coming for you!" Anthony cried, walking towards the commander.

James merely shook his head in dismay. There were no mortal wounds to them, their suits had been cut from shrapnel, but they were still both intact, simply knocked out. James brought his hands up and raked them through his hair in anger. "Dammit, Anthony! I was only supposed to bring one back! Now there's two of them!" he yelled in frustration and then glared at his accomplice. "It's a damn good thing there's a hole in the wall a few hundred meters from here, or I'd have you do this all yourself! Get the damn jeep over here and get them loaded in!"

Anthony nodded sympathetically. He had known he had screwed up and did as James commanded as quickly as he could.

James stared over the body of Hokura for a moment. She was still breathing, which was a great relief. He looked at Amara and cursed, kicking at the dirt below him. How on earth could this go so wrong tonight? He swore to the sky and looked back at Hokura in her suit when he noticed something different. On her right wrist, there was a bracelet. He knelt beside her body and examined it. As he rolled her wrist, he noticed that the bracelet let off a gentle light from the bottom. He figured this bracelet was going to be a problem and reconciled precisely how he was going to dispose of it.





The professor had watched as the blinking light on the monitor went out. He shot up from his chair and trembled as his heart raced. “No,” he said in disbelief, staring hard at the monitor, praying that it had merely been a malfunction. He closed his eyes and opened them again. It was still gone. He glared at the GPS system as he raced over to the radio. “Hokura?” he called into the livewire, but the call went unanswered. He waited a moment and tried again only to get static. Dread flooded him. He then radioed Amara but was met with the same silence.

“Talon, there’s an emergency. I need you to get me into the city now!” he yelled into his livewire feed to the watch commander.

“I can have the night watch head towards it and have them check it out, sir.” Talon’s voice came back.

“Damn you. I said I need to get into the city now!” he bellowed, grabbing his jacket, and within moments he was out at the garage with this GPS coordinator in his hand. Talon had just run around the corner, meeting him. “I need you to get me to this location,” the professor said, pointing at the screen.

Talon nodded; he wasn't about to question his higher up. “I have men already securing our vehicle, this way,” he said as the professor quickly followed him towards an old jeep that already had three, armed night watch guards getting in.

The professor had never left the compound before, never felt the need to concern himself by leaving, but now it was crucial that he get to her as fast as he possibly could. The doors to the garage opened as the jeep raced into the night. Talon knew the location and promised that he would get them there as fast as he could.

The moments ticked away as the professor stared back at his coordinator, hoping that there had been some other reason for the bracelet to stop functioning, that she was safe and well. Please let her be okay; he prayed as he kicked himself for allowing her to continue on her duty. Why did he think he could protect her when she was still going out as a peacekeeper? How could he have

been so foolish! He made a promise that if she was still with him when they arrived at their location that she would never be sent out on the force again. He didn't care what he would have to do to confine her, but this would never be allowed to happen again.

The jeep turned the corner and came to a sudden stop. The professor leaped out of the side to look at the debris. It was apparent that a large explosive blast had shaken the alleyway. It was then that a glint of silver caught his eye. He ran over and crouched on the ground, carefully picking up the bracelet. It was destroyed, as was the tracker. He tilted his head back to the sky in dismay as he felt tears come to his eyes. There had been no body, which had meant they had taken her. Grief filled his entire body as he started to shake. A scream ripped through the night. "Hokura!"

"Sir," Talon said, running over to the professor, "there's a possibility that she's still alive. We radioed in to Adam, but there's no sign of Hokura or Amara, which means they must be together. Please, sir..."

The professor looked up with hatred in his eyes. "Find her. I don't care if you have to kill every last rebel out there. You will find her!"

"Go beyond the walls? Sir, that's madness. None of us guards have ever been beyond these walls," Talon stuttered.

The professor looked up at him, glaring with contempt. "Your men have been in hardened training, now put it to use!"

Talon merely stepped back, gulping. "Yes, sir, I'll assemble our strongest team right away."

The professor sighed, trying to swallow his grief. There would be time for that, but right now, time was of the essence. "Take me back to the compound, assemble your men and regroup in the briefing room in one hour," he commanded.



Once they were back at the compound, the professor went straight to this office,

locked the doors, and broke down. His legs collapsed beneath him as he leaned up against the door for support. She couldn't be gone. After everything that had happened, he couldn't lose her now.

He had loved her, more than he had thought was still possible in the world. The touch of her skin gave him a feeling that he had never experienced, and now she had been taken. He had to be strong; he had to compose himself; he couldn't allow anyone to see his weakness. Amara was with her; they would stick together and fight through if they had to.

He looked at his GPS and sank even further. He hadn't the slightest clue where she could be. They could easily be miles away by now, and even further than that in an hour, and even more so once they started searching.

He thought he was going to be sick at the notion that she wasn't within the walls. He took off his glasses, and shakily made his way to his desk. He had to stay positive. He had to believe that with all her training that she would live through this, that she would somehow survive and that she would make her way back to him, or they would find her.

The idea of the rebels having her in their custody made his mind race. What if they tortured her? What if they were laying their disgusting hands on her? "I'll kill every last one of them," he muttered darkly.

He couldn't believe the way he was shaking. Even when Hokura had been induced back into a coma, she was still physically there. She was still within reach. "Hokura," he breathed, "I don't know where you are, and suddenly it is I who need you more than anything." He laid his head on his desk and tried to compose himself. "Dammit, man, get a hold of yourself," he cursed.



Hokura's head bounced to a soft rhythm. She thought she was in the back of a night watch truck, but something wasn't right, there was too much of a breeze, and she was sitting on something plush. She opened her eyes to see Amara out beside her. They were in a rebel jeep. She moaned softly, putting her hand to her

head.

"It's okay. The blast merely knocked you two out," the commander said, turning towards them.

Hokura's eyes widened in panic.

"I promised we're not going to hurt you; you have my word. I just want to talk! I'm sorry that Anthony panicked and tossed the grenade. It was an old percussion bomb; that's why the blast didn't kill you. It wasn't meant to eradicate you," James quickly added.

"You took us outside the walls!" Hokura gasped.

"Well, I wasn't about to talk to you within the city walls. Please just hear me out," James continued.

Hokura's eyes squinted, her ears were ringing, and her head had a dull ache.

"Here," James offered his water bottle along with a white pill, "it'll help your head. It's nothing more than pain medication."

Hokura's raised her eyebrows. Medication wasn't something she had ever taken. She took injections to heal whatever wounds she had. She had decided to trust him as she put her hand out and took both the water and the pill.

"Where are we going?" Hokura asked after swallowing the pill.

"We're heading to tent city. Some of the rebels have abandoned it and have gone further out. It's not far from here."

"They'll come looking for us," Hokura said. "The professor will send the night watch after you, and they'll kill you all. Besides, there was a change of plans! I can't go!"

James merely chuckled. "If you're referring to your tracker bracelet, it's in pieces by the blast site, and if you think the night watch knows anything about tracking in the wastelands, then they're welcome to try and find us. Besides, my lookout says that everyone went back into the compound and that no one has left again. And what do you mean about change of plans? Two days ago, you had agreed to this!"

Hokura looked down at her wrist in shock, a tracker, was that how Dorian was able to find her lately? Suddenly her wrist felt so bare without it, no matter its function. Why hadn't he come looking for her? Because she was a

peacekeeper, and she was trained for this? That was right, she was trained for this, but she didn't feel as though she was in any immediate danger, so she went along with them. Amara stirred at her side.

"Amara!" Hokura cried.

"Dammit, I hit my head hard," she moaned and then made the same discovery that Hokura had just a few moments earlier.

"It's okay," Hokura reassured, "he's not going to hurt us."

"Then why the hell were they throwing grenades at us?" she groaned.

"I apologize," James offered. "That was my idiot accomplice. He's a little green and panicked. It was merely meant to stun you."

Amara's head rolled to look to Hokura, who wasn't in a panic. She closed her eyes for a moment in hopes that the ringing would subside.



Adam had been called back to the compound along with the rest of the watch. When he didn't see the others, he started towards the professor's office when Talon stopped him.

"I don't suggest you go in there right now," Talon warned.

"What happened?" Adam asked in earnest.

Talon's lips merely pursed. He wasn't ready to explain this to the third child. He wasn't exactly a man for words and had no clue how he was going to tell Adam that he was the only remaining peacekeeper in Meridiana.

That's when the professor's door opened. He stood in the doorway, looking down at Adam with a cold, stern face. "The rebels have taken them."

The third child stepped back. "How is that even possible?"

"There was an explosion. From the looks of it, Hokura and Amara took the brunt of the force and were incapacitated. We are guessing the rebels went through the wall and took their bodies with them. We are currently assembling a team to go after them."

Adam stared at the professor. The professor didn't falter, and yet behind his

glasses, his eyes seemed tired and strained. There was something off about his formidable stature and his voice, but Adam couldn't quite determine it. It was as if he had been recovering from a fit of rage.

"We will get them back," the professor stated. "A team of night watch will be leaving the walls in the next hour."



Hokura sat up, her head was no longer throbbing, but her ears still had a dull ringing in them. Amara was still lying beside her, groaning; they were being bounced around as they went over dunes when Hokura heard her friend groan. "Dammit, I'm gonna be sick."

James had Anthony stop the jeep and let Amara exit and have a moment to be profusely sick.

"Apparently, you peacekeepers aren't immune to motion sickness." James chuckled, shaking his head.

"You would be sick too if you just lived through what we did!" Hokura tried to snarl but found her voice was weak and trembling. She was sweating. She looked down at her suit and saw that it had been heavily damaged, which was apparent as to why the cooling system was no longer working. Even if there were a way for the professor to hack their suits to get a location on them, they were out of luck with the technology being damaged.

Hokura jumped out of the jeep and helped Amara back to the vehicle. She thought about running, but as she looked in every direction, she knew it would be pointless and that Amara wouldn't likely make it more than a few feet.

"I wouldn't think of running," James called down. "You'd be forever lost out there."

As the two got back in, Hokura brushed her hair from her face. "And how is it that you're able to navigate so easily when everything out here looks the same?"

James smiled. "Just like the people of old-world did before they started using

technology. The primitive way of finding out where you were going using maps, compasses, and the stars."

Hokura looked up at the sky, which was littered with stars. She had a bad feeling about how things were unfolding. It was supposed to have just been her. She would have snuck in and out, but now Amara had gotten involved. She dropped her head. Of course, Adam would find out. He wouldn't rest until he had them back. Everything had gone wrong.

"I need you to take us back," Hokura finally said. "It wasn't supposed to happen like this!"

"Hokura, don't," Amara groaned beside her; she was now sitting up but still holding her head.

James scoffed. "Are you crazy? We can't just go back now. Besides, I'm sure the wall is crawling with guards looking for you both. If anything, I can take you back first thing in the morning." He knew that wasn't the case as his men had said the watch had all been called back into the compound. He figured they were regrouping to send the watch out after the two peacekeepers.

"I'm not the one who pulled out a grenade!" Hokura cried.

"I already apologized. What more do you want! It wasn't my intention! What more do you want from me?"

Anthony ducked his head slightly; he hadn't said a word this entire time and was thankful that James hadn't taken his head off.

"Everything has been jeopardized!" Hokura screamed. "Nobody but myself was supposed to be involved, and as I said, I had a change of heart. I wasn't even going to agree on coming tonight! I was going to ask if there was another way!" She shook her head.

"It doesn't matter anyway! There is no other way!" James yelled. "By the time word gets out that two peacekeepers are no longer in city walls, the civilian uprising will start. If anything, I'm doing you two a favor by getting you out of that damn city."

Hokura backed down. "Please, I have to protect him. I have to go back! I'll keep them from arresting you!"

Amara raised her eyebrow as her friend broke down in tears.

James gawked. "Please, first child, don't think that you have any real sway. If I were to return you, they would lock me up and torture me for information."

"I do with the professor!" Hokura exclaimed. "He'll listen to me! He loves me! He'll do anything to have me back. You have to listen to me, please!"

"And you have to listen to me, Hokura. There's no way in hell that I'm taking you back to the city tonight, so you can either come with me like you had originally planned, or you can jump out of the jeep and hope that someone finds you, but the likelihood of that isn't too pretty," James yelled.

Hokura sat back in defeat, Amara stared at her.

"You have some explaining to do," she said dryly.

"You were right all along," Hokura sighed... Amara's stare didn't help, "about the professor."

James settled into his seat and merely listened.

"Dorian and I... he told me not to tell either of you because you two hadn't gone through all the motions yet. He said you wouldn't understand and that I would end up alienating myself from you." Hokura chuckled darkly. "Which is exactly what I did, lying about it. The nights that you and Adam have been together, I've been with Dorian. I've been lying and sneaking around. That's why I've been so off lately. It started right after I was brought back on duty after the blast."

Amara looked away as she processed the news. She almost wished she hadn't known. The professor was manipulating her. She had always known that he had his eye on the first child but never thought it was so much deeper. She then looked up. "And what about this?"

"Two nights ago, when I went against orders and broke away from the group, the rebel commander had come to me. He told me that we were being lied to and that he wanted to show me the truth. I agreed. I wanted to see it. I wasn't thinking at the time. Then something happened, and I had a change of heart. I didn't want to do this; I knew what it would do to the professor if something happened to me. I can't imagine what's happening and what he's going through," Hokura spoke. She didn't look at either Amara or James. She couldn't bear to meet the eyes of either of them.



"Well," James chided, getting comfortable in his seat facing forward as Anthony continued to drive, "it sounds like plenty is going on that you two have to talk about."

"There's nothing else to say," Hokura stated meekly.

"You'll take us back tomorrow morning?" Amara asked.

"If that's what you want, then yes, I will see about getting you two back to the city," James answered flatly. His heart sank. She had someone, and that someone was the man who was the ringleader of the compound. He shook his head; was this suddenly all for nothing?



The professor stood in front of three jeeps; all had four, armed night watch guards and a driver.

"We don't know what's out there. We are going out blind, so make sure you all have heavy rations of food and water," the professor stated.

The governor stood next to him. "How the hell are they even supposed to find them?"

Dorian lowered his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose in defeat. "I don't know. Due to the erratic windstorms out there, the desert changes daily. We never had a need to go beyond the walls before now."

"The foot soldiers who were sent out to scout the walls said they saw tracks heading north. That's all they were able to give us, but with the slight breeze and their vehicle kicking up dust, it'll be damn near impossible to track them," Talon said, staring at an old-world map of the area.

Adam walked up to the professor at that time. "Sir," he stated, waiting for orders.

The governor cleared his throat and looked at the peacekeeper. "You are to stay here."

Adam stepped back in dismay. "Are you serious? Hokura and Amara are both out there, and I am expected to stay here? That's..."

The professor put a hand on Adam's shoulder. "I know you love Amara and want to be there for her. I fully understand that third child, believe me, I do, but you must understand that we have no idea of where they might be. We are merely scouting to see if we can come across something. For all, we know our own men might become lost out there! What good would that do if you ended up lost out in no man's land?"

Adam scowled and looked away.

"If we find anything, you will be the first to know," the professor pleaded. The last thing he needed was the last peacekeeper leaving the city walls to possibly be lost forever.

"Yes, sir," Adam answered in a strained voice and walked away.

"Are we ready, then?" Talon asked as he rubbed his temples.

"We are," the governor answered. "Open the doors!"

With that, the large compound doors opened to part of the city wall, which had been made of thick steel. With another command from the governor, the wall slid slowly open to reveal the barren sandy wasteland that awaited them.



Within an hour and a half of leaving the walls, they came up to the tent city. James parked the jeep alongside a row of other desert vehicles and large hauling trucks. He helped Amara and Hokura out as they both seemed unsteady on their feet.

"This is our home, my people," he said, spreading his arms out as the peacekeepers both took it in. In the distance, there were groups of canvas tents. They could see people mulling about fires, talking, even laughing.

"Most people decided they wanted to head further out to a temporary setup while others chose to stay. People here are free to come and go as they please. We merely ask that if they are to be part of our society that they contribute. Some groups go out and forage old cities, others know mechanics and fix vehicles, we have a group of women who sew clothes, others who teach the

children here. We are our own city and society.” James could see the stocky figure of Barack approaching from the distance. He gave the two peacekeepers a moment to take it all in.

"Why were you exporting weapons into the city of Meridiana?" Hokura asked, shifting.

"We had gotten word from the inside. It was a distress signal that had been seeking weapons, or so I was told that's how it started," James mused. "I wasn't the one who answered that call. It was my father who had started the weapons trade within the city. We had originally been on the move looking for one of the free cities. Rumors are they're still a few north from here. Either way, my father answered the call of the civilians. They got old weapons, and we were given goods and supplies. A large amount to keep our camp running for some time." James chuckled. "Rumor was that some of the people who sent out the signal were those who had been from the compound itself at one point. People who had been dismissed from their jobs and forced to live in the harshness of the city."

Hokura glanced over as Barack came closer, he was a large man, but she recognized him instantly. "I know you," she stated. Amara looked at her questionably. "You were a scientist at the compound."

Barack smiled warmly at her. "Aye Hokura, I was there when you awoke."

She couldn't make sense of it all. "Then, why are you here? Why do I not remember you leaving?" She shook her head at the memory. Nothing had ever been said. It was as if he had suddenly disappeared, and nobody had ever made a notion of it.

"I'm here, my lady because I learned about how corrupt the system truly was. How civilians were treated in the city and how the compound had been turned into a science experiment itself," Barack offered. "You two are among friends here. Any questions that you have, we will answer to the best of our ability. Please come and sit around the fire and ease yourselves. You look like you've had a long night."

"You mean actually go..." Amara raised her eyebrows and pointed towards the tent city. "We're the enemy."

"You can trust us. If not our leader here, then you can trust me, and if you

wish, I will escort you back myself and give myself over to the compound for treason," Barack said.

James looked at him and was about to protest before his friend raised his hand. "You both have my word and my honor. We have nothing to gain at the loss of your lives here. We only want to help you understand and warn you."

Amara and Hokura walked forward. Amara instinctively grabbed Hokura's hand and squeezed it, something she used to do for comfort when they first started scouting the city at night as peacekeepers. Hokura couldn't help but feel guilty for getting Amara involved in this and gently squeezed back. She had been sure at that time that Amara had wished it was Adam squeezing her hand back in the safety of the walls.

They moved through the sand, and through the setups of people's tents, there were women, men, even a few children still walking about this late. Hokura noticed how people glanced their way but with curiosity instead of menace, yet nobody approached them.

"We can talk in my quarters," James said as they walked through the large gathering of canvas and towards the far edge where it seemed the tents were fewer and further apart. Finally, they had reached the lone tent, which had been the commanders.

"Barack will start a fire," James smiled. "I'll get you both some water." Amara plunked down silently on a log in front of the fire pit, but Hokura followed James inside.

James went over to his cold box and allowed Hokura to simply look around. "It might not be much," he called, "but it's home."

Hokura walked over to a desk that had maps scattered around it when something caught her eye, an old photograph.

"We keep our cold boxes running with propane, we're lucky to still find it in old cities, but mostly we stick to canned and non-perishable food," James continued. He stopped and looked at Hokura, who had become transfixed on something on his desk. Curious at what had caught her attention, he walked up behind her.

Hokura's eyes were on the photo, she didn't dare touch it, but they hadn't

moved as she pieced things together.

"I know him," she whispered.

James looked down solemnly. "That was my father," he said in an equally quiet tone. "He died not that long ago."

Hokura's eyes widened with dismay.

James cleared his throat. "He was inside the walls of the city. Something happened. His comrades said it was an accident but never went into detail about the ordeal."

"He saved me," Hokura said, turning to face James. "He pushed me out of the way of an explosive."

James looked down as grief-filled him. No wonder they hadn't wanted to tell him. He looked back up at her, still the most beautiful thing that he had ever laid eyes on. "Then he did a noble thing, and his legacy will not be forgotten. He believed that the peacekeepers were not our enemies."

James turned. "Come on. I'm sure your friend is worried about you being alone in here."

Hokura followed James out to see Amara and Barack conversing as they sat by the now roaring fire.

James offered Amara a bottle of water as he sat down across from Hokura.

"Amara stated this was her first time ever seeing beyond the wall but that you had ventured through one of the rebel breaches," Barack said huskily. "Before the war, the most populated area around here was known as Surprise, Arizona. It was a natural desert, but due to all the dust that kicked up, the plant life here died out. We've slowly seen some parts of this area show life again. Insects have been showing up, closer to the ocean has apparently shown more signs of greenery."

"That's amazing. We never knew the origins of this area," Amara stated, taking a sip of her water. "How did you come about this information?"

Barack smiled as Hokura leaned in with earnest. "Maps, of course, old-world history! You can't tell me that with all the technology that the compound holds, they wouldn't know where we are on this planet. When I escaped, I ended up heading south in hopes of going beyond the border. That's when I ran into this

group, and they took me in." He poked at the fire for a minute. "The scientists at the compound know everything about the old world, yet it seems so much information is classified because they deem it useless." He harrumphed for a moment. "They know about parts of the world that still run under old government order. They knew when they set up the city of Meridiana, that was another reason why I couldn't stay there."

"We never knew," Amara stated as she rocked back and forth.

"And why would you?" Barack asked, stroking his beard. "What benefit would it have if you knew, other than you would question it."

"But we know now," Hokura whispered. She felt a tingling sensation go up her spine... they didn't want them to know. "Does the professor know?" Hokura asked as her voice cracked.

"He's the governor's right-hand man when it comes to how that place runs. Before I left, there had been talk about genetically altering the food and water supply that fed the compound to enhance the cell and DNA structures of those working there. The professor knows everything from how the compound came to be to how every piece of it works. The man is a prodigy," Barack said.

"So, you're not the only ones that are part of the compounds little science project," James said as he looked at Hokura, his eyes meeting hers.

"That makes sense," Amara said, giving her a moment to take it all in. "How else are they able to push training tools like the simulators? They told us it would take months to complete, and then it had been pushed up to days."

Hokura sat in silence. Dorian knew. Was she just a pawn in this? She knew she had a duty as a peacekeeper, but why would he keep this from her? He kept saying there were bigger plans for her, that she hadn't been truly created to be a peacekeeper, then what was she? What about those in the compound?

"I'm sorry that you two came here by the means that you did. We just wanted you to understand," Barack apologized.

"James told me about the civilian uprising, what about that?" Hokura asked, looking to Barack.

"I'm afraid it's very much true. The civilians are treated poorly. They barely get enough food for rations, they're kept from knowledge, work long hours to

upkeep the city, and are not allowed to leave. Wouldn't you say that's unjust?"

Hokura chewed on her bottom lip, so many things she didn't know, didn't understand. So many lies and secrets...

"Where do we go from here?" Amara asked. She hadn't directed the question at Hokura, but the first child stirred beside her.

"I don't know..."



Adam walked restlessly around the compound garden; it was only two hundred hours. He had tried to retire to his own room to sleep, but it wouldn't find him. He went to Amara's and found it unbearable. He grimaced at the thought that it had been so many hours since Hokura and Amara had been taken. He knew the professor was working diligently to find them but had heard nothing.

"I will update you when I know something," the professor had told him.

What if they were both gone? Adam shook his head; he wouldn't allow that thought to pass through him. They were alive. They were well and most likely on their own way back to the compound. Hokura and Amara were a team that could overcome anything. He was sure they were walking through the sands, trying to find their way back to the city walls with information about where the rebels were. He had to keep that reality in his mind and not let the possibilities of anything else creep upon him.

He found himself pacing the cafeteria. His heart wrenched when he peered at their spot. Who would be sitting there in the morning? He shook his head. He had to get away and knew just where he could sit and watch the world pass this night by.



Amara shifted as she yawned. "I think I've heard enough; I've come to believe

you both, but I am at a loss at what we could possibly do about it. We know now that you're truly not our enemies. Unfortunately, it doesn't help that you've told us about the civilians we're supposed to be protecting are planning an uprising against the compound. That simply means more trouble for us."

"Stay with us then. We're going to be moving out soon to find a place that's still thriving," James said pointedly.

Amara sat for a moment and thought about it. "I can't leave Adam... if there were a way, I would consider it. There's nothing else holding me to the city." She stared at Hokura.

Barack cleared his throat. "That is fair enough child, it is getting late in the night, and I think we all need to clear our heads before we go back in the morning."

"I have extra cots in a spare room set up in my tent," James offered. Amara nodded tiredly.

Hokura's heart ached. "I'm going to go for a walk if you're alright on your own," she said to Amara.

"Don't go far," Amara pleaded.

"I'll go with her," James offered as the second child nodded at him. He showed her the room and allowed her to get settled.

Barack had already bid Hokura a good night and had left her as she stood alone and in silence staring up at the stars.

"Come on," James offered as Hokura followed him in silence. They walked without saying anything as Hokura took in the outside world beyond the walls that had imprisoned her all her years.

"I'm sorry," James finally said as he gently brushed against her.

"For what now?" Hokura asked dryly.

"For everything that there is to be sorry for." He stopped and looked at her; her eyes were so incredibly sad that he couldn't help but feel her grief.

"You scouted me out. You watched me along with the other peacekeepers. For how long?" Hokura asked.

James glanced over at her. "Since the first time I saw you. After that, I knew I had to tell you about this. Since then, I've felt this need to protect you."



"What am I supposed to do?" she whimpered. "Everything I've ever known has been a lie. A façade put on by the person I trusted more than anyone."

James took a step towards her and gently wrapped his arm around her waist. "Stay here with me." He paused for a moment, thinking about what he was about to do. He didn't give a damn about the professor, so he came to resolve and kissed her.

Hokura didn't stop him as she felt something inside her shatter. She didn't want to stop him. Her lips met his without contest as their mouths parted. She felt a familiar stirring mixed with something new, something that seemed to free her. When she finally stepped back, she stared at James and trembled. "I-I..." she started but was at a loss for words.

"Your professor is only using you, Hokura," James said, pursing his lips. "You're a prisoner under his command whether you like it or not. He created you with a purpose already in mind. You have no freedom inside those walls."

"But he loves me..." Hokura whispered but, in an instant, felt hesitation to her words. She turned away from James as she held herself.

James shook his head. "That's not love, Hokura. He's controlling you with that sentiment."

Hokura huffed out of anger and confusion, turning away and raised her voice. "Then tell me if you know so much about the emotion. Everyone else has given me their opinion, so then please enlighten me and tell me what love is?"

James grabbed her arm and turned her to face him. "Love is knowing that you're going to go back to Meridiana tomorrow and not standing in your way!" His eyes widened in shock, as did hers. "I won't stand in your way," he said again in a quieter tone. "I will never control you; I want to protect you with every ounce that is in me. From the first time I saw you, I wanted to keep you safe. I know it doesn't make any sense. I know that I don't even know you, but something inside of me pushed me towards you." He sighed. "You can stay here, or you can have me escort you back in the morning. I won't fight you. If you stayed, you would always be free to make your own choices, and I would always be there for you."

Hokura's expression softened to disbelief. "How can you have these feelings

for me? You don't even know me; we're supposed to be enemies."

James kept his expression firm. "You see me as an enemy because that's the lie you've been made to believe. Who do you think is more of a peacekeeper? Armed soldiers who only go out at night and destroy buildings and fight with those who enter the city but lock up those trying to get out. Or those who are trying to liberate people from their holdings. Who allow them to come and go as they please, who take in those who are in need and give them a home and people to call family?" He stared at her hard for a second as she seemed to take in what he was saying. "I know they've programmed you to think a certain way, but you still certainly have free will. You should have a conscience over what's right and what's wrong."

She broke as tears started to stream down her face. "What of it? What if I was to stay here with you? The professor would eventually find you!"

"We're not staying here, Hokura! We're always on the move. Once the uprising starts, the rebels will pack up and be done here. We're heading north in hopes of finding the free world, your professor won't find us, and if he did, I would do everything in my power to keep him from you!" he answered gruffly, feeling his frustration getting the best of him.

Hokura shook her head. "We can't leave Adam. If the peacekeepers leave, it's together."

James's expression lightened. He was now the one shaking his head as he put his arm around her. "We can figure this out. Let me help you."

Hokura sat in the sand, staring out towards the vastness of the desert. "We need to return tomorrow. You know that the moment we return, they'll continue to search for you," she said, stretching her hands out in the sand.

"We can move our camp easily enough. I'm hardly worried about being caught by the watch out here. This is our land; we know how to navigate it well. I'll keep the rebels safe." James stared at her.

"You care for these people," Hokura stated.

"They're my family. They may not be blood, but we are a unit here. We all depend on one another," James answered.

"That's another form of love," she stated dryly.

James raised an eyebrow. “For some super-being, you sure seem to be naïve about a lot. Emotions especially. Barack has told me about the professor, about you being special to him.”

“I only awoke a few years ago,” Hokura commented. “When I was a child, I was put into a medically induced coma...”

“Barack said he was a scientist on your team. That he was there when you awoke.”

“I only know what I’ve been taught through electrodes that fed my brain in that sleep. I only know what the compound deemed important. Human emotions weren’t exactly part of my teachings, and it seems now that a lot of them have been awakening.” She looked at James. “And there’s only been one person to explain them to me. And now I’m here learning that it isn’t true. What am I supposed to believe?”

James shifted in the sand; he couldn’t believe the conversation he was having with her. “If you had something that you loved and watched it grow, would you want to confine it?”

“To keep it safe...” Hokura answered.

James shook his head. “Say I planted a flower in a small pot, and it bloomed, would I want to keep it in the pot forever? Or would I want to plant it in a large piece of land? If I planted it in a larger area, it would flourish. It would take better root; it would grow even better.”

“But it would be in the elements!” Hokura cried.

“As plants should naturally be. Just as people are meant to be free. Just as we are meant to flourish and learn and grow on our own,” James added.

“Have you seen flowers growing naturally?” Hokura asked in astonishment.

“I have. And if you somehow stay, I would love to show them to you one day,” James continued.

Hokura smirked. “For a rebel, you’re pretty insightful.”

“Come on,” James said, getting up and giving her a hand. “Walk with me inside the camp for a little bit.”

Hokura followed at his side.

There was still a small pocket of people who were about. Some were sitting,

enjoying the glow of firelight. Others were walking with children. Every single one of them held an expression of contentment.

“Look at them,” James ordered. “They’re free. Free to love, free to live, and free to flourish. Do you have this kind of thing at the compound?”

Hokura chewed on her bottom lip. “No. I’ve never seen people like this at the compound. From what I know, scientists and technicians work long hours and hard days. They don’t get to enjoy themselves.”

“Would your professor die for any of those people in the compound? I can tell you right now that he wouldn’t. Not for the people of the compound, nor the people of Meridiana. I’m sure he knows well enough of the uprising. He won’t stop it. He’s a man of his own agenda.” He then looked hard at Hokura and pointed at her. “You have something to do with that agenda whether you like it or not. I would die for these people. I already told you that I would escort you back tomorrow morning. I know the possibilities that lie ahead and what will happen to me if I’m caught.”

Hokura was taken back. “I won’t allow anything to happen to you.”

James rolled his eyes at her.

“I swear it!” she said out of earnest, grabbing onto his arm. “You will not fall because of me. I won’t let the compound take you.”

“Even if that’s the case... they’ll still have you.” James’ voice was hoarse with dread.

The two made their way back to James’ tent. When he offered Hokura to catch up on some sleep and that he would station himself outside the tent, she denied the notion. They continued walking the wastelands until they both sat down on a dune in silence.

Hokura pondered for a few moments about everyone she would leave behind, about the people she had to save. She knew she had to save Amara and Adam from the uprising, that they needed to survive no matter what, no matter what she decided to do, in the end, they would be free. “I need three days,” Hokura breathed airily.

“Three!?” James countered. “Why can’t you go back tomorrow morning and leave tomorrow night?”

Hokura shook her head. "It's not going to be that easy. If what you've told me is true, then Amara and I will be under strict surveillance. I doubt the professor is going to let me out of his sight once we're back." She chewed on her bottom lip. Could she convince him too? Would Dorian love her enough to leave with her, even if it wasn't with the rebels?

"What about the uprising?" James asked. "It can go either way. Whoever is leaking information can tell the civilians you're back, and they can start the war, or they might hold off. I can't predict what's going to happen, or what might already be happening." James gave her a worried look.

"If it comes down to that, then we'll have to get out quicker," Hokura mused, still looking ahead.

James never wanted to take his eyes off her again. The last thing he ever wanted was a wall separating them. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Her heart clenched. She wanted those feelings to return when she thought of Dorian. She wanted to feel yearning at the thought of his name, but now it just brought her a physical ache inside her chest. "Three days," she answered. "You will meet us where we made contact this time..." She stopped and stared at him hard. "Swear on your word that you will take whoever is there and that you will leave right away and not wait for anyone."

James pursed his lips; he wasn't sure she liked that idea, the way she had worded her terms brought him some doubt, but he brought his hand out. "I swear it." He held her hand and never wanted to let go as he stared into her golden eyes. "Even if you don't feel the same for me, know that my feelings for you are genuine."

Hokura's heart warmed suddenly as she thought back to the kiss they had shared.

"I care for you, and I want to show you fields of flowers, as far as the eyes can see." He placed a tender kiss on her forehead.

"I have some ideas on how we're going to make that a reality." Hokura smiled at him with new vigor.



Adam sat in grief on the top of the compound roof, staring out at the wall. He had wanted to leave but had not been so brave. He could never match the bravery of the two gone. Amara and Hokura would jump headfirst into any situation laughing. He was more calculated, more cautious. For a moment, he sat hating them for where their bravery had gotten them this night.

He couldn't even imagine where they were or what was happening to them. He held onto the thought that maybe they escaped, but his heart clenched at the thought of them wandering lost in the barren wasteland that was beyond the walls. The watch had brought canteens and rations with them. He knew the men that were sent out were dispensable and that neither the governor nor professor wouldn't care if they were lost.

Adam wanted to kick himself as his mind raced with thoughts of the worst-case scenarios. He had to remind himself repeatedly that this was Hokura and Amara. The first and second child who had both already come into contact with the rebel commander and had listened to him, Adam stopped for a moment. Was it at all possible that there was something more to this? His rationale swung the other way, but it didn't seem likely.

What if they had gone willingly? Amara would have said something if there had been a plan to make contact with the rebels again. Then again, Hokura wouldn't have said a thing to either of them. Was it possible that somehow Amara had become entangled in all of this? The idea made him breathe a little easier, but still, he felt like he was grasping at straws. He paced, he sat and bounced rocks off the wall, which he glared at.

He cursed at the sky and made deals with long-forgotten entities to simply bring them back. He was exhausted but couldn't bring himself to go down to the briefing room and face the professor. No, the professor had said that he would find him if there were any news on the two. Adam groaned as he laid himself back on the concrete roof and stared at the stars. At least they were under the

same sky.



Dorian sat in his office, disheveled and exhausted. There had been no word back, dawn was approaching in an hour, and there hadn't been a single trace of where they could have gone. The sun would rise on the city, and there would only be one peacekeeper inside the compound.

Governor Larson came through the briefing room door without even knocking and glanced at the man who was cradling his head on his desk. "Dawn is upon us, and there's still not a word," he spoke. "Do you think they're still alive out there?"

With incredible speed, the governor was being held up against the wall by Dorian's strength as the professor glared angrily at him. "Don't you dare doubt for a second that they are alive, Governor, and the moment the peacekeepers are back, their use to you will be suspended indefinitely."

"I didn't give you permission to suspend their use!" Larson choked, glaring down at the man.

Dorian crushed the governor's body against the wall sneering. "Do not forget who I am, governor. If I so wanted, I could crush you like the bug you are."

"Alright!" Larson choked. Dorian then released his grasp, and Larson fell to the floor with a hard thud.

"Stage two is already fully in place. You know that! It may be considered premature, but it's already happening. You have your day and night watch. The cell regeneration in the peacekeepers has been completed! Soon the females will carry what will be the first genetically perfected child known to mankind. We will start our new age and a new beginning as a superior species," Dorian stated with a stern look. "I have given you your army and your genetic enhancements, now it's time to take back what is mine, and when she returns, she will be mine, and neither you nor anyone else is going to stand in my way."

Governor Larson looked up at Dorian and glared. "You have done well and

lived up to your side of the bargain Dorian, but I suggest you don't get ahead of yourself. Who knows when they will be back?"

Dorian looked back at him. "Don't doubt Hokura. She's under my full control and will do whatever it takes to get back to me."

With that, the governor left, and Dorian fell to the floor in exhaustion. His words were nothing but the truth. Hokura would have to physically fight him before he would allow her back outside the compound.



The sun was starting to rise as James and Barack drove Hokura and Amara back towards the walled city.

"Are you sure about this?" James asked, stopping the jeep miles away from the wall.

Hokura nodded. "I think this is the best plan," she said as Amara hopped out of the back of the jeep and into the sand.

"And what about you?" James pointed at Amara.

She glanced at him. "You heard the first child's terms, three days. Whoever is with us you take; whoever isn't along, you leave behind." Amara was feeling raw, tired, and wanted nothing more than to throw her arms around Adam once she got back.

Hokura jumped out of the jeep and walked towards the front where James sat. "Get your people as far away from here and keep them safe."

James stared down at her as he cupped her chin. "You just worry your pretty head about yourself. Nothing will keep me from getting back to you in three days." He leaned down and gently kissed her forehead before handing her a compass pointing to the needle. "As long as this is pointing North, you'll get back to Meridiana."

"You better get moving then," Hokura said, looking at him one last time before she turned and started following after Amara.

"Do you think this is for the best?" Barack asked, sitting beside James.



The rebel commander made a noise. “It wasn’t my idea. I told her either of us would happily bring her right up to the city wall, but she was against it. She came up with this whole plan. I’m merely going along with it whether I like it or not.” He grimaced at the idea. He didn’t want her back inside the walls. More so, he didn’t want to think of her being back in the arms of the professor.

Barack grinned at him. “Then we had best do as she says and get a move on and start retreating what is left of the camp. We have to get back here in three days to liberate them.”



Hokura walked along beside Amara, who was trudging away warily. “Would it matter if I apologized?” Hokura asked in a small voice.

Amara looked down and merely shook her head with a hint of a smile. “You were right, you’ve always been right, you’ve always had a better perception about things than the rest of us.”

“No...” Hokura answered as she chewed her bottom lip, “I haven’t always been right. You saw through the professor when I couldn’t.”

“He fooled us all,” Amara mused, “but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have feelings for you and that he doesn’t love you. You were special to him from the beginning.”

Hokura didn’t know. She wanted answers. She had felt so conflicted.

“I know we went over the plan with the commander, but do you think it’ll work? Do you think we’ll be able to convince Adam and manage to sneak back out?”

“I don’t know,” the first child answered. “We’re walking into the unknown right now. They can do anything to us. If the governor so wished he could have us locked up for being captured, we could be highly reprimanded for what happened.”

Amara’s eyes widened. “Do you think that will actually happen?” she asked in a panic.

Hokura gave it a moment as she thought of it. “No, I don’t.” She looked forward, wishing she could see the wall on the horizon. For the first time ever, it seemed like she was yearning to be back in her confines. She was tired. She was exhausted at the beginning of the night after her late nights with the professor and training. Now she had no idea what was keeping her upright and walking. “If we go along with the plan and tell them that we were knocked out in the city and came to while being transported and fought off the rebels so we could escape, they’ll believe us... *he’ll* believe us if I say it’s so.”

“Well, we do look like we’ve both been to hell and back,” Amara said, stretching. “At least my ears are no longer ringing.”

The first child glanced at her. “If we can convince Adam, are you sure you want to leave?”

Amara took Hokura’s hand as they continued. “As long as the three of us are together, we can overcome anything. We’re a unit.”

Hokura’s heart ached. She hadn’t made up her mind yet. Could she possibly leave everything behind? What about Dorian? What about the doctor? What about all the innocent lives inside the compound?

They had walked for about an hour when Hokura saw a cloud of dust kicking up on the horizon. She felt her body sag slightly. She hadn’t realized how exhausted she really was up until this point. She wanted to collapse right there in the dunes. Instead, she dropped the compass in the sand using her foot to bury it and moved forward towards the dust cloud.



The call had come into the professor who had haphazardly fallen asleep at his desk. He picked up the phone and was filled with relief. “They’ve been found?” he shouted in startlement. “They escaped? Are they wounded? Get them back and get them straight to the decontamination showers. I will meet them there and will take them to the medical facility right away!” He stopped for a moment and re-adjusted his disheveled clothing. He picked up the phone to alert Doctor Allen

to find the third child and relay the message immediately before calling back the rest of the groups he had sent out.



The doctor climbed the rooftop to find Adam lying on his back, not quite conscious. He cleared his throat as Adam shifted and stared up at him with dead tired eyes.

“They’ve been found. They’re arriving back shortly...” The doctor was unable to finish his sentence as Adam had quickly shot up from where he was and wrapped his arms around the man and was now hugging him tightly. The doctor slightly squirmed as the third child let go.

“Unfortunately, it might be a bit until you can see them. They’ve both been sent to the deco showers and then will have to be fully looked over in the medical facility before they’re cleared. With that said, I’m not sure if they’ll be discharged or if they’ll be briefed and questioned. You can make your way down in a few minutes, but I can’t tell you for sure when you’ll be able to see her,” the doctor continued.

Adam stepped away from the doctor and stared at him. “Do you think this will change things?”

Doctor Allen gave the third child a grave look. “Adam, I won’t lie to you. I lied to you before without realizing it.” The doctor placed his hands in the pockets and stood motionless. “Everything is changing; *everyone* is changing. Everyone here in the compound has been affected. They’ve been injecting our food and water supply with cell enhancing particles. We’re all part of the science experiment. That’s why there’s been such a huge fluctuation in breakthroughs in every department in the compound; we’re evolving.”

Adam stared at the doctor; he knew he could trust him. “Doctor,” he said quietly, “what about the word of a civilian uprising?”

Doctor Allen didn’t dare make eye contact with him. “It’s coming.”



Hokura put on her medical gown as she stepped out of the deco shower unit ahead of Amara. She saw the professor standing in front of her with a grim look on his face. He had looked so tired. Hokura walked towards him and looked back to where Amara was just drying off. "I told her about us," Hokura said quietly. She hadn't wanted anymore lies between her and the others. If they were to be a unit, then she needed to be honest with them.

"In that case," Dorian said lightly as he stepped up to Hokura and embraced her in a hug holding her tight to him. He brought her closer and kissed her deeply. There had been so many things he had wanted to say to her. He ran his hands through her hair and down her body. He lost himself in the moment of having her in his arms again.

Amara walked out of the room in shock. Hokura had told her everything but seeing it was a different type of shock.

The professor looked up at Amara and straightened himself. "The first child just told me that she had filled you in. If you have any questions, I will be honest with you about them."

Amara merely shook her head in embarrassment as she felt her cheeks flush to see them in such a way. The way he had held her and kissed her just then was unimaginable. "No sir, I think Hokura was quite thorough." She glanced around the room and felt disappointed.

The professor quickly spoke up, "Adam will be on his way shortly. The doctor was sent out to find him and tell him of your return. Until then, you two are needed in the medical facility. We need to run some tests to make sure neither of you came across anything hazardous or radioactive." He turned, walking close beside Hokura as they made their way to the medical facility.

"Can you re-account what happened last night?" the professor asked, looking to Hokura and back to Amara as they continued their way to the compound's far end.

Hokura took a deep breath as she was about to replay what they had come up with. “After the night watch dropped us off, Amara and I were scouting a civilian garage a few blocks over in a back-alley. I had ordered Amara to go around the front while I checked the back. That’s when I came across the rebel group. They were heavily armed and started yelling at me to surrender...”

Amara verified Hokura’s story. “Sir, I heard the commotion and came running. I had my gun on me as Hokura also had hers out. I was ready to fight them, but upon running towards Hokura, they threw some sort of bomb at us...”

“Everything went black...when we came to, we were beyond the wall in some sort of cargo jeep. We fought the rebels who were in the jeep and were able to bail out and make a run for it,” Hokura continued.

“And they didn’t pursue you?” the professor asked, astounded, and yet questioningly looking at Hokura, who shook her head.

“They said we were as good as dead anyway,” Hokura answered, “and we might have been if we didn’t see the day watch scouting vehicle that was patrolling beyond the walls. We seemed to have walked forever.”

The professor lifted an arm and wrapped it around Hokura’s shoulder. He needed to feel that comforting contact with her. “We can be so thankful that you both made it back unscathed. You’re both home now, and never again will you be in danger. You three are officially off duty indefinitely.”

Hokura’s eyes widened in shock as she looked back at Amara, who also had a look of dismay on her face when the first child mouthed, “We’ll figure this out,” to Amara and looked up at the professor. “It’s so good to be back, and in the safety of the compound,” she sighed, placing her head on his shoulder. She was exhausted.

As they rounded the corner, Amara saw Adam standing with Doctor Allen. She couldn’t help but break into a run as she collided with the third child hard enough that they both fell back onto the floor. Amara kissed him hard as he held onto her for dear life.

Once they finally parted, Adam breathed. “I knew I would see you again.” He beamed as Amara helped him up and then glanced at the doctor, who was staring wide-eyed at Hokura and the professor and how she had her head rested

on him and how he had his arm wrapped around her.

The professor looked up at the shock on the doctor's face and smiled wickedly as he regarded him and Adam. "Since everything is out in the open now, I can tell you all myself that the first child and I are indeed together and will no longer have to sneak around hiding it." The professor cleared his throat. "Now, doctor, if you would see to Amara, I will see to Hokura. We can run a few tests to make sure they're still in perfect health and get them both on their way. I'm sure they're beyond exhausted from their journey and will need some rest." The doctor only nodded as he opened up a facility door and ushered Amara, followed by Adam, inside.

Amara took Adam's hand as he helped her up on the gurney. He stayed by her side as the doctor sat on a chair rummaging through different syringes. "What on earth happened last night?" Adam finally asked, not being able to sit quietly any longer. Doctor Allen turned around just in time to see Amara wince.

He glided up to Amara and looked at her. "The truth Amara, you can trust me wholeheartedly. I swear I will not utter a word to anyone. I have a feeling it's not exactly the same story you and Hokura have told the professor."

Adam nodded as she looked up at him. "You can trust the doctor; he's actually already shared a great deal of information with me."

Amara took a deep breath and went over the account of what truly happened.



The professor sighed as he leaned up against the door. "Now that that has been dealt with, we won't have to hide anymore," Dorian said, closing the door behind them. He was on Hokura in a second, pushing her against him. "Never again," he said, kissing her deeply. "I swear I will kill every last rebel who dare even look your way."

"Dorian, please," Hokura gasped, but he wouldn't hear it as he covered her mouth with his as he held her.

When they finally broke, he stared at her. "Do you have any idea what it felt

like thinking you were gone?” He breathed heavily.

Hokura stepped back and looked away, trying to catch her breath as she sagged. “Dorian, I am so tired. Can we please run the tests so I can sleep for a couple of hours? Please,” she begged; her knees were feeling weak as she stumbled slightly towards the gurney. He caught her and held her as she rested her head against him.

She had looked so fragile just now. Obviously, she hadn’t slept all night and had been fighting to try and get home. He reconciled with himself that he could get the tests done as quickly as possible and then take her up to his quarters and tuck her in beside him so they could both enjoy a long and much-needed rest.

“Very well,” he stated as he turned for a syringe.

She wrapped her arms around his body and rested herself against his back, she was aching to feel as though she could dive deep into her feelings for him, but suddenly everything inside of her felt barren.

He turned to see her eyes watering. He gently brought his hand to her face and wiped a lone tear, looking at her in concern. “What is it?” he asked softly. “Did they hurt you?”

“I didn’t know if I would ever make it back,” she said, wiping another tear from her cheek. It had been true, but in a way, Dorian couldn’t understand. She was conflicted that morning. After talking with James all night, she had played with the idea of staying but knew she had to return.

Dorian’s expression softened. “You’ve been through a lot, come and let’s get this over with and then we can be done for the day. I promise if you want to stay in bed all day, I’ll bring you iced tea, and we can have dinner brought to my quarters.”

Hokura lightly nodded.



Doctor Allen sagged in his chair. “I was afraid of this, and now everything has come together.” He stopped for a moment. “If Hokura knows that the professor

has been manipulating her, then she's in danger. If he finds out that you're trying to escape, then you'll all be in danger. You need to leave sooner than just three days!" he urged.

"The rebel won't be back for three. We just have to wait things out. Anyway, the professor said that we're off duty and won't be allowed out any longer. We're pretty much prisoners now," Amara said, chewing on her lip.

"How did everything go so wrong?" Adam sighed, bringing his hands to his face in frustration.

"It's always been wrong. It's just that you now know the truth. This was all going to happen eventually. It was just a matter of time, the only thing that hasn't been fully in our hands has been the uprising, but we're well aware of that as well. In fact, we have a hand in it," Doctor Allen stated.

"What!?" Amara cried, jumping to her feet.

The doctor brought his hand to his mouth, motioning Amara to stay quiet. "I had spoken to Talon, it's being kept quiet, but it was the governor who started pushing for it. They had moles from the compound pose as citizens. They started the idea of the civilian uprising; they knew there was rebel activity outside the walls and were able to recruit one to start bringing in weapons by telling them about the harshness of the compound and that they needed the weapons for a civilian uprising."

"Why would the governor push for a war between the civilians and the compound?" Adam asked, trying to piece everything together.

"Why else, if the civilians go to war with the compound, then the compound is justified to wipe them out. The superior beings keep living, and those who are no longer needed are eradicated with all the breakthroughs in technology, science, in how we create our food. We no longer need the civilians of Meridiana like we once did. Before the walls went up, the compound was where the civilians worked. They all had small menial tasks here. In the beginning, we depended on the civilians." The doctor shook his head. "But not anymore."

Adam stared at Amara as her eyes widened. They were both in total shock. "That's genocide!" Adam whispered.

"And it's been done for thousands of years. There's no stopping them.



Believe me, I've spoken to Talon. I've tried. Why do you think the watch has been training day and night like crazy? Of course, there will be casualties, but we want to keep our sides to a minimum," the doctor sneered.

"Why didn't you say anything before?" Adam asked in earnest.

"Up until Hokura and Amara went missing, we were still months away from this happening. We were going to try and figure something out! You two going out just sped up the process from months to days," he answered, looking at Amara. "I don't blame you two. This was going to happen either way."

Amara breathed. "I need to tell Hokura."

The doctor looked down in helplessness. "You weren't the only ones who've been thinking of leaving, but I fear trying to get this information to Hokura might not be easy."

Adam looked at the doctor in all seriousness. "Come with us."

"I have someone here that I need to stay for," the doctor said, looking away. "I'm sure she knows this is coming up from under us."

"Bring her!" Amara urged. "We made a pact. The rebel commander promised that whoever came with us would be welcomed and that he would take them."

The doctor gave it some thought. "I will see if I can convince her. In the meantime, we three need to come up with a plan, and we need to get this information to Hokura."



Dorian had carried Hokura up to his suite and had laid her in his bed. She had been melancholic since her return. He watched her sleep as he stretched out beside her. She hadn't wanted to engage him and had pushed him away, stating that she was tired. He fought with himself to be more understanding. She had been through a lot and had needed her rest.

He had purposely pushed her these past few days, from training to being physical with her. He needed to understand that she needed some time. Still, his

plans were moving ahead. He had thought she would be pleased that they no longer had to sneak around now that everything was out in the open, but even that didn't seem to help her mood. He was hoping it would lighten once she awoke. He kissed her lightly on the cheek, causing her to stir but not wake. There was nothing more that he could do at this moment so he resolved that he too would take advantage of getting some much-needed rest.

Hokura awoke to Dorian's sleeping face. He had looked so soft lying next to her. She had yearned to feel the spark that she had felt just a night ago. The fire seemed to have quickly burnt out in her heart. She wanted to cry as she watched him. How could she have been so wrong about him?

She thought of her predicament. He was going to hold her as a prisoner next to him. How could she possibly escape the compound now? She gently got out of his bed, grabbed a blanket, and wrapped it around herself as she walked to the large bay windows that overlooked the city. The sun would be setting soon. Her hours were ticking away by the minute. She felt a pang of regret. Maybe she should have just stayed with James, but... she needed to get Amara and Adam out. Amara wouldn't have stayed, and she couldn't have let her come back alone. Dorian would have gone mad, sending men after her until she returned. Hokura couldn't allow that to happen. She had to keep the commander and the rebels safe.

Then it hit her, was that what true love was? That she would think to sacrifice herself to keep him safe. She watched the city below bask in the light of the sun as if it were burning. She had been so fed up with the idea of her destiny; she wished it would burn away as well. She heard Dorian shuffling out of bed and had prepared herself as he came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her.

"Beautiful," he said, kissing her neck.

"It'll always look so different in the sunlight," she said, staring down at the city.

"No," he mused, "not the city, never the city, just brick, and civilians, that's hardly anything to call beautiful. I was talking about you."

Hokura merely looked sadly out the window. She tried to enjoy his warmth,

tried to allow herself to become wrapped in his love, but at that moment, all she was doing was hoping that James had moved his camp far enough away. That everyone would be safe and that he would be back on his way to get her.

“You don’t seem yourself,” Dorian stated, turning Hokura around to face him. “Were you telling me the truth when I asked what happened? You didn’t leave anything out, did you?”

She couldn’t break now; she had played the game of deceiving the others. Now she had to turn it back on him. She smiled as she leaned into him and rested her head against his chest. “I promise I told you everything. It’s been a very emotional time. I thought they were going to kill me; I was so worried that I would never see you again.” She grabbed onto him and held on. “Even walking back when I told Amara about you and me... I was so afraid that I would never see you again. That’s why I told her, that’s why I put it to words, Dorian! It was as if saying it out loud meant I would somehow make it back to you!”

He clutched her and held onto her. “I’m so sorry,” he said, kissing her. “You’ll never have to be afraid again. You’re here with me now. I’ll never let you go; I’m not going anywhere.” He needed her. He wanted to be with her but could tell she was exhausted. Just by her composure, he knew she was worn out.

Hokura knew she had to stall him. She had to put some distance between them and see the others so they could plan. “Dorian,” she asked sheepishly, “do you want me to stay here tonight?”

“Of course!” he said, bringing his hand to her face and gently cradling her cheek. “Tonight, and every night forward, Hokura, we don’t have to hide anymore.”

Hokura’s cheeks reddened. “Can I go back to my room and bring some of my clothes up here then, especially since all I have is the medical gown at the moment.” She blushed.

Dorian’s smile brightened. “Of course, my dear, that’s an excellent idea. How about I order us dinner, and afterward, you can go to your quarters while I brief Talon, and we can have a lovely evening together, just the two of us.”

She closed her eyes as his arms held her, his arms felt so safe, but she knew the man holding her was anything but.

Hokura sat on the couch next to Dorian and nibbled on her dinner.

Dorian had gone ahead and ordered a large amount of food. "You can try anything you like; you'll never have to bother with cafeteria food again," he said, glancing at her.

She hadn't realized how absolutely famished she was until she started eating. She had to remind herself to go slow or risk feeling sick later this evening.

Dorian merely sat beside her watching her with a smile on his face.

After dinner, he sat merely holding her on his couch as she drifted between sleep and rest in his arms. A smile was still across his face in complete satisfaction as she lay on his chest. It wasn't until his pager buzzed that he glanced across the room at it with a scowl. He knew it was Talon and that he would have to leave. He glanced down at Hokura, he would be quick, and they would have what would be the first night of the rest of their lives together. He shifted slightly as she woke up.

"I have to go and brief Talon for the night," he said, looking away in disappointment. "You said you wanted to quickly get some of your things from your room so you can do that." He had wanted to tell her to do it as quickly as possible and get back to him but wasn't ready to make a command of it yet. She had seemed so breakable upon returning back to him; he needed to make sure she still had every reason to trust him.

"Yes," Hokura said, stretching as she got up, "I'll try and get as much as I can..."

"That won't be necessary," Dorian cut her off. "Just get the essentials, and I will have someone pack up your suite tomorrow."

Hokura was taken back. She was hoping that she could stall as long as possible.

Dorian's face lightened when he saw her change in expression. "You've had a very long and hard day; you don't need to tire yourself out with such trivial things. Grab what you need and then come back and rest. You need your rest after such an ordeal."

Hokura merely nodded. They both got up and went to the door.

Dorian grabbed something and placed it in Hokura's hand. "In case you get

back before I do or things end up running long for me, this is yours now,” he said, placing a key in her hand. “My quarters are just as much yours as they are mine now.”

They made their way down the elevator to the main floor. “I promise I’ll be back in a while. Make yourself at home when you get back,” Dorian said and then headed towards the briefing rooms.

Hokura sighed, staring at the key. Things were moving so fast; she hoped to go up to her room as quickly as possible and grab what few things she needed and see if she could track down Amara and Adam before Dorian would get back. She stepped into the elevator, which led up to the suites, when she saw Doctor Allen. He hurried to catch up to her and caught the elevator with her.

“We need to talk,” he said, standing beside her, “but not here. Amara and Adam have been waiting for you at the second child’s place.”

Hokura nodded. “I need to grab things quickly from my room, and then I’ll be right over.”

Doctor Allen smiled. “Good, it’s best that we’re not seen together at the moment. I will meet you there in a few minutes.”

As they both got off, the doctor went the other way towards Amara’s room. Hokura sighed. At least she wasn’t going to have to go far to find the others. She made haste and quickly got to her room and packed a bag of essentials. She wanted to pack more but recalled how persistent Dorian had been about just grabbing a few things for tonight. She remembered to grab the canvas she had made earlier. She wanted to eventually give it to the professor, either way. She found the irony of it not being finished. She then quickly made her way to Amara’s. She opened the door and let herself in. The doctor, Amara, and Adam were already sitting around the small living room waiting for her.

“I’m amazed the professor let you out of his sight,” Amara gasped as she got up and hugged Hokura.

“Not for long. He’s currently briefing with Talon and then will be back, so my time is limited,” Hokura said, raising an eyebrow as she looked at Doctor Allen.

“The doctor was so kind as to fill me in. He knows everything,” Adam

stated. "What the rebel commander told you and Amara was true. The doctor confirmed it with me."

Hokura's heart sank. "Why didn't you tell us?" she asked pleadingly.

Doctor Allen stood and walked over to Hokura, placing his hands on her shoulders. "I only found out just a few days ago. It was mentioned that the civilian uprising would start if anything happened to you two, and although I haven't been able to confirm, it might be on its way." He stopped as he raked his hands through his hair. "I thought we had more time, but we don't."

"You three need to get out!" Hokura cried.

Amara stood in front of Hokura with an angry look across her face. "And what about you?"

"I..." Hokura stopped for a moment. "I don't think there's any way possible that I'll be able to, but with Dorian keeping a close eye on me, I'll be able to keep him distracted while everyone else gets out and makes a break for it!"

The three of them stood shocked.

"Hokura, it doesn't have to be this way!" Doctor Allen said. "We have time to come up with a plan, don't sacrifice yourself like this!"

Hokura could feel tears coming to her eyes. "You'll all have a chance to escape, to be free and save whoever you can, you must do it!"

Amara glared at Hokura, straining her voice. "And you think for one second that the commander would leave here without you?"

"He has too. He gave his word," Hokura pleaded with her.

Amara merely shook her head, her expression softened. "He's doing this all for you, Hokura. He's moving his camp and people and coming back for you." She made a frustrated noise. "Don't you get it? He loves you, dammit!"

Adam came up to Amara and placed his arms around her to settle her as she continued. "Or are you so blinded by the professor that you can't see what's right in front of you anymore?"

Hokura stepped back, looking at all three of them.

"We have time, but you are right Hokura, you need to keep Dorian busy for the next couple of days so we can collaborate on something," Doctor Allen said. "If all his attention is on you, then he won't be looking at the three of us. There

will be a chance that we can all make it.” The doctor looked at the other two peacekeepers and then at her. “Hokura, I know right now that you feel like a pawn in all of this, but please, you need to trust me.” He was sure the first child had heard this enough lately; his look became desperate. “I will never falter, I want to keep the three of you safe, and your safety is no longer within the walls of the compound.”

Hokura looked from Adam to Amara, who both nodded.

“I am going to see if I can find what’s happening in the city from Talon after he briefs with the professor. I’ll meet up with these two afterward. You need to get back to his quarters...” The doctor looked at her in earnest. “Hokura, you cannot let on that you know anything. Everything has to be as it once was before you found all this out.” He didn’t want to say it; he didn’t want to tell her she was in danger of him.

“We will find a way to get word to you,” Adam said. “We’re a unit, we will work together, and we will leave here together.”



The professor made his way down to his briefing office to see both Talon and Governor Larson standing in front of the doorway. His face hardened as he unlocked his door, and the three of them went in.

“Gentlemen,” the professor stated as he sat in his seat across from them and folded his hands.

“We have trouble,” Talon said, leaning back and crossing his arms. He didn’t like this situation one bit.

The professor looked up to the governor. He already had a hunch about what was about to be said.

“It’s starting. Word got out that the two peacekeepers had been taken, and the civilians started rallying today,” the governor said.

Dorian scowled. “Why did you allow your mole to leak such private information?”

The governor stopped. "There was more than one in place. It seems that the group went rogue on us and is now in hiding. We only got this intel from one who decided to keep their nose clean and come back to me with this information."

"How long?" Dorian asked in a very stern voice.

The governor gulped. "Two days."

"What!?" the professor yelled as he shot up from his desk.

"You two were playing with fire planning this all out, and now it's come back to bite you in the ass," Talon said, looking up at the professor. "The day watch didn't have any issues. If they're all preparing for this, hopefully, the night watch won't have any difficulties either."

"We have two days to prepare ourselves," the professor stated, staring hard at both men. "The peacekeepers will not be participating in this."

"And that's why you've been training the watch so damn hard so they could stand in, isn't it?" Talon scoffed but stopped as the professor's steely eyes bore down on him.

"We have enough weapons and firepower that we can easily overtake the civilians. The compound is pretty much impenetrable, which means we can station men on the roofs and walls that surround it and take out civilians who try to storm it." The professor spoke again; he looked at the governor. "You wanted this war. Now it's here. I suggest you start going over tactics and preparing since your time is limited."

"What about the watch?" Talon asked, his voice strained.

"Keep them on duty, and if anything comes about, they are to radio back to you right away. We will keep them on their simulation training, but I want them all ready at a moment's notice," the professor said. He wasn't ready for any of this yet. Dammit, he loathed mankind and how they could so quickly turn on one another. He wondered what Larson had done to cause these men to betray him.

"Understood, sir," Talon answered.

"After sending the watch out tonight, continue to monitor them but start going over tactics." He glowered at the governor; he was incredibly unhappy with the man. "Get the generals in here and start going over tactics. This was



your doing and what you've been planning. I have other things to see to tonight."

"You're not staying?" Governor Larson cried, standing up.

The professor merely smirked at him. "No, Governor, as stated, I have other things to see to tonight. You can send all reports up to my quarters, and I will go over them there and will be in touch with you tomorrow. This mess is due to your own personnel. You can start with the cleanup effort." He waited for the men to move, but they both stayed seated, which annoyed him. "Is there anything else that needs to be discussed?"

Talon shook his head.

The governor gave a grave expression but kept quiet.

"Then this meeting is over, and I will let you two get on with it. I suggest you be diligent in this matter, considering this will change the course of this city," the professor said as he stood up and dismissed the two.

Once they were both gone, the professor brought his head to his hands and cursed. Of course, the moles weren't going to side with the compound. They were most likely the lowest of the low being picked for this job. He was sure that the governor knew more than he was letting on, but he had faith that between himself, Talon, and the tactics crew, they would be able to get the upper hand on the situation. They had been preparing for this for months. It was now simply happening sooner than they had expected. He gave himself a moment to compose himself and grinned at the thought of retiring to his quarters for the night.



As the professor opened the door and walked into his suite, he saw Hokura's head rise up off the couch and grinned that she was waiting there for him.

"How did things go?" she asked, walking up to him as he unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt.

"Not well," he sighed, "but that's nothing you need to concern yourself with." He turned to her as she wrapped her arms around him and allowed his

stress to melt as she brought herself closer to him. “Did you get everything you needed for tonight?”

He could feel her nodding against him.

At least that was one less thing he had to think about tonight, she did as he asked, and she was back before him, which was a relief. He was hoping now that she had a chance to rest and eat that her demeanor would return.

The horns blazed in the distance as Hokura’s head came up to attention as her body went rigid. He wrapped his arms around her. “You don’t have to be out there tonight,” he whispered in her ear. “You’re safe here with me.”

Hokura only nodded. The day was done. It felt like the night before had happened ages ago as Dorian led her to the couch. He continued unbuttoning his shirt as he placed his glasses on the table in front of him and simply laid his head back and closed his eyes as she rested beside him. She stared up at him for a moment. He always looked like a different person when they were alone like this as if the professor and Dorian were two different people. His well-toned body underneath his large suits, his piercing blue eyes under his glasses, even how his face rested and eased.

His one eye opened as he glanced over at her. “Yes?” he asked.

Hokura blushed and looked away. Was it possible that maybe those feelings would spark again? She remembered what the doctor and her friends had said. She needed to keep him busy, he was in for the night, and Hokura knew she didn’t have to entertain the idea at the moment, but her heart still yearned for that feeling.

Could they be wrong about him? Could there be something more? She wanted to hold onto hope, to hold onto the idea that the man who held her loved her for more than his own gain, that she was more to him than a science experiment. She crawled into his lap, straddling him, and looked at his face.

“I like it so much more when you’re Dorian and not the professor,” she said in a soft tone.

He smiled, bringing his arm up over his head to help shield the light as he looked up towards her. “I much prefer it too,” his smile faded slightly, “but both sides exist for a reason.”

She suddenly felt so small as she pressed herself forward. “They don’t have to when you’re with me. I know the truth. I know that you hide what you really are from everyone.” She slid her hands upon his broad chiseled chest. “You don’t hide that with me.”

He shifted under her and looked away. “There’s still so much you don’t understand, Hokura.”

“Then tell me!” she cried. “We’re here together. What more is there now?”

He grabbed her, brought her crashing into him, and kissed her with force as he held the back of her head. His need for her only grew. “What have I told you time and time again?” he said in a husky voice. “Do I have to ask you again if you trust me?”

Hokura’s words stuttered. “Y-yes, Dorian, I trust you.” She wanted to say no. She wanted to say she didn’t know who she trusted right now.

He saw the doubt in her eyes. He picked her up off the couch and flipped her beneath him, and kissed her harder as he brought his hands over her body, making her gasp. “I’ll ask you one more time, Hokura,” he continued, “do you trust me?”

“Yes, Dorian!” she pleaded. He needed to believe her.

“Then don’t question me and believe me that I will tell you when the time is right.”



Doctor Allen had left Amara’s quarters, feeling exhausted. He sagged against the wall for a moment as he tried to compose himself. How could he look at Hokura and tell her to keep the professor busy while they figured this out? The thought of her being so manipulated by him made him cringe.

“I’m sorry, Hokura,” he whispered; he brought his hand through his hair. He had felt disheveled ever since he sat down with Amara to do her medical tests this morning. That had been hours ago, and since then, it felt like he had the ground knocked out from under him.

He had to speak to Talon. He had to speak to Annette. He needed to help the other two come up with a plan of getting out of the city. He wondered if Annette would come with him, would she want to leave all this for the unknown beyond the walls. The peacekeepers were hardened. They were unnatural survivors. Annette was a woman of science who was used to the clean, polished floors and walls of the compound. Would he leave if she stayed? If he stayed and the professor found out that he had a hand in the peacekeepers escaping, he certainly wouldn't live long after that fact. He knew he had to leave too.

He found himself walking down towards the briefing rooms in hopes of seeing Talon. He noted that the professor's briefing room was closed. He didn't hear anyone from behind the door, so he continued a few doors down to Talon's. He could hear raised voices past the room to one which had the door ajar as he peeked in. He saw Talon rapidly pacing as the governor and some other men went over what looked to be a large map.

"We've got two days to figure this out," Larson harped on at the men. "We need to keep casualties low on our end. Mason and Harrison, I want to make sure the tally of weapons we have is correct. We need to know how many armed men we can have fighting for us."

"Sir, this is madness!" Harrison stated.

"I don't give a damn what you think, just do as you're damn well told, or I'll have you demoted lower than Gavin ended up when he spoke his mind! You can be doing the tedious government work right alongside him!"

The doctor stopped; he knew to speak to Talon at this moment was out of the question. The governor had just confirmed what he was wondering. He turned and hurried towards the training facility to find Annette. Two days, his heart sank. The uprising was going to take place the night the peacekeepers were to leave. The compound was going to be impossible to sneak out of if the uprising was already happening. His mind was racing with possibilities.

He came to the training facility to see Annette tiredly writing on a clipboard in the simulation screening room. Even now, the day watch was running trials.

"Annette," he said, stepping into the room and closing the door.

She looked up at him and blushed. She quickly got up from her chair and

hugged him. “Allen!” she cried, “what on earth has been going on? I’ve heard so many different things, about the peacekeepers, about the watch, what’s happening?”

He held her for a moment as he stroked her hair. “The uprising is happening; in two days, we’ll be at war,” he spoke softly.

“This is awful, Allen!” she continued. “This isn’t what I signed up for. I thought we had time to stop this. That someone could talk some sense into them before this all happened!”

The doctor wished he could simply stop time. He wished he could have foreseen all this. “It’s happening, Annette, there’s nothing we can do to stop it... but...” he faltered. If he asked her and she didn’t come with him, then what?

“But what?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Will you come with me?”

Annette looked up at him in confusion. “Come with you where? Where on earth would we possibly go?”

“With the peacekeepers.” He kicked himself for not starting at the beginning as she gave him an even more confused look. “Hokura and Amara met up with the rebel commander. He had told them his side of the story why they were exporting the weapons. That they were for a civilian uprising, he offered to take them out of the city and to one of their camps. They’re traveling to find the free world. He told them they could bring anyone from the compound, and he would take them. He’s returning in two days to take whoever is with them.”

Annette left his arms and sat down bewildered. “Only one person has ever escaped the compound, Allen!”

“I know.” He sighed.

“They’re planning on leaving during the uprising? That’s madness! How are they even hoping to...” she then looked up at him. “You can’t be serious? Are you helping them?” she cried and crashed back into him, holding onto him for dear life. “If you help them and the professor finds out, he’ll kill you!” The reality of the situation turned over in her mind as tears streamed down her cheeks. “You’re leaving.”

The doctor squeezed her, looking down at her. “Come with me, Annette,” he

kissed her gently. "Let's be together outside these walls. Let's finally be free."

She didn't know what to say.

"I'll keep you safe," he promised. "You're not safe here anymore. Who knows what's going to happen here once the compound is successful with eradicating the civilians!" He shook his head. "Dorian is going mad with power; I wouldn't trust him or the governor with my life right now."

Annette trembled. "The very thought of leaving, I'm scared."

"We're all scared, Annette, but I'm more afraid of what will happen to us if we stay than if we leave. Hokura trusts this rebel, so does Amara. If anything, we just need to trust the peacekeepers."

She sighed in contemplation. "How do we escape?"

He looked down at her and pursed his lips. "We haven't figured that out yet. I'm working with Amara and Adam, trying to make up a plan. I promise I will let you know."

Annette gave him a look. "What about Hokura?"

The doctor gave her a disgruntled look. "She's keeping Dorian busy enough to keep him from looking our way."



Amara paced diligently in her room as Adam sat on the couch, bouncing his foot off her coffee table, thinking.

"Dammit, how can this be so hard?" Amara cried as Adam looked up at her.

"You couldn't have anticipated any of this, Amara," he said. "None of us had any clue that the professor was seeing Hokura, or that she had spoken to the rebel commander, or... or any of this!" He stood feeling frustrated. "How did it all get like this?"

"It's his fault!" Amara said as she stopped pacing for a moment. "He's the one who started whispering into her ear. He's the reason why she was acting so off and couldn't talk to us! He told her to keep quiet, and she listened to him!"

Adam softened. "You can't blame Hokura for listening to him. He's our

commander, he's..."

"A snake!" Amara continued. "He's using us, using everyone in the compound for his own science project." Amara felt tears in her eyes. "Our entire lives were already set out before us before we were living them."

"Stop it!" Adam commanded. He got off the couch and stood in front of Amara. "Stop it right now! We have a chance to change all this now! We just have to figure out how to get out of here. Besides, you've snuck out once before without anyone knowing. We can do it again!"

Amara felt her shoulders sink. "That was just me, and with your help, we're talking about all three of us and the doctor and possibly more." She turned away. "Plus, we have to somehow get Hokura away from that mad man!"

"He let her leave last night. He might let her leave again..." Adam stated. He closed the gap between him and Amara and held her. "Maybe you should have stayed with the rebels. This would have been easier."

Amara looked at him in anger. "How can you say that? Do you think I would have left you?" She shifted out of his embrace and stepped back.

Adam looked down at her. It would have been easier. The two of them would be free and already on their way. His heart would have been broken, but if he could have somehow known she and Hokura were safe, it would have slowly knit back together over time.

"That's the stupidest thing you've ever said in your life, Adam! How you think that I would abandon you!" Amara raised her voice. "I love you!" She then stepped back further as her eyes widened, and she started to laugh as her tears began to flow. "Only I would yell those words to someone in anger." She had wanted to say them, she had wanted to tell him as she had dived into his arms that morning when she returned but hadn't the chance, and now she had yelled them at him.

Adam smiled at her. "And that's why..." he stepped closer to her, "I love you." He kissed her, kissed her more passionately than he ever had. He came away from the kiss, still smiling at her confused look, he held her. "We'll figure this out. We have the doctor on our side. He was going to talk to Talon. We just have to have some faith."

“We have two days,” Amara muttered. “Hokura was the one who had told the commander the timeline. We should have gone with his plan and just left tonight.”

“She didn’t know,” Adam coaxed her. “Neither of you knew what you were walking back into...”

“Hokura did. That’s why she said we needed more time. Dammit, I wish I could just sit down with her and pick her brain. She always seems to have some kind of plan, she’s still in the compound, but it feels like she’s a million miles away,” Amara started.

“She’s buying us some much-needed time. We need to put our heads together and think for ourselves. As much as we want her here, that’s not going to happen. We need to figure this one out without her,” Adam continued. “Now, let’s go over what we do know until the professor gets back to us.”



The doctor had left Annette to continue with the simulations. He needed to think. He found himself outside wandering the compound grounds. He knew the peacekeepers came out here every so often before the briefing. He had never been one for walking the grounds much. Now he wondered why he hadn’t done so more often.

The grass looked so green in comparison to the white walls in the compound, the air smelled so fresh, he didn’t know what pushed him, but he climbed to where he had found Adam this morning on the roof. He sat where he found the third child and stared out at the wall, which divided the compound from the city. He wondered why Adam would come up here. It wasn’t like there was a view of anything other than the sky and what had been containing them as he sprawled out and stretched his legs on the ground. He found a small stone, he picked it up and threw it with all his might at the wall, the doctor’s eyes widened as a very tiny crack formed, he couldn’t help but feel a smile spread across his face, he didn’t know the meaning of it, but in his heart, he felt like he was close to



something.

“There has to be a way,” Allen mused, staring out at the wall. Excitement welled inside of him. The unknown was out there, and he was daring to venture into it and leave these walls behind. Even with the countdown, there were still rations being given out to the civilians. There were still cargo trucks making deliveries to the city. Maybe they could possibly stow away in one of those? He shook his head; no, that might work for one or two people but not five. He sighed in frustration.

He needed to talk to Talon. The man would know a way out better than him. Talon knew the layout of the and the city. He knew all the unseen nooks and crannies. He had known where the rebels were and sent the watch the other way. He scowled. The man would be in tactics briefings all day. He needed a reason to contact him and get him away. That’s when his eyes widened. His men were running simulations. He could have Annette call him in for something that had to do with the simulations and the men’s progress but something small enough that it wouldn’t call attention to the professor. He grimaced, he doubted that Dorian would be leaving his quarters tonight if he was holed up with Hokura by his side, so it had to be tonight.

The doctor made his way down from the roof as he stared at the wall and then up to the facility's large fourth floor. This compound was just a society of secrets and lies. He wondered what else was possibly going on that only a few people knew about. He wondered if the scientists knew about the uprising, or if they would even be told or would simply work right through as the madness ensured outside and the compound wiped out the city of Meridiana’s citizens.

He made his way back to the grass when he spotted something white lightly fanning its wings on a longer blade. It was a moth. The doctor was astounded as he made his way closer. He had never seen an insect before. He was entranced in watching it dance between the blades before it took off and flew over the wall. The doctor stared in amazement as it went above and beyond the wall and vanished into the night.

He hurriedly made his way back to Annette, who was just briefing another day watch crew. The night watch had just gone out for their watch, and shifts had

just changed over. He wondered when on earth the woman slept. As the watch went into the simulation room, Annette looked up at him.

“I need to speak with Talon, but I need you to call him in, tell him it has to do with the simulations,” he said in earnest. “Can you make something up to get him down here?”

Annette nodded.



The phone rang through to the briefing office, where Talon was still pacing over maps with the governor and tactics team. He saw that it was from the training facility and picked it up. The governor paid him little mind and didn't even glance over at him as his men were setting up points along the compound wall, which had the clearest views.

Talon stood and cleared his throat. “Would it be alright if you gentlemen excused me?” he asked. “It was from the training facility, Annette simply...” he was cut off by the governor.

“Yes, if it has to do with training, then see it done.” Larson waved his hand at Talon.

Talon smiled at the dismissal. At the moment, he would have chewed off his own arm at the chance to be out of the tactics room and silently thanked Annette. He was exhausted, and the idea of this war had his stomach in knots. He didn't like the governor beforehand, and now with learning everything he had, his dislike for the man only grew.

He took his time walking down the hallways of the compound. He wanted to procrastinate as much time as possible to be with his own thoughts about how ludicrous everything was suddenly turning. He had wanted to speak to the professor without Larson looking over his shoulder, but the man had dismissed himself from all operations tonight and wouldn't hear from anyone.

He arrived at the simulation observation room door and straightened himself. He was sure he didn't want to hear what news was to come of his men. He was

thankful that at least it was Annette who was going to speak to him and not the professor's temper. He knocked and had Annette usher him in. He sat in a chair and realized that the doctor was there as well.

"This isn't about the simulations, is it?" Talon said in a dry voice.

"No," Doctor Allen stated, "this is about whether or not we can continue to trust you."

Talon grimaced. "I haven't given you any reason not to trust me. Do you want to hear it? The uprising is happening in two days, we're going to war in two days, and I've been in tactic meetings. The last thing the governor was going over was the best stations along the compound wall to set up to snipe off civilians."

The doctor shifted. "Talon, you know the ins and outs of this compound-like the back of your hand, you know the layout of the city... you have to help us."

Talon raised an eyebrow. "Help you what?"

"Escape!" the doctor urged. "We're going to escape."

Talon leaned back in his chair and laughed. "Escape where? To the sand?"

"No, Talon! Just listen to him!" Annette said, keeping an eye on the screen.

"I need your word Talon," the doctor continued. "Swear to me that you won't say anything to anyone about this!"

Talon smirked. "I've known you a long-time, Doctor. I like you, and you're about the only one on my list of people I can trust at the moment. Whatever is said here won't go any further."

Doctor Allen took a deep breath. "The two peacekeepers met a rebel commander who told them what was going on. He brought them back to his camp and spoke with them. He told them he would help them escape the compound and take them with him."

Talon shot up. "Are you out of your damn mind, man? You think you're going to get the peacekeepers out of the city walls and live to tell about it?"

"That's why we need your help!" the doctor said, gritting his teeth.

"That's treason for me if anyone figures out I had a hand in this," Talon said, squeezing the bridge of his nose, suddenly wishing he was still in the briefing office.

“Then come with us, too,” Annette said.

He looked at her for a moment. He was the night watch commander, could he just up and leave his life’s work? He stopped himself. What was going to be left of his life’s work when this war was done? When the civilians no longer existed, then what? There would be no one left to police. Would they still want someone guarding the walls? Up until now, he had been loyal to the professor, but how far did that loyalty go?

“Dammit,” Talon cursed, “those are good men going to war for no reason.” He looked up at Annette and the doctor’s desperation.

“There’s an old loading dock on this end of the compound. It’s been boarded up and left for storage after the garage was moved to the other end, so it was closer to the briefing rooms so the watch wouldn’t have to make their way back through the compound before leaving. Because it’s on this side, it isn’t guarded. With that said, you’re talking about leaving during a war.” Talon then bit his bottom lip. “There’s a hole in the wall...”

“What?” Doctor Allen cried.

“There’s a hole in the wall. There are lots of damn holes in the wall. You think the rebels scaled it to bring in crates of weapons. Use your head, Doctor.”

The doctor stepped back and shook his head in bewilderment as Annette quietly stood by his side.

“As I was saying, there’s a hole about a few blocks up between second and third avenue. As long as you can get out of the compound and stick to the wall on the west side, you’ll be able to get beyond it. The hole itself is covered by a heap of scrap metal. If you hit the industrial area, then you’ve gone too far and have to backtrack,” Talon continued.

“This almost sounds too easy,” Doctor Allen stated.

“Getting beyond the wall is easy. It’s going to be getting out of here in the chaos. From what I’ve seen from the tactics, most of our men will be set up on the east side of the compound since that area along the garage would be the easiest to storm,” Talon stated.

“Come with us, Talon,” Annette said, looking at him.

The man sitting in the chair made a noise. “When are you hoping to get out

of here?”

The doctor cleared his throat. “Right after the curfew horns blow.”

Talon looked up at him and chuckled. “If we’re going to war, what makes you think there’s going to be any curfew horns?” He stopped for a moment and considered. “I will meet you at the loading dock if I can get away. If not, then go on without me.” He gave the doctor a wink. “I wasn’t planning on staying anyway. I was just planning on taking a jeep instead of going out on foot.” Talon asked Annette for a scrap piece of paper and drew up a quick map for both of them. “This is where the old dock is. I don’t know how crammed full it is or if you’ll even be able to get inside. I suggest you clear your way before you try to get out of here.”

Annette stared at him. “Thank you, Talon.”

Talon took in both of them and made a face. “This is an incredibly stupid but brave thing you’re doing here, Doctor; I hope you can get them out.” He got up. “But if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to planning. I don’t need Larson down here sniffing around or possibly getting wind of this.” Talon left them.

The doctor studied the map and then shoved it in his pocket. “It’s getting late,” he sighed. “We need to be well-rested for this.”

Annette stretched. “This is my last simulation run for the night before I retire.”

The doctor nodded. “I should make myself scarce from you over the next few days. I don’t want it to look like I’m dragging you into this.”

Annette only blushed at him. “You think when this is all said and done, we’ll actually be able to have time for a relationship?”

A light smile touched Doctor Allen’s lips. “Now we’ll be able to make time. I need to get this map to Amara and Adam. Hopefully, tomorrow between the three of us, we’ll be able to clear a way and make things easier.”

He turned. He didn’t know if or when he would see Annette again before they were fleeing for their lives. “I’ll come for you; I’ll find you before everything happens.”

Annette sighed. “You know where I’ll be.”

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Amara was lying on the couch, her head in Adam's lap as the two turned over possibilities when there was a knock at the door. Amara got up quickly and answered it to see the doctor.

"I can't stay long," he said, quickly walking in. "This is a map. There's an old loading dock located near the training facility part of the compound. You need to find it and see if we can somehow slip out from there. There's a possibility the uprising is going to be happening at this time. There's going to be panic and confusion." He handed Amara the note. "There's a hole covered by old scrap metal in the west wall, large enough to get everyone out. It's a few blocks down between second and third avenue."

Adam came up behind Amara and stared at the map. "How did you get this information?" he asked.

The doctor cleared his throat. "Talon, it was Talon."

Adam shook his head. "No wonder we were told to stay along the east wall looking for holes. They knew where they were the entire time."

"I need to get going. We all need to make ourselves scarce from one another before this happens so we can escape together. We are to meet at the inside of this loading docks when the curfew horns blaze," Doctor Allen continued. "I need you two to scope it out tomorrow and make sure it'll be accessible. If I don't hear from you between now and then, I'll take that there aren't any problems and will meet you there." He looked up at both of them. "I *will* be there; we need to find a way to get this information to Hokura."

The two peacekeepers nodded; Amara smiled. "I have a plan. Leave it to me."

The doctor nodded and was on his way again.

Amara slumped and went back to the couch and crashed on it.

Adam looked down at her and raised an eyebrow. "Care to share this plan?"

Amara chuckled as she put her arm over her forehead. "Not really...but

you're going to keep asking until I do... I can go to the professor and beg to talk to Hokura. I'm going to tell him that I need to talk to her about things between you and myself and that I need to confide in another female."

Adam gave Amara a look. "Do you think you can be convincing?"

Amara smirked at him as she raised her head from the couch and smiled back at him. "Believe me. I'll be so convincing that he'll practically push Hokura towards me and tell me to get out of his face.

Adam shook his head. "I'm almost upset that I'll have to miss this performance. While you're away doing that, I'll check out this loading dock."



Hokura gazed at Dorian, who was now lying in bed next to her, contently reading something. She pursed her lips; she barely knew anything about him. She felt like she was still grasping for something that was no longer there but maybe if she knew more about him, she would be able to understand things.

"Dorian," she said quietly. He turned to her with a solemn expression, "I-I," she stuttered slightly, "I just don't know that much about you..."

He placed the pile of paper on his nightstand and rolled over to face her. "What is there to know?"

"Well," Hokura thought for a moment about the basics, "what about your favorite colors?"

He gave her a questioning look. "Isn't that a little trivial?"

Hokura bit her bottom lip. "Everyone has a preference; I was guessing you like red and dark blue since your suits are usually those colors."

The professor made a disgruntled sound. "I guess then you can say those are the colors I prefer."

She felt like she wasn't getting anywhere with him. She wondered who he was in the old world. She knew that he had always been a scientist. That's when she fully rolled over to face him. "Dorian, how old are you really?"

His eyebrows rose in surprise as he gave it a thought for a moment. "Age is

irrelevant when you've stopped aging. It's merely a mathematical calculation of how many years you've physically been on this earth. It doesn't determine a person's strengths or weaknesses, how intelligent they are, or any other qualities that a person might possess." He smirked, looking at her. "Does it really matter how old I am?"

Hokura slunk onto her back. "No, I guess not."

"Would my true age disgust you?" he asked.

The first child merely shook her head.

"Then I guess it's irrelevant," he continued and then looked at her from the corners of his eyes. "Why all the questions?"

"I want to know more about you. Isn't that what people do when they're in relationships? Know everything about one another?"

He brought himself towards her and hovered over top of her body, smirking. "I know everything there is to know about you, Hokura." He kissed her deeply in hopes she would forget all the questions she had for him that night as he moved over top of her and enveloped her.



James sighed, watching the horizon as the sun spread a dusty pink glow across the land. They had driven straight the following day and into the night. Everyone was tired. He had gotten the rebels set up in a northwestern area called Samilian City, which still had some city ruins inside of it. Everyone was anxious to be on their way and to find a new place to call home, miles outside of Meridiana had merely been a pit stop in their journey but held them well enough, especially for fuel.

"Do you think she made it back okay?" he asked as Barack came up behind him.

"I won't believe anything else." His friend smiled, putting a large hand on his shoulder. "She'll be just fine, and she'll be waiting there for you," he assured. "I suggest you rest before you start on your way back. You won't be any help to



anyone if you're half asleep."

James nodded; he thought of her waiting for him. There was nothing that would keep him from getting to her. He just wished he knew whether or not she was okay and what had happened upon her returning. His heart ached for her and the situation she was going back to. He shook his head. He simply had to have faith that everything was going to work out. He sighed. It seemed like time was going by so slowly suddenly when all he wanted to do was get everyone where they needed to be. He had a responsibility to his people and to keep them safe. He had rallied them and promised them that they would be on their way, that between himself and Barack, they had a good idea of where to head next and that their hopes were that they would soon come upon one of the free cities that were left in the world.



The sun streamed in through the windows basking the professor's suite with light. Hokura turned with dread. Another night that Dorian had kept her from any further information, it had seemed every time she pushed, he would push back physically in a way that left her mindless. She didn't know how she could possibly continue lying to him. Just another two days, she thought to herself, tomorrow night she would be leaving this place. She shifted as she was about to get up when his hand grabbed her wrist.

"Going somewhere?" Dorian asked in a husky voice as he stared up at her.

"The washroom," Hokura replied meekly.

"Fine, then come right back to bed," he instructed.

Hokura walked into the bathroom and paced for a moment before washing her face. She needed a few moments away from him. Her heart ached; she couldn't deny the feelings she had for him. She wanted to grab hold onto them and, in a way, wished she hadn't known. She wished she could have still been ignorant of everything that was going on. There were things that he was going to tell her, and yet it was never time. Hokura shook her head. Time was running

out, maybe she would never know what else he had intended for her, and perhaps that was for the best. She took a deep breath before leaving the room and went back to the bed where he was waiting.

“Are you okay?” he asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

She stopped for a moment as she got back into the plush bed and lay down beside him. “I guess this all just feels so surreal,” she lied. “To wake up next to you and...” she gave him the best smile she could muster at that moment, “and not have to rush out of here and sneak down the hallway to meet the others for breakfast.”

He pulled her close beside him and held her. “Good,” he said. “It’ll take some time to get used to, but this is how every morning will be spent from now on, just you and me.”

Hokura’s brows knitted. “Don’t you have morning meetings that you have to see to?”

He brought her closer, burying his face in her hair and breathing in her scent, truly enjoying himself. “No, I had all the documentation that needs my attention sent up last night.”

Hokura’s eyes closed as her inner turmoil turned inside of her as she felt the warmth of his naked body against hers.

She heard him chuckle. “What, did you think that I would busy myself with work when I just got you back? You think that little of me?”

“I just know that with all the training that’s been going on that you’ve been really busy,” Hokura murmured.

There was another chuckle. “What would you like us to do today?”

Her heartbeat for a moment; this was a chance to be out of this room. Maybe she would possibly see the others and somehow be able to talk to them alone. “I’d like to walk the gardens; it’s been a while since I’ve seen them.”

“That’s slightly mundane, but we can do that if you wish,” he said, nuzzling deeper into her. “But for now, I just want to have a lazy morning with you, for just a little bit longer.”

Hokura closed her eyes, she needed to keep him busy, and she would, but she didn’t know if she could stomach staying in his quarters.



Amara sat beside Adam in the cafeteria. They were awake early and mulled about her suite until the need to move got the best of her.

“I hate how this has become the new norm,” she said, eating her toast.

“Not having all of us at the table?” Adam asked as he chewed his eggs. He then lowered his voice. “It won’t be for long, there will be new norms soon, and even those might change.”

Amara huffed. “Does he really think that he can literally keep her locked up with him forever?”

Adam placed his hand on hers. “This is the way it needs to be for now. You’ll see her later today if what you have in mind goes as planned.” He smiled at her in earnest. “Do you feel like I’ve isolated you with wanting to be with you all the time?”

Amara shook her head. “No, but this is different...” she sighed in frustration. “Do you think it’ll be different once we...”

Adam gazed at her. “It’ll all be different, isn’t that what we’re hoping for? It’ll all be laid out in front of us. There won’t be any lies, any more secrets. We won’t be pawns anymore. We’ll be our own people.” He turned fully towards her now. “We won’t have to fight anymore; *you* won’t have to fight anymore.”

Amara chuckled. “What on earth will I do if I don’t have to fight?”

Adam grinned. “Whatever you want.”

She looked at him and shook her head gently. “But for today, we both have jobs to do, I need to try and get Hokura away from the professor, and you need to see about our possible escape plan.” Amara sighed. “I hope this works.”

Adam squeezed her hand. “Stay positive. We’ll finish up here and then be on our way. If I don’t catch you beforehand, we’ll meet back at your place an hour before dinner.”

Amara nodded; she was just unsure how she would be able to find the professor. She hadn’t a clue about where the man was stationed during the day or

where his quarters were. Finding them was going to be a challenge in itself.

It had been two hours after breakfast, Amara had asked Annette about the professor, but unfortunately, she could only tell her that he lived on the fourth floor where the head scientists and government branch workers dwelled and that she had yet to see him that day.

Amara cursed as she simply wandered the briefing room hallways. If a room wasn't locked, it was being occupied. Her ears piqued as she came by one, the door was closed, but she could clearly hear the governor yelling.

"We want to keep destruction to a minimum on this. What do you fools not understand about that? We don't want to spend the next twenty years rebuilding this damn place! We stop them on the walls, and that's final!"

Amara's eye widened as she hurried along. She doubted that the professor was in that room.

She figured with it being so close to lunch that the professor most likely had Hokura dining with him, the thought turned in her mind. That lunch date that she had with him seemed when everything started to change. It was indeed after the blast that the professor started spending more time with her, even at briefings after she had been brought back on. The prototypes, him asking to have words with her, her random checkups. Amara felt a cold sweat come upon her; he had been manipulating her this entire time and had told her not to say a thing. She shook her head. She couldn't imagine what Hokura had gone through. No wonder she had shut herself off from the others.

Amara found herself wandering the garden in frustration. What was it going to take to get Hokura away from him? She was about to walk to the cafeteria and start having a fit to see if someone would call for him when she heard two familiar voices coming up from behind her. He was with her. Amara had to get her alone, so she took a deep breath and mentally prepared the tears. She had turned to Hokura, tears in her eyes as she cried, running towards her.

Hokura was taken back as the second child crashed into her and Dorian sobbing inconsolably, her words muffled by her tears.

"Amara!" Hokura cried as her friend braced her arms around her in worry. She was relieved to see her but had no idea why she was suddenly crying.

“Hokura!” Amara sobbed into her, clearly distraught. “Last night... Adam wanted to go further... we were in bed together... and... and” Amara brought up her pained face and sobbed loudly.

The professor was in shock as he stepped back from them and adjusted his glasses awkwardly, taking in the scene as the first child held her friend, who seemed to be inconsolable. “Hokura, it seems that Amara would like to talk to you,” he cleared his throat, “alone about this personal matter of hers.”

Amara smirked inwardly and gasped, looking up at him, tears still rolling down her cheeks. “Professor, you and Hokura know what you’re doing. I feel so lost!”

Dorian grimaced for a moment and placed his hand on the second child’s shoulder. “I’m sure Hokura can walk you through what has you so upset.”

Hokura looked up at him innocently. “I know you wanted to spend the day with me, but she really needs me. Is it alright if I come back to our quarters when I’m done?”

He pursed his lips; he had indeed wanted to spend the day with her, but what was a few hours when they had the rest of their lives. He smiled lightly. “Of course, this is important.” He kissed the top of her head and walked away.

As Amara continued bawling, she watched him depart, and when she was sure he was gone, she dried her tears and smirked up at Hokura, who was still holding her. “I’m pretty good, aren’t I?” She chuckled.

Hokura stepped back, looking at her friend in dismay. “What on earth was all that about?”

Amara shrugged as she continued wiping her face clean of tears. “I needed to find a way to get you alone. I figured there was no way he would want to deal with me having a crying fit and that he’d allow me to confide in you.”

Hokura let out a small giggle. “You had me worried.”

“Good, if I convinced you, then that means he thinks I’m having an emotional meltdown, which will give us some time.” She smirked.

“We’ve found a way out of here,” she whispered. “Come on, we’ll go a little further into the garden, and I’ll tell you about it.”



Adam had made his way to the loading dock door. It had opened with ease, but as he stared inside, it was obvious the room had been forgotten. He went into its vastness and coughed on the dust that seemed to have settled over everything stored in there. Adam peered into the darkness as his eyes adjusted to see a messy array of random boxes and crates stacked over six feet tall. He wondered what on earth they could possibly contain. The third child tried to navigate through everything in order to find the door, which led to the outside. There were moments where he had to climb over crates in order to move forward.

“This won’t do.” He sighed. If they were to make their escape quickly, he would have to find the door and clear a path to get to it. First, he needed to locate the door and make sure that it would open for him. He made his way on top of a large crate and struggled to find what he was looking for. Talon hadn’t marked where the door had been, only where the room itself had been.

He knew there had to be an exit on the outer wall, so he started towards it, making his way from the center of the room to the far side. There was no way he would be able to open the large loading dock garage door on the far side. He squished his body up against the wall as he fumbled his hands along, searching for a door frame. He breathed lightly to try and keep from choking on the dust. His breath stopped as his fingers came along something cold; he had found it but would it open? He pushed down on the handle to find that it barely moved. He grunted in annoyance; he hadn’t come this far to let a simple locked door stop him.

Since the door was blocked, he tried the lock again, forcing the handle down harder as he jarred his wrist.

“This is stupid,” Adam breathed to himself as he then positioned himself correctly and brought all his strength down on the handle. He heard the mechanism break as the handle went down, and the door moved slightly. He opened it a crack to see the daylight streaming through it. It indeed led to the city

streets.

Adam cautiously closed the door again and looked back at the room. His day had suddenly gotten a lot busier with having to move everything to clear a path. He started shuffling crates, trying to move them to the far side of the room, when one of the lids shifted. Adam couldn't help but open it as he stared inside of it, books, what could have been hundreds of books were held in the crate. He picked one up and stared at it. The name read Cormac McCarthy. He looked at the title of the book, *The Road*. He picked up another *No Country for Old Men*, *Child of God*. He shook his head as he flipped the cover open and read: *Property of Hollyhock Branch Library*.

He gazed at the room and wondered, were these all things from the old world that the compound had kept packed away. He went to another random crate and cracked the lid, and peered in. These books contained all yellow and black covers. He picked one up and read it, *The Internet for Dummies*. He grabbed another, *SEO for Dummies*, and another *Instagram for Dummies*.

Adam shook his head. The words were foreign to him but looking at these books' dates. They were once things of the old world, things that held no importance now, but why keep them locked up?

Adam huffed. As much as he wanted to indulge himself in his findings, the clock was ticking. "It's not like any of this matters now anyway," he said, dropping the book back into the crate as he began the slow task of moving the containers to clear a pathway to the door.



Amara stood with Hokura in the gardens. "You need to be there," she urged. "We can't leave without you."

"I know," Hokura sighed. "I'll be there." She couldn't help but feel like a vice grip was suddenly clenching down on her with what Amara had said. Usually, that was the time that Dorian met for briefing with Talon. She was hoping she could slip away while he was in his office and make a run for it.

“You don’t look so sure,” Amara said, pleading with her friend.

“I know what I have to do,” Hokura answered; it seemed despicable to simply leave him. She worried about him sending men to follow after them, but if it were true and the uprising was going to be happening while they escaped, the professor might not have any extra hands to go out after them.

“You know this is our only chance,” Amara urged. “You came up with this plan of escaping. Adam is clearing the loading dock room as we speak.”

Hokura nodded. “I’ll be there.”

Amara hugged her. “Tomorrow night, and then our new life starts.”

“And if I don’t see you till then, I will meet you in the room. I think I know where it is,” Hokura said, squeezing Amara. “I do have to get back, though. I don’t want Dorian looking for me.” She pulled back from Amara and smiled sadly. “I miss you two.”

Amara returned the sentiment. “We miss you; things haven’t been the same since...” She shook her head. “I’ll let you go; I’m going to see what Adam has uncovered.”



Hokura made her way back to Dorian’s quarters. She opened the door to see him reading over a report as he sat on the couch. His shirt was unbuttoned, and his feet were resting on his coffee table where more papers were strewn over. He wore a stern look on his face, that was until he looked up at her.

“How did everything go?” he asked, shifting, and putting his report on the table.

“Amara was merely feeling confused about things,” Hokura said as she made her way to the couch and sat beside him.

She heard the professor give a low chuckle beside her as he brought his arm up to rest on the back of the couch. “It is a confusing emotion, one of the most confusing ones someone can go through.”

That thought gave Hokura very little comfort as he placed his hand on her



thigh and leaned over towards her. “Do you remember just not that long ago how confused you were?” he said. “You said your heart was racing; you felt faint,” he whispered in her ear. “Every little thing that I did to you made your mind go blank, didn’t it?” Her heart began to race as he brought her closer to him. “Just a simple kiss opened up so many feelings inside of you, didn’t it?”

“It did,” Hokura gasped. “You knew what you were doing to me.”

He brought his body on top of hers and kissed her neck as his hands ran down her body. “I’ve always known.” He chuckled darkly. “I could tell from your heart rate monitors when you were in the medical facility before you even knew yourself about your feelings. That’s when I knew it was time to pursue you.” He brought his hands up under her shirt, kissing her deeply. “I still know what I do to you, Hokura.”

She couldn’t help but allow herself to be sucked in by his touch as much as he lied to her, as much as he hurt her, as much as he didn’t tell her. “Do you love me?” she whimpered.

“More than anything,” he stated in a husky voice. “You have no idea what I have planned for you.”

That’s when the words hit and pierced through her, what *he* had planned for her. Her destiny that he already had mapped out for her that she had no say in. He picked her up off the couch and carried her to his bed. “We’re a few days away from such things, but that doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy ourselves until then.” He continued, “I love you, Hokura.” He wanted to hear the words from her, but they didn’t come as she gasped his name because of what he was doing to her. He was fine with that. He enjoyed making her mindless and relished in his physical manipulations.



Amara lay on her couch when she heard the door open. She watched Adam walk to the couch but stopped him before he sat down.

“You’re filthy,” she stated, looking up at him. “Go shower.”

Adam smirked and shrugged as he made his way to her bathroom.

Amara sat outside the bathroom door listening to the sound of the water running on the other side. "I take it you found it and cleared a path."

"That's not all I found," Adam muttered.

Amara's head popped in as she quickly gazed at his naked form for the first time. Her eyes widened, as did his.

"Sorry!" she cried as she quickly turned back, she heard him chuckling.

"If we're going to be in a relationship and eventually... well..."

Amara felt her cheeks flush. "Don't!!! I already had to convince the professor that I was some kind of confused maniac with my performance today!" she cried embarrassingly.

Adam came out a moment later with a towel wrapped around his waist while using another to dry his hair. "And how did that go?"

Amara rolled her eyes. "Mission accomplished, he practically shoved Hokura towards me and was out of there as fast as possible."

Adam chuckled again. "I'm glad you were successful."

Amara couldn't help but stare at him, his chest and stomach weren't considered chiseled, but there was a soft hint of muscle tone. To her, he was beautiful. She suddenly snapped back to reality. "What was it that you found?" she asked. "The room was used for storage. Anything interesting?"

"A lot." Adam grinned. "Books. Hundreds, if not thousands of books from the old world. I couldn't even imagine what they were all about." He scratched his head. "Old world artwork, large canvas pieces, some of them of landscapes, others of people, so many different pieces of artwork, but why store all that stuff away?"

"You know why." Amara deflated. "The compound doesn't even want us remembering that the old world existed. They have their own way of doing things and don't want to be questioned."

Adam's grin faded. "If only we could take it all with us."

Amara sighed with a pout. "Believe me, if I could take my bike with us, I would ride it through the hallways."

Adam put his arm around her. "Who knows, there might be more bikes out

there. I'm sure there's still a world of books and artwork out there, too." He looked down at her and kicked himself for producing such a solemn mood. "I'll get dressed, and then we'll grab some dinner." The notion seemed to perk Amara up a bit.

"After dinner, I'll take you to see the room, so you know where it is."

The night wore on for all of them.



Annette placed her glasses down as she squeezed her eyes shut. She had stared at the screen all day as the different watches went through the simulations. She arched her back slightly and rolled her head and shoulders, trying to work the stiffness out of them. She hadn't seen the professor or Allen all day. She sighed in relief; everything must have been going as planned.



Dorian had excused himself after dinner for the briefing as Hokura stared out the large bay windows looking over the city. Her body and heart had ached from him, her grief of what she had lost for him consumed her as the door closed, and she was left to her own tears. She had wanted to love him; she had wanted to feel that way always, but it was gone. She couldn't bring herself to understand how suddenly her heart could no longer beat for him. He had shown her everything, and she had become enveloped in him until she found out the truth. She cried even harder, thinking of James and the kisses that they had shared as he had assured her that he would make it back to her no matter what, the small kiss he placed upon her forehead before leaving.

She felt as though her world was in pieces and that no matter what she tried to do to pick them up, she was going to risk getting hurt. The thought of leaving doubled her over in sobs. Dorian said he had loved her, and yet it felt like it was

only physically. He had plans for her which he wouldn't tell her. He held her destiny and yet wouldn't allow her any say in anything. He had told her to trust him, and now she couldn't when just days before she did full-heartedly.



Talon stood stone-faced in the briefing meeting as the governor and professor went over more tactics with a team of men who were starting to unload weapons along the walls as they braced for the upcoming uprising. He was counting down the hours until the chaos started, the chaos which would be enough of a cover to get himself and the others the hell out of here. He thought about all the holes in the wall and where the nearest known rebel jeep had been parked. It was only a few blocks up from what he recalled. He winced at the thought of leaving his men to the war, but this was going to be a situation of survival of the fittest. He was a hardened soldier who fought in the war. He could easily survive the wastelands. He made a note that he still needed to find provisions. He would be ready to leave this place, whether it was with Allen and the peacekeepers or not. The meetings droned on as Dorian lost his temper several times, screaming at the governor. The two men who seemingly worked well together were now butting heads every few minutes as Dorian's fist crashed down on the table, cracking it. The man was more on edge than Talon had ever seen him before. He closed his eyes tightly as he rubbed them, tomorrow night was his last night in the compound, and if he never had to look at another tactical map again, it would be too soon.



Doctor Allen sat in his quarters looking out his window, wishing he could see beyond the wall, wondering how his life was going to change tomorrow—fearing what was beyond the life of the compound. He felt like he had failed his

life's work like he had failed as a doctor in keeping not only the peacekeepers safe but the people of Meridiana. He had hoped that his skills would be needed beyond the walls and that he would be able to continue helping those out there. His mind wandered back to Annette. He would be brave and endure anything for her, but above all else, he would keep her safe. He knew she had to leave with him. There would be no way that the professor would turn a blind eye to her. She might have been one of the head training facility technicians, but her links to the peacekeepers made her too much of a suspect to stay. He didn't want to think about it. He merely sighed as he began packing a small duffle bag of things he thought might be important in the new world.



Amara and Adam walked in silence, hand in hand, past a room in a far forgotten hallway of the compound. Adam barely squeezed her hand to take note as they continued on their way, walking the hallways of the compound for the last time. Mentally saying goodbye to everything they were going to walk away from. They walked past the one training room as they peered in to see the large punching bag still on the floor.

“Do you think they’ll ever get that thing off the floor?” Amara asked dryly.

“Do you think they’ll have a reason to do so once everything happens?” Adam replied.

Amara pursed her lips as they continued to walk. “What do you think will happen to this place?” she asked in a hushed tone.

“I don’t know,” Adam continued. “Maybe the civilians will overthrow it and turn it to rubble. Maybe the walls will eventually break down. It’s hard to say.” He then stopped and stood in the hallway, silently taking in the reality of it all. “It doesn’t matter what happens once we’re gone. We won’t be here to see it.”

Amara nodded, and they continued their walk.



Dorian had arrived back to his quarters, feeling exhausted, only to find Hokura's sleeping form under the window. He puzzled over why she hadn't made her way back to their bed. He gently picked her up and placed her next to him, watching her as she didn't even stir. He had one more day of this mess with the uprising before he could continue with their destiny. He lay next to her and simply turned off the light, knowing that the day upon him would be one for the history of the compound.



James had slept the better part of the day; he wandered the camp kicking up dirt as he stared at his compass and at the stars. He wondered how Hokura was doing and if she was okay. He couldn't allow his worries for her to take over as he continuously told himself that she was okay, that no matter what, she was a peacekeeper. She was strong and could overcome anything. She had been trained in combat, in tactics, that she was a survivor, just like him.

He couldn't wait to have her safe beside him again. He couldn't wait to show her what it was like to taste freedom and experience the love he had for her. He would never manipulate her the way the professor had. He would always be honest with her; he would be her equal, never someone who commanded her. If she would have him, then he would be her partner who would always stand at her side.



The sun rose slowly over the city as the scientists made their way to their laboratories, doctors made rounds in the medical facility. They had been ordered

to shut down the civilian clinic and hospital last night, and so they did under the ruse that the compound needed to go through decontamination procedures. Those of the compound received summons, which held reminders of emergency evacuations and safe zones. Nothing that was out of the ordinary considering every second month or so, they were reminded for precautions.

Talon slept through breakfast. He was so mentally and physically exhausted by the idea of what was happening that he could barely stir enough to roll over to keep his alarm from continuously chiming.



Hokura woke up to the light chime of Dorian's alarm. He shifted and turned it off and then turned to face her.

"Are you alright?" he asked, his tone sounding of sleep.

"I will be," Hokura said in a dull tone.

He pursed his lips, studying her. She was keeping something from him. "If this is all too much, we can slow down. We can do something different. We can take things slower."

Hokura could hear the desperation in his voice. How could they possibly slow things down now that they had come this far? Yet he would do anything to appease her, only because he needed her. Was this how he showed that he loved her? That he would do anything for her to make her happy as long as he was controlling her? "I need some time, Dorian," her voice cracked. "Maybe everything just happened too fast." She rolled onto her back, bringing her hand to her forehead. "So much has happened in the past few weeks. The blast, being off the force for two weeks, and being in the medical facility. Then these feelings, they seemed to just double over hour by hour, then I was in a coma," her voice faltered. "You brought me up here, you showed me everything, and then I was taken by the rebels."

"It's okay," he eased. "I understand. As long as you trust me and love me, then we can take this slow, we can step back a bit, we can do whatever you

want.”

She nodded as she fought to hold back tears. He came up to her and kissed her on the forehead just as the rebel commander had, soft and lightly, endearingly.

“I do have some rounds to make today, though,” Dorian stated. “I would like if you accompanied me.”

Again, Hokura nodded. He was going to keep her by his side today. She only hoped that tonight he would do his regular briefing and that she would free to set her plan in motion.



Throughout the day, Dorian had her accompany him through his rounds. He took her down to the training facility to see Annette. Hokura kept her face blank as he spoke to her, “Annette, we won’t be running simulations today. I think we’ve been running the watch ragged, and Talon has urged me for a day of rest.”

Annette knew the man was lying as he smiled at her, not faltering for even a second. “Of course, Professor.” She smiled back. “I know we do have some up and coming upgrades for our systems that I would love to take a few hours to look over. Besides, I feel like I’ve been sitting in this viewing room for too long. It would be good for me to stretch my legs and busy myself with something else for now.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Annette,” he said as Hokura stood beside him staring at Annette. Did she know that the uprising was happening tonight? Did the professor know that she knew?

He then took her by the hand and led her back down the hallway. She saw the doctor walking up towards them. He smiled and regarded them both.

“Professor,” he stated. “Hokura.” He nodded.

“Doctor, I apologize that the past few days have been so devoid of routine. I’m sure you can understand what happened to the peacekeepers and having them off duty, that things have been in a bit of a disarray. I assure you, though,



that we will be back on schedule in the next few days,” Dorian spoke.

“No need for apologies,” Doctor Allen stated. “I’ve merely been overseeing the samples that we took from Hokura and Amara when they returned. I checked in with Adam as well to make sure that although he hasn’t been training these past few days that he’s been taking his supplements.”

The professor nodded. “Good, I’m glad to hear that. I want you to keep an eye on Amara and Adam over the next few days. I will have a report sent to your office today at seventeen hundred hours. I want to make sure you read it once it hits your desk.”

The doctor stepped back for a moment. He found the timing of this report to be odd. “Do you have it now, sir? I’d be happy to take it off your hands, considering you’ve been so busy.” He stole a glance at Hokura, who was by the professor’s side. She looked pained as her eyes held some sort of haunted sorrow in them.

“I don’t have them with me now, Doctor, seventeen hundred hours is when you’ll receive them. I want you to make sure you read the report and follow through.” The professor tipped his head and continued on his way down the hallway with Hokura in tow.

The doctor pursed his lips. Why would the professor be sending him a report at dinner time, only three hours before the supposed uprising?

The professor led Hokura down the hall to his briefing room, where he opened the door and quickly locked it behind him. He crashed at his desk for a moment. Hokura went up to him and gently brought her hands to his shoulders and squeezed them lightly.

“You seem like you have a lot on your mind,” she pressed. “Is there anything wrong, Dorian?”

“Nothing you need to be concerned about,” he stated, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes.

Hokura licked her lips. “Aren’t we supposed to know everything about each other and tell each other everything?” she pushed.

He pushed away from her hands and stood up, facing her, a stern look on his face. “This has to do with the compound. It’s nothing that you need to be

concerned about! Or do you not trust me?”

Hokura shrank back slightly. “I just...” she didn’t finish.

He stepped towards her, but she took a step back, distancing herself from him, remembering Amara’s warnings that his man was dangerous.

“Hokura, please, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that,” he urged. He cursed himself. This damn war was going to rip them apart before it even started. He shook his head and grabbed the files on his desk. “Come, we’re going back to our quarters for lunch,” he said, taking her hand and leaving the office.

He had noted that she had been off for the rest of the day. He wasn’t able to lift her mood no matter what he had tried or offered her. He was beginning to lose his patience but knew he couldn’t continue to push her physically. He decided it would be for the best to just let her be as he busied himself reading reports of what was expected to happen that night. He stared at her as she sat by the window, looking out over the city. He made a noise as he put the papers down and walked over to her.

“I’ve only been out in the city once,” he said, leaning on the windowpane. “That was the night that you were taken,” he continued. “Maybe we can go into it together.”

Hokura forced a smile as she looked up at him; he was truly mad. She knew hours from now, the civilians would be eradicated, and the city would most likely be left in ruins. He was lying to her to appease her mood. She almost found it amusing how he could be so straight-faced with her and promise her such things when she knew the truth. “I would like that,” she lied sweetly back to him.

A grin spread across his face, happy that he was finally able to lift her mood. There was a light knock at his quarter’s door. He excused himself and grabbed a folder as he went to answer it. Hokura craned her neck to see who it was. Dorian handed the file over. “Yes, to the doctor’s office right away.” He then returned to her.

“You weren’t going to deliver the file personally?” she asked, still looking outwards. The sun was a few hours away from setting on the city, for what would be the last hours that the city would be whole.

“No,” he stated, “there’s no dire need for me to deliver them. I know he’ll get them, read them, and follow them.” He glanced at the clock and cringed. “How about you and I get some dinner before I have to go to briefing.”



Dorian brooded after their meal arrived. She had barely said a word to him again. If anything, she pushed further away from him than she had been all day. He couldn’t take it any longer and excused himself for a shower.

Hokura sagged. She had never felt this uptight before. She had never felt like she was a prisoner before today.

Dorian stood in the shower with his fist clenched, they were hours away from war, and she was suddenly pushing him away like she couldn’t stand the sight of him. She said she wanted to move slower, which had been fine, but he didn’t think that meant shutting him out. He regretted his outburst this afternoon when she had asked him what had been wrong. He had wanted to confide her in but couldn’t. He couldn’t let her know that they were going to war, that he knew about the civilian purge, that Larson had pushed it and that he was merely a pawn going along with it. She would think of him as a monster. He would lose her, and then everything he had worked so hard towards would crumble. He needed to make amends with her. Time was short before he had to go to his briefing. He needed to know that when all of this was said and done that, she would still be his.



The doctor unlocked his office door to see the report laying on his desk, at seventeen hundred hours, just as he knew it would be. He closed the door picking up the report:

*Doctor Allen.*

*There have been speculations of there being an emergency lockdown tonight. If that is to happen, you are to locate Amara and Adam and have them go to the science department's safety lockdown zone.*

*Professor Dorian.*

The doctor shook his head. Direct orders to keep the children safe and in the lockdown zone. Not enough time to find and question the professor, not enough time to do anything but follow the command, that was if he had actually planned on carrying out what he was commanded to do. The horns would sound, the uprising would start, and he would be right along with the peacekeepers escaping the compound and not looking back.



Dorian had spent some time in the shower brooding. He didn't want to get out to face Hokura but knew he could hold off any longer. He walked out with his towel around his waist to see her pacing between the windows.

"Hokura," he softened as he held out his arms, "come here, please."

She looked at him sadly but didn't move.

"I just want to hold you," he stated. He wanted to feel her, needed to hold her before he went down to tonight's briefing before his world turned and changed.

She walked up to him stiffly and allowed him to wrap his arms around her. He breathed in her scent and enjoyed the softness of her skin. He didn't know how long he stood there, simply not wanting to let her go until he brought his hands down and looked at her. "Thank you," he said as he kissed the top of her head and then went to get changed.

Hokura's heart ached as he walked away from her. She looked at the clock and knew that would be the last time he ever held her like that again.

"I have to go to the briefing," Dorian said, placing a small tender kiss on her

cheek. "I'll be back in a bit, is there anything that you'll need while I'm gone?" he asked tenderly.

Hokura's heart clenched. If everything went as planned, she wouldn't be here when he got back. "I'll be fine." She smiled up at him.

"Very well." He then left his suite.

Hokura sighed after the door closed. Soon she would leave this place. Anticipation welled inside of her. She brought out the canvas she had tucked away and placed it on his kitchen counter. She had had so much left to say but wouldn't be able to say it now. She went to one of his notebooks and took out a piece of paper, and started to write:

*Dorian,*

*By the time you find this, I will be gone. You may not understand why, but my need to leave is greater than the both of us. I know there are secrets you have been keeping from me and wish that my love for you was still as true as before I found out that I have merely been a pawn in your own devices. I wish things were different. I thank you for all that you have done for me, but you have been my blessing and my curse. I will never forget you or the compound, but I need to be free to find my own calling and make my own destiny.*

*Hokura*

Her heart felt heavy as she wrote the words. Did she dare say that a part of her still loved him? That part of her might always love him in some skewed way. She shook her head; it wasn't fair for her to leave him with such thoughts. She took the emotion, locked it up tight, and buried it with grief. She needed to bide her time here until it was time to leave for the others. She felt anxious within the walls of the suite, so she paced, staring at the clock. She found it ironic that every day she had waited for the curfew horns to blare and summon her to get ready to go into the night as a peacekeeper, but tonight they were summoning her into the night to leave everything thing she knew, even being a peacekeeper,

behind.



The professor had made his way down to the briefing room to see Talon, Larson, and the tactics team standing at his door. He gave a grim look and let them in as they all sat. He couldn't help but feel anxious about what the night was to bring.

"We have intel that the civilians are already grouping together," Larson stated. He tossed some maps and files onto the table. "It'll be within the hour that all this starts. We've had men patrolling the perimeter wall all day."

"The day watch noted that there was barely any civilian activity on the streets today. It seems like they're all rallying together at certain outposts, most likely where they've been storing the weapons," Talon added.

"So, what you're saying is we're waiting for them to fire on us first before we return fire and end this," the professor stated.

Larson nodded. "What about the peacekeepers?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"The first child is tucked up in my suite for the moment. I have Doctor Allen keeping an eye on the other two. Upon this starting, they'll be ushered to the lockdown zone in the science department. They have no clue about what's coming. It'll come as a surprise to them. The less they know, the better," Dorian stated, grabbing a map from the pile, and studying it. "I take once the uprising starts. We'll trigger the emergency systems and have everyone get to their designated areas?"

"We will, in the case that anything happens, and anyone is able to breach the walls, we'll have watch guards patrolling the main hallways as well. The possibility of that happening is slim at best," Larson stated. The men looked over the reports. "We have enough firepower that we should be able to clear everyone out. If they flee the city, that's fine. We're planning on patching up the wall once this uprising is done. We won't allow anyone to further breach the walls of the city," Larson continued. "There will no longer be rebels or civilians to deal with.

Meridiana will be free-standing of those in the compound.”

Dorian scowled down at the report. This was wrong, but it was the way of life. It was survival of the fittest, which is what he had been trying to achieve ever since he started these experiments. He would be the father of the new age with Hokura by his side, and together they would create a superior being. He didn't want to keep any more secrets from Hokura but knew their future would be plagued with them. He could never allow her to know that he knew about any of this, that he had a hand in any of it.

Suddenly there was a large blast at the east end of the compound, which vibrated the walls inside. He heard people in the hallway scream as another hit. It was beginning. The curfew horns hadn't blared yet. Even if they did, they would have been blocked out by the first explosion that hit the compound's perimeter wall. It was happening all too fast. He thought he had still had time. Talon had hit the emergency sirens as Dorian ran out of the briefing room. He had to reach Hokura and confirm that all three peacekeepers were in their designated lockdown areas.

Dorian knew he had to get to Hokura and ensure that she was safe. He had hoped that she was still in his quarters. He had told her the briefing would take longer; there was no reason for her not to be there unless she heard the sirens and was already making her way out.

Dorian came rushing into his quarters to find Hokura with a small bag of her things.

“What are you doing?” he commanded as he straightened himself.

Hokura looked up at him in surprise and shock. She had hoped she could slip out and simply leave him the goodbye letter that she had penned for him. She had been waiting for the curfew horns that didn't blare; instead, she was met with the emergency sirens and knew she had run out of time. She didn't want to face him, and yet he was standing right in front of her questioning her. “I'm leaving Dorian,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Leave? You can't leave!” he said, stepping towards her grabbing her arm. “Where would you go?”

“I am,” Hokura cried, wrenching her wrist away from him. “Dorian,” she

struggled, “all these secrets, this war, these lies, they’re wrong. I can’t be here anymore.”

“You lied to me.” He looked at her, his face full of bewilderment. “You had planned on this. Since when?”

Hokura brought her chin up. She fought to keep her composure. “Since I was taken by the rebels. I wasn’t taken. I had agreed to go with the rebel commander. He told me everything. I know *everything*.”

Dorian cursed as he ran his hand through his hair. “you’re going to trust a rebel over me?”

Tears came to her eyes. “Yes!” she cried.

“Well, that’s too bad because I’m not letting you leave,” he said, grabbing onto her. “You’re staying right here beside me. I don’t care if I have to lock you in this suite. You are not going anywhere!”

Hokura fought him, she brought herself down quickly and kicked out his legs, he landed hard on top of her as she tried to struggle from underneath him.

“There’s so much you still don’t know!” he cried, trying to grab at her to restrain her.

“Because you never told me!” she screamed, trying to claw her way away from him. “All you did was manipulate me!” She then got up and tried to make it for the door before he was on her again. Using his speed, he sprang on her, wrapping his arms tightly around her waist, trying to bring her to the ground.

“I created you! You belong to me!” he screamed at her, he tried to fight to restrain her, but she wasn’t having it. Her strength was beyond his, and he was losing her quickly. He couldn’t allow her to walk out on him now. “I love you!” he cried, struggling to grab onto her again. “I don’t want to hurt you, Hokura, please!”

“You only love your plans!” Hokura then brought her fist to his face and quickly kicked him to the side as he crashed to the ground. She kicked him again in the ribs hoping he wouldn’t get up. She was still crying.

“That’s not true.” He coughed as he spat out blood, his one eye already swollen. “Hokura!” he cried, still on the floor holding his ribs. He knew they were broken, “if you leave, everything that is out there; every person out there is



going to grow old and die except you!”

She looked at him once more and ran for the door, tears streaming down her face.

Dorian coughed again, damn she was strong, he thought to himself. That’s what he got for training her so well. He looked up at the door and screamed her name, he got to his feet and ambling upwards got himself to the hallway, still calling for her, but he knew she wasn’t coming back.

Outside there was another large explosion. He shook his head; how could she be so foolish? He hobbled his way to the elevator; downstairs, people were running in disarray as the emergency sirens had finally stopped; even through the thick walls, gunfire and explosions could be heard. He made his way out of the elevator and tripped as someone smacked into him. He fell to the ground again, coughing blood. When he looked up, it was to a familiar face.

“Talon,” he cried. “Talon, help me!”

Talon looked at him and looked off to the distance where the peacekeepers were now rendezvousing. He wanted to be there with them and escape. He looked down at the professor, a man so strong and proud now on his knees and bleeding.

“Talon, don’t leave me, help me!”

Talon cursed at himself and helped the professor up and held onto him.

“Help me, and I will give you anything you want. I need to get to the lab.” He coughed harder and winced in pain as he held his side.

As Talon shifted the professor in his arms, he silently made his peace with what he was about to do. “I will help you, but you will save every one of my men that you can. If they come in here dying, then you will damn well inject them with your bloody regenerative cells, and you will save them! You will call whatever doctors you have to, but you will save every innocent watchman that you and your damn governor brought into this stupid war!” Talon yelled as another wave of explosions went off, he looked down at the professor hating the man for getting in his way of being able to escape, but in his heart, he couldn’t give up the opportunity of being able to save who he could.

“It’s a deal.” The professor slumped in his arms.

Talon swore and started dragging him to the lab.

“She betrayed me. They’re escaping. The peacekeepers are escaping the compound,” the professor muttered.

“We can track them down after the uprising, sir,” Talon assured him. He resolved that he was buying the others precious time that they had needed. He would leave himself once the time was right. He looked down at the professor, who was bloodied and limping beside him as they hurriedly made their way to the labs. “First, let’s get you dealt with and then get to those who are going to need help this night. Once the smoke clears, you can send the watch out beyond the walls.”



Hokura ran down the hallways, tears streaming down her face, her heart breaking as she gasped for air. The deafening sirens had been turned off as a few people still ran past her, not even taking notice of who she was as they tried to make it to their designated safe zones. One lab technician smacked into her shoulder as he ran past her, he gave her a look and shouted that she had been going the wrong way, but he had turned quickly and continued in a sprint towards the safe zones.

Hokura sighed in relief as she made her way down the now dead training facility hallways. She ran past all the training rooms taking note as she finally arrived at the loading dock door; it was opened just slightly as she ran in and ran into the arms of everyone waiting for her.

“Hokura!” Doctor Allen cried as his hands caught her shoulders. “Are you alright? What happened?” He gently shook her as she sobbed.

“He found out,” she cried. “Dorian knows, we need to get out of here now!”

Adam looked up at the doctor with a worried look. “Talon’s not here yet!”

“Talon said if he wasn’t here to leave without him. He has other means of escaping, but if the professor knows we’re leaving, then we need to get out of here now!” Doctor Allen said.

Hokura nodded, wiping away her tears, trying to compose herself.

Amara put a hand on her shoulder. "Are you sure about this?"

The first child nodded in contempt. "We have to go."

The five of them shuffled through the darkness. Adam had cleared their way well enough among the boxes that they would be concealed if anyone came looking for them. They could hide but would still be able to make their way.

Adam went first; he knew the door was unlocked but couldn't help but hold his breath in anticipation. He pushed the lever down, and the five of them stepped out into the night.

Doctor Allen and Annette both gasped. They had never been outside the compound before. Gunfire and explosions could be heard towards the east side of the compound.

"We have to move!" Adam said, shuffling them along.

Hokura could smell the smoke of war in the air as it rose up, choking off what should have been a fresh spring night.

"Down this alleyway, we have to stick close to the wall." Amara pointed as she and Adam led them.

Doctor Allen held onto Annette's hand as they quickly followed the three peacekeepers.

"We have to hurry!" Hokura cried. "James might already be waiting for us!"

"He's not leaving without anyone," Amara assured her as they kept running.

Hokura thought it strange that they could hear the uprising in the background, but they hadn't seen any civilians. They must have been battering the east perimeter where the garage was to try and breach the compound. She shuttered. She didn't want to think about it. She didn't want to think about the countless lives that were being lost at that moment. She saw a group of civilians as they ran past a break between the buildings. They were carrying bags and heading away from the fighting, possibly trying to escape as well. Her mind went back to Dorian, his screams of anguish as she ran down the hallway. She hadn't dared stop at the elevator. She continued to run all the way down to the stairway, which took her closer to the training facility. His screams echoed in her mind; she couldn't help the few tears that were managing to escape her as she

continued to run with the others.

She looked back at the doctor and Annette, who were wearing grim faces. She couldn't even begin to imagine what was going on in their own minds. She thought about the commander, how he now held not only her freedom but theirs as well.

"It's gotta be up ahead!" Adam cried as they kept moving forward. The alleyway they were running down was full of garbage bins, but they hadn't seen anything up against the wall just yet.

"Is that it?" Amara called, pointing to a large pile of scrap metal a few hundred meters away.

"It's gotta be!" Adam huffed as they continued to run.

Adam came up to the pile first and quickly started moving the pieces. Amara and Hokura got right to work helping him.

"Don't you think this was a little obvious?" Amara asked as she and Hokura moved a larger piece.

"It was meant to be obvious," Doctor Allen spoke. "Talon knows of all the holes in the walls that the rebels used to export crates of weapons in." He looked down. "He had joked about it, asked if I thought the rebels were scaling the walls with crates." He shook his head. "It's amazing how deep this truly goes."

"That doesn't matter anymore," Annette said, giving him a shake.

"She's right," Adam said as he grunted, trying to move the last piece. Hokura and Amara worked together to move it to reveal a large hole, big enough to transport large crates through easily.

They all stopped and looked at the hole and hesitated. Hokura made her way through and looked back at the four. "There's no going back now, only forward."

Adam pursed his lips. The other two had been out there, had seen it. He stepped through the hole and looked around at the desert wasteland around him.

"We have to keep going," Hokura urged as she strode ahead of them in determination.



Barack was riding next to James, who was driving the jeep. He could see a cloud of black smoke rising on the horizon.

“Dammit, it’s already started!” he cursed as he drove faster in desperation, tearing over the dunes. He knew that the possibilities of the uprising holding off were slim, but he had figured it would have started in the darkness of night. Not before the curfew horns had gone off. He had miscalculated, and it was possible that Hokura was now paying the price for that calculation.

“Easy there,” Barack said, putting his large hand on his friend’s shoulder, “these are the peacekeepers; they’ve been trained for this kind of fighting. If you’re stupid now and destroy our ride, we won’t get there at all.”

James clenched his teeth. “She’s in danger. I have to get to her!” He would never forgive himself if something had happened to her. He had wished she would have just stayed with him; she had been so adamant about going back, and he knew he couldn’t stand in her way.

“She won’t be alone,” Barack encouraged him.

James shook his head. He slowed a little but continued, they would be there in about fifteen minutes, but it seemed like every second was a lifetime.

“She’s a peacekeeper, a survivor. As long as she was able to breach the wall, she should be safe.” Barack continued trying to ease his friend’s mind but knew that James wouldn’t be satisfied until Hokura was among them.



Hokura led the others along the outside of the wall. Annette was having a hard time walking in the sand, so the doctor was helping support her. Adam and Amara were silently holding hands behind her. Nobody spoke a word and left the first child to her silent resolve.

She licked her lips; she could feel her insides trembling as she replayed what had happened in Dorian's suite. She remembered all the lies, the way she yearned to feel the way she had for him. He said he didn't want to hurt her, but he had. She thought of James and felt her heart warm. He was coming for her, she looked in the distance and saw a cloud of dust coming towards the wall.

"It's him!" Hokura cried as she broke out in a run leaving the others behind.

Adam looked over to Amara. "She loves him, doesn't she?"

Amara shook her head with a grin. "Yeah, I just don't think she knows it yet." She looked down in despair. "What the professor did to her isn't going to just go away."

Adam put his arm around her shoulder and ran his hand up her arm. "He had us all fooled. If any of us can come out of this any stronger, it'll be Hokura."

Annette stood beside the doctor as she watched Hokura run. "I guess you could never have predicted that one day we would be escaping the compound together with the peacekeepers."

The doctor stared up, looking outwards towards the cloud of dust that was approaching, Hokura's hair trailing behind her as she ran. "No," he sighed, "but I would never have predicted that the man who had been my partner for years would be standing beside the governor as he started a war either."

"None of us did," Annette said as she walked closer to him, "but we're free now. We can see what life is without living like prisoners."

He smiled at her. "As long as it's spent with you, I don't care."

James could see her running towards him. They were outside the wall and safe. He gave a sigh in relief and stopped the jeep and got out, running towards her as well. He couldn't understand this feeling that had suddenly welled up from his stomach and jumped into his throat as he broke into a dead run. Their bodies collided as he went to the ground, his arms automatically around her.

"James!" Hokura cried, burying her face in his chest, holding onto him for dear life as she felt her body crumple into his.

"I'm here now," he coaxed, bringing his hand to her head, gently stroking her hair. "I'll always be here."

Barack got out of the jeep and smiled regarding the other four who walked

behind Hokura. He recognized the other female peacekeeper as well as Adam. His expression became one of happiness as he recognized Annette and Allen, whose eyes met his, and the two of them started running towards him.

“Barack!” Annette cried as she ran to him with a hug.

“We never knew what became of you.” Doctor Allen gasped as he embraced his old friend.

Barack laughed wholeheartedly. “Well, I have stories for you two then!”

Hokura brought her head off James’ chest and stared at his green eyes. He brought himself up, kissed her gently, and smiled up at her. “Are you ready to go home now?”

He helped her up and dusted himself off. He looked at those around him. He grinned at Adam as the two peacekeepers both nodded back at him. Barack had both arms around Annette and the doctor and wore one of the biggest smiles he had seen in years.

He took in the moment and knew this is what his father had wanted. To liberate and free people, and for his son to have a sense of belonging and family. He felt Hokura’s head as she rested it on his shoulder. He looked down as her hand was clasped in his, and this feeling that he had whenever she was around, and he knew that it would only grow in time.

He looked down at the first child and brought his hand under her chin. As she looked up at him, he gave her a loving look. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Hokura breathed lightly.

“Then let’s all go home together.”

## EPILOGUE

It had been three weeks since the uprising. As determined by the compound leaders, the city's civilians had fallen in an unfair blood bath, which had been the one-sided battle as they had tried to wage war against the compound. The moles who had set the uprising in motion were never found. The civilians of Meridiana were either dead or had somehow fled the city. The watch had suffered very few casualties as the professor had promised. He now stood in command with Talon beside him as he watched the night watch assemble for their scouting exercise.

“It’s been weeks, Dorian.” Talon sighed. “They keep marking the maps, but the trail has gone cold. It’s no use.”

The professor glared at his right-hand man. “I don’t care if it takes months. There are no civilians to police anymore. Your watches’ job is to now find them.” He glared at the men who were quickly packing their gear into their vehicles. They all assembled neatly in front of him in order. “You will go out, and you will do as you were trained to do and if you come across any rebels, kill them!” he shouted at the men. “Now go out there and bring them back!”

With that, the professor walked away with a dark scowl on his face. He didn’t care how many months or possibly years it took. He would have her back.



It had been a three-week drive since they had left the compound; they had seen



so many different and new sights as the large rebel caravan headed north. They had spent many nights camping and resting as they continued their journey. Dunes slowly turned into deteriorated roads, which gradually turned into paved roads and into highways. The destroyed earth melted into greenery and forests as they made their way.

James had only allowed them to go six hours a day before stopping and making camp, a convoy a large group of rebels took up several man-hours between scavenging towns for fuel and supplies and setting up camp. To the commander's amusement, all five of them had made fast friends and had settled in amongst their new family.

Barack had kept notes on his maps of where they were heading, he had called it the coast, and soon Hokura's eyes lit up with delight as she saw the ocean for the first time in her life. James had appeased her and camped along the shore for a few days allowing everyone to rest. As they kept traveling north, Hokura's head bobbed as she slept in the passenger side of the jeep as James drove on, he looked at her and sighed lovingly as he placed his hand on hers. He looked forward and squinted for a moment; there was indeed something up ahead in the distance. He couldn't hold back his enthusiasm as he shook Hokura awake. "Look!" he cried in joy. In front of them had been a city, and from the looks of it, there were people there.

"We found it!" James hollered to everyone. Hokura looked up with a smile on her face. It had looked just like the old-world photos. It was a city, and it was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen.

**Next in the Series:**  
Rebirth  
(The New Age Series Book 2)



After forty years of freedom and hardship, Hokura, a former peacekeeper, is haunted by her past. Determined to confront her fears, she embarks on a journey to the walled city of Meridiana, unsure of what she will find. To her astonishment, she discovers that the city has transformed into a thriving sanctuary under a new governor, rising from the ashes of a civilian uprising.

With the guidance of the enigmatic professor and the support of the governor, Hokura is determined to liberate the old city and bring its inhabitants to the safety of the sanctuary. But as she delves deeper into the secrets of Meridiana, a web of love, lies, deceit, and betrayal unravels, leaving her questioning everything she thought she knew.

In a world where mankind is on the brink of extinction, Hokura's true destiny emerges, unveiling a captivating journey filled with unexpected twists and revelations. Will she find redemption and forge a new future, or will the shadows

of the past consume her?

**Rebirth**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nicolette Fuller: Mother, wife, artist, lover of the arts, reptiles, and arachnids- not your average individual. Born and raised in the Okanagan region of Canada, I can be found enjoying an array of activities, from fishing, and gold panning, to dancing and wine tasting.

I've always been an avid reader who enjoyed everything from fantasy to crime novels. I've found my absolute love for writing novels over the past few years. Three years ago, a passion project of mine, The New Age Series, took root and blossomed into an unforgettable series that has grown over time.



To learn more about Nicolette Fuller, visit her [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).