
GLOBAL DIVIDE

001: RYU RISING

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Global Divide: Ryu Rising

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PROLOGUE

In the year 2050, the Earth is desolate, ruined, and the population is under the control of the remaining elite. The Global World Order, or GWO—the same group that conspired from within the former United Nations—is now the law. If you're privileged, you do not age. Technology is advanced beyond imagination.

For everyone else, being born in this era is as close as someone can get to hell. Your rights don't exist, your freedoms are restricted, and your only purpose in life is to fight the remaining groups of resistance that oppose the GWO. Failure to do so means death.

A war is being waged over the remnants of the planet and the fate of all mankind is uncertain.

CHAPTER 1

February 15, 2050

Ryu was going to be late again. Still pulling up his trousers all the way, he shoved his dorm room door open with force and took off at full speed down the hallway, his boots thumping loudly on the floor.

“I can’t believe I overslept again!” muttered Ryu as he gasped for air, running as fast as his legs could carry him. Sweat poured down his face as he dodged canisters, jumped over railings, slid through small openings, all in an attempt to make it in time for the morning briefing. He could not be late, or there’d be hell to pay.

At 17, he was a first-year rookie at the GWO academy, but this was already becoming a horrible habit of his. Ryu had never been the type that could accept less than eight hours of sleep, and it didn’t help that his dorm’s atypical design added to his narcoleptic

tendencies, barely allowing sunlight through the lone 12 x 12-inch window that adorned the south wall of the room. The only sign that there was still a sun somewhere outside. It made the room feel like an egg warmer in a chicken coop. A proper environment for long naps.

None of the rooms in the academy were anything glamorous, as you would expect from a military school in a post-apocalyptic setting. The beds were mere platforms on the floor as to preserve space, and you were only allowed enough belongings to fit in a single duffel bag, provided by your local friendly government-run administration. Every day here at the academy started out the same: get up at the crack of dawn, report to the main hall for attendance, and attend the daily GWO briefing, where you would be expected to know the anthem word for word. Breakfast, if you could call it that, would be a blend of the same stuff as always: greens, vitamins, infused beverages, all made specifically to replenish the body of all things necessary for the rigorous demands later to come.

While running, Ryu wondered how in the hell this kept happening to him, that almost every morning he was running down this hallway, fearing for his life. He fumbled through his thoughts of what had happened after he woke up... He remembered getting into the shower as soon as the alarm went off—the cold water running down his back had been so refreshing—and then he'd turned off the water and shaken his hair dry and hurried on to the next step—which was just as time-consuming as the shower was. Putting on his military garb felt like he had to shear a sheep and prepare the wool, convert it to thread, and sew an outfit fit for

military use. That's how long it took. An eternity.

Finally, dressed and ready, he'd looked at the clock one last time and that's when he'd noticed he was going to be late again. Like clockwork. What did he need to do differently? He couldn't skip the shower; he hated smelling terrible.

As he ran, he knew he was getting closer because he recognized the markers on the walls as he made his way to the main elevators. As he approached the final turns, he noticed another person running towards him in the opposite direction. It was his friend and classmate Dmitry or "Turbo," as he preferred to be addressed.

"Ryu!" Turbo shouted. "Hurry up, I'm not covering for your ass again." Turbo was used to Ryu's tardiness to the point that he felt he had to look after him even at the expense of his own well-being. They had made an unspoken truce, which meant each one would look out for the other no matter the reason.

"C'mon, Turbo," Ryu said with a smirk. "I thought friends have each other's back, and also didn't I cover for you that one time you put your pants on backwards?" He raised his voice so that it echoed down the hallway, a way of teasing Turbo as they took the elevators down and stepped out into another hallway.

"Pants on backwards?" Turbo replied as he sped up to catch up with Ryu, his cheeks reddening because the other stragglers in the hallway, who were also heading in the same direction, were now fixated on the awkward banter between the two.

"I think your hearing is what's backward, and did you have to shout that so loud? I'm like ten feet away from you, and not deaf yet." When Turbo reached him, he grabbed Ryu around the neck

and put him in a chokehold, pushing and pulling at him as a sort of punishment for his teasing.

It was this type of banter that made the two feel as if they'd known each other for years. Good friends meant you had something to live for. They were total opposites though; Ryu was quicker with words, while Turbo was quicker on his feet. He was tall, lanky, and had gained his nickname by being the fastest sprinter in the whole school, but he'd always been fast at almost everything—sometimes *too* fast, in a way that made him clumsy and provided lots of opportunities for Ryu to make fun of him. Meanwhile, Ryu was witty but sluggish at almost everything—including getting anywhere on time. Even though they were opposites, they were the best of buds.

“Hey, is that guy taking my spot?” asked Turbo as they entered the giant open area at the center of the facility, where the General conducted the daily briefing. Prompt attendance was expected every morning.

“Who does he think he is? Ryu—where'd you go?” He looked frantically around for Ryu's agreement, not seeming to notice that he had miscalculated his spot by not paying proper attention as he entered.

Meanwhile, Ryu had moved on to where they were actually supposed to be standing. But when he noticed Turbo wasn't with him, he turned back around. There was Turbo, standing before a young man with a dark look in his eyes. A tan skinned, dark brown-haired individual who had a mischievous vibe to himself. Ryu recognized him at once, and his spine went stiff. *Well, this is just great.*

He quickly hurried back to stop Turbo. "You're in my spot—" Turbo was saying.

"Are you new or just incredibly stupid?" the dark-eyed young man was asking, with an impatient look. "Of course I didn't *steal your spot*," he spat.

Turbo continued his hard stare not relenting his aggravated stance.

"Get with the program number 190, or would you prefer we handle this a different way?" said the individual as he lifted his hand to mimic a pistol with his finger pointed at Turbo.

The other students, who were in proper formation, began to notice and stare, some muttering to each other, others laughing and pointing at Turbo. The situation was getting too loud, too fast.

"I'm not afraid of you—" Turbo started, just before Ryu grabbed his arm.

"Hey man, come on," Ryu cut in, trying to calm him down. "You know damn well that isn't your spot. We're both over there." He nodded his head at another area of the line-up.

"Oh..." said Turbo, frowning. "Right."

Ryu gently led him away, throwing a tight smile back at the young man Turbo had accused. "Sorry, my friend just got confused." The boy just looked back at him, coldly, without a reply. To Turbo, Ryu said under his breath, "You've gotta be more careful, Turbo. Hiro isn't someone you want to mess with," Ryu replied. Out of all their classmates, Hiro was second only to Turbo in speed. Not to mention, he was a favorite of the General.

Turbo's face reddened again, and his lips pursed slightly as he stepped into his correct formation. "Yeah, yeah, I know, he's the

General's stooge, someone to look out for. Well I'm not worried about that, he doesn't intimidate me," Turbo stated without a hint of fear in his voice.

But Ryu saw Turbo's eyes flit to Hiro, and the smile rise at the edge of Turbo's mouth, and he knew his friend was remembering the last race, the one where Hiro lost to Turbo. It had been decided by a mere two-thirds of a second, giving Turbo the narrow win. Ryu just hoped Turbo wouldn't get so caught up in the memories that he'd have trouble paying attention, as often happened.

Even now, Turbo was starting to drift out of his position in the line once again, and Ryu opened his mouth to get his attention but—

"ALL STUDENTS ACCOUNTED FOR, SIR," boomed the loud voice of the staff sergeant, which echoed like a screech from a piece of chalk striking at a chalkboard.



It was the 46th time that phrase had been said at this exact hour, to start the briefing. That was how precise this institution was. No one was allowed to disrupt this serene seriousness or else

they would face the brunt of the General.

General Les Gohan of the GWO presided over the daily briefing. A stocky individual, he'd fought personally on the battlefield, and his face was adorned with the scars to prove it. He spoke directly and precisely so as to not confuse anyone and kept nothing censored. His words were resolute and full of ambition and it was said he could spot a single individual in violation of the formation amongst the hundreds present. Ryu had become very accustomed to this moment every day and easily felt as if this was the most critical part of the day due to the person presiding over it. Here you had to be at an extreme level of serious, as in Defcon 5 serious.

"You there, number 190, GET IN LINE!" shouted General Gohan, his voice similar in strength to that of a freight train coming into station.

Immediately, Ryu felt the air turn cold and thin out as if someone was denying him the right to breathe. Fear struck him immediately and caused his memory to jog a bit. He asked himself mentally to remember what number he'd been assigned, God forbid he was the number 190.

"YESSIR, APOLOGIES SIR," Turbo piped up, quickly fixing his place in line permanently this time. Oh right, *he* was number 190. Ryu winced on his behalf. Being called out like that by the General had the same feeling as a date with the firing squad. The General was not the type to forget who stepped out of line.

Ryu adjusted his stance too, not wanting any of the affection Turbo had endured. He ensured he had his back straight, remembering the place in the manual that described posture, page

43 paragraph 10: *Stand straight, chest held high, arms at the sides, head looking forward.*

The teasing and laughter he'd shared with Turbo a few minutes ago was now a distant memory. Time moved at a snail's pace as the General kept staring at Turbo with those narrowed eyes of his. The silence was so evident; you could've heard the wind cut through a small crack in the frame of the emergency exit. In this environment, any attention was considered bad attention. Even being in close proximity to Turbo in this situation would make anyone feel uncomfortable. Ryu was no exception.

"What in the hell were you doing?? Trying to get us thrown in isolation?" whispered Ryu, as he gathered himself from the feeling of being kicked in the gonads, gulping the last amount of saliva his overworked glands could bear. He noticed Turbo staring down towards the ground, which could easily be considered insubordination according to manual rules. "C'mon, Turbo, snap out of it," Ryu hissed.

But Turbo continued to stand still and motionless, his eyes glued to the floor, not seeming to hear or care about the words coming from Ryu's mouth. Sweat started down from his forehead and then dripped from his eyebrow to the base of his neck. Ryu watched his Adam's apple bob as Turbo swallowed hard.

Finally, the General turned away and the briefing carried on in the usual order. Even then, Turbo didn't relax, and neither did Ryu.

They were given an update as to the status of the GWO forces that were in direct conflict with the resistance—a small group of individuals who sought to disrupt the order of the GWO with no intended purpose other than to oppose everything the GWO

represented. At least, that was all the General would tell them. That was it, and nothing else was to be believed. In the GWO, anyone questioning authority was considered a traitor; therefore, no one ever spoke of the resistance, especially in the presence of leadership. After the debrief everyone was expected to continue onto their next duties and promptly exit the main area. The staff sergeant, having received the order of dismissal from the General, turned to the students and ordered them out.

“You all know the routine, get with it maggots,” he barked.

That was the type of censorship you were treated to on a good day. A good day meant working in sync, NOT disrupting the chain of events like Turbo had, something he had yet to shake off.

“Hey, c’mon Turbo, it happens to the best of us,” Ryu murmured to his friend as he stepped closer to him in an attempt to bring him out of his continued state of shock. But Turbo’s face showed no change. Ryu knew something had to be done, or else the two of them would once again disrupt the chain of events, Turbo’s expression had to change. Out of the corner of his eye, Ryu noticed the staff sergeant’s attention had turned on them since they were lagging behind everyone else. Ryu swallowed hard.

If this continues it will surely lead to the isolation chamber, Ryu thought to himself.

The isolation chamber was a room with no light, dark and damp and only 4 x 4 feet in size. Something that would be a struggle for a young man like Ryu measuring 6 ft. 2 inches. Once in the chamber, you were neither fed nor given any nourishment of any kind. This according to the GWO was a minor punishment—a Grade 1 punishment to be exact—while the worst was death itself, Grade

4 or higher. With these thoughts in his mind, Ryu grew less and less patient with every second that passed.

Dammit Turbo, we don't need any more attention, he thought to himself. Finally having exhausted his patience, Ryu decided on a more subtle approach, one that would possibly get Turbo going again.

He thought about earlier, and how Turbo got butt-hurt when hearing about how Hiro almost won the race. He took a deep breath, puckered his chest like a rooster in heat, and walked towards Turbo for the last time. Bearing the worst poker face look, he said with a sarcastic tone, "Turbo, so I heard that new guy, what's his name... Hiro, oh yeah, the race could have been considered a draw, am I right?"

And just like that—*Slap*. Ryu felt a sharp pain start from the right side of his face, which slowly progressed to the left side and felt eerily similar to the burning sensation of hot wax being torn from your skin when removing unwanted hair.

"WHAT THE HELL?" Ryu said, holding his cheek.

"No one is faster than me and you know it, so I had to remind you, so you won't forget again," explained Turbo, snapping back to normal.

"You didn't have to SLAP ME FOR IT! Argh," replied Ryu.

Anger brewed in Ryu, and he considered retaliating, but his words had gotten through to Turbo, and he was back to normal again, at the behest of Ryu's pain. His actions also caused the staff sergeant to return to his normal state and exit the area. The danger that seemed imminent had been averted and the day could continue once again.

CHAPTER 2

“Damn, why do we have to work so hard?” Ryu muttered to himself after experiencing both a well-balanced diet and an earful of morning briefing. Now they were on their way to the training facility.

Every day at the academy was broken into two training phases: physical and mental. It was that simple, anyone with a brain could follow. All the students were split into groups of two, assigned at random. This was to help them adapt to working with different people, which posed a different set of challenges. Whether you were a man or woman, it did not matter; you were expected to run the routine to perfection.

The training facility had ample lighting, nothing special, but accommodating to the types of workouts expected in this environment. No windows—those would’ve been a distraction—

and a matted floor with the typical iron weights and workout equipment. The air was maintained at 85 degrees Fahrenheit, something Ryu believed to be a nuisance. But he supposed it could've been a lot worse.

The physical phase of the training was designed to keep the students' bodies in tip-top shape. They were expected to withstand the rigorous feats involved in single hand combat, to endure harsh conditions, to fight off the enemy and survive with very little assistance. Self-sufficiency was the way of life here. Anyone who failed would be cast out—though most people who couldn't stand the pressure didn't even reach this point in the academy. Both Ryu and Turbo felt lucky they'd made it this far. No one really knew the fate of those who were not selected, but it was assumed they were killed off because they served no purpose. The narrative always seemed to favor the most fearful route in any conclusion. That was how the GWO governed the people. Through fear and intimidation.

They'd all read the academy manual, page 11, paragraph 2, after all: Failure to adhere to ANY of the requirements brought upon you by the academy will result in the immediate nullification of your rights as a member of the GWO and its authorities.

Translation...you die!

Even now, Ryu and Turbo might've made it through the initial selection process, but that didn't mean they were home free. Which was why Ryu kept an eye on Turbo as they entered the training room today, at around 0900 hours.

"Hey, good luck," he said to his friend. "Don't get into any trouble and keep to yourself as we've discussed."

Turbo nodded his understanding and sped off to meet with his

assigned partner. A monitor always showed them who they'd been assigned to train with that day, displaying their number beside someone else's. Then all they had to do was look around the room for the student with that number emblazoned on the chest and back of their uniform in giant font. Ryu, also moving to his designated spot to meet up with his partner, looked around for any sign of them. No one resembling a partner was there except for the observer, which wasn't surprising. He reminded himself again of the typical workout required for a first year.

"Okay, so, it's one set of 100 pushups, a set of 100 crunches... argh, what am I wasting time for? The observer is here, better not disappoint," said Ryu to himself as he bent down to assume the pushup position.

All of these workouts had their specific timetables for completion, and failure, of course, was not an option. Everything was graded, and there was always someone watching, ready to catch any signs of partners joking around, fraternizing instead of doing the work. Ryu couldn't control whoever his partner was, but he could control himself. So, he started doing his pushups, counting them off one by one. "1...2...3..."

"Are you number 101?" a faint voice interrupted. "I have been assigned as your partner for today's training."

Ryu paused and, somewhat excited and curious, turned towards the voice. It was a female, Ryu noticed immediately, but having further thoughts on that premise meant trouble. A girl who looked about 17, with a light complexion and long blonde hair, not necessarily to her waistline, but long enough that she had it tied up tightly, so it wouldn't get in her way. She had a bullish tone to her

voice, which reminded Ryu of the type of character they were required to exemplify when attending the school, something Ryu was still not accustomed to and was having trouble acknowledging. He frowned to himself, wondering if he'd seen her around the academy before, but could not come up with a solid reference.

"Yes, I'm number 101," said Ryu with a faint smile. "The name is Ryu, Ryu Kendo as in Japanese kendo."

He almost winced after he spoke. What the hell are you doing? He knew it was a weak attempt at a form of flirting and hoped it had been subtle enough the observer hadn't noticed.

The girl didn't even flinch. "Umm, was that supposed to be a joke?"

"Yeah, sorry, I'll forget I said anything. Let's get training," replied Ryu, clearing his throat.

The smug look on her face surprised him. Apparently, the part of the manual that stated no fraternizing didn't mean much to her.

"I'm Angela Fitzgerald, and it's a pleasure to meet you," she said, speaking rather louder than she needed to.

"Shhh...please keep your voice down," said Ryu, looking quickly around. He could feel the observer's eyes striking at his shoulders as if a weight literally dropped on him. I have to stop standing out, dammit, he thought with clenched teeth as he continued counting his pushups. desperately hoping Angela would follow his lead and get going with the workout. "11, 12, 13, 14..."

"I'm sorry, you're telling me to be quiet?" responded Angela. "You're the guy with the sense of humor."

Dammit, thought Ryu.

She was right, though; if he'd just kept his mouth shut they

wouldn't be arguing like this. He stopped doing pushups again and looked towards Angela, ready to plead with her to not cause any trouble for them, but she was smirking at him. There was a twinkle in her eyes that made him falter again and unclench his teeth. There was something...inviting and friendly about her smile that felt so out of place in the academy. It warmed his heart a little. The last time Ryu had felt this way was when his parents were still alive.

"Yeah, you're right, my bad," Ryu boldly responded, having built up his normal courage once again.

"Let me guess, you're new here aren't you?" he asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" barked Angela, narrowing her eyes at him.

Ryu turned back around, half-smiling, half-grimacing to himself. Her emotional outburst was answer enough. She definitely hadn't learned the way of things here yet. She's way too comfortable with the way she's carrying herself, not to mention the way her hair is done, and that smell? I mean how do you have time to put on some perfume, seriously!

"Excuse me, did you hear what I said?" Angela said behind him, continuing to pester him as he continued his workout. "Do you normally start without your partner? Or are you just trying to show off?"

"Umm, I guess I did start without you," said Ryu, grinning, "and it seems I'll end without you if you don't start soon, Ms. Fitzgerald. 36...37..."

"Aha a cocky one, I like that. Ok, don't hold back on my account." Assuming the pushup position, Angela began lifting herself with ease. Her hair waved in the air while her bosom gently

touched the ground. She was moving faster with every count as if she had agreed to a race. Angela looked over to Ryu with anticipation, probably hoping she would witness a sense of defeat from Ryu's expression.

Ryu shamelessly smiled back as he observed her body in motion, hoping this would clear up all misunderstandings. After all, he was a guy and she was a beautiful blonde girl. Ryu finished his first set way short of the required time of 10 minutes and continued his ogling, all the while battling with his inner self in order to avoid any trouble. He'd never been paired with a girl before, and it was definitely enjoyable, but also a painful reminder of what could never be. They were both here to train to be soldiers. The GWO wouldn't allow anything more. Flirting when no one was paying attention might be mostly harmless...but anything beyond that would draw the wrong kind of attention to them.

He sighed to himself and forced himself to control his lustful tendencies. Just then, something out of the corner of his eye made him look at the observer, who had his eyes on Angela, too. He was a big, brawny guy, with a facial expression like a bulldog, and he was watching her so heavily, almost like he despised her. As if he was foreshadowing Angela's demise with every second that went by.

Ryu narrowed his eyes at him. What the hell's wrong with him? What did she ever do to him? He would've rather gone to the isolation chamber than ever be left alone with him. That was the kind of aura this guy had.

Ryu turned his back on him and focused on encouraging Angela on, counting with her, as she completed her first set just shy of the

10-minute mark. I wonder if she's noticed him, if she's able to read people like I am? Well, it's probably for the better if she doesn't know.

"Don't tell me you're holding back 'cause I'm a girl," said Angela as she stood up, breathing heavily. She looked a bit uneasily at him.

"No of course not," Ryu said quickly. "I was just doing what I do with all my partners." But his face warmed so much he was certain it was turning red. She raised an eyebrow at him, clearly not believing him, which confirmed it.

Dammit, thought Ryu, as they moved on to doing a set of 100 crunches. You're being way too obvious. Pull yourself together.

But there was that smile at the edge of her mouth again, and it put Ryu more at ease with her as they continued their workout. She was smart, and he liked that. Being her partner was something different than usual, a little bit like being normal again.

CHAPTER 3

After the physical workout came shower time. The halfway mark of the day, an opportunity to refresh yourself before the next set of grueling measures yet to come. Every individual had their own locker assigned by number. Ryu's was 101, which meant it was on the first level. The second level consisted of numbers 150 to 200, and so on. The numbers for the current graduating class ended at 349, while the previous class numbers had ranged from 350 to 750. It was suspected that the numbers held some sort of meaning, an indication of ranking maybe? It was just a rumor, though, so Ryu never paid too much attention to it.

The stalls in the showers were adorned with a shiny marble type of construction, similar to the type of materials you would expect in a 5-star hotel. Each stall had two showerheads facing each other, offering ample room for two individuals to fit with

minor discomfort—and of course, the genders were kept separate. The water was always cold. Supposedly it opened the pores of the skin and allowed the toxins to flow out freely. Nonsense or scientific fact, either way, cold was cold, and sharing the stall with someone else was embarrassing at best. One word came to mind, and it rhymes with “linkage,” but you learned to endure and moved on.

The paired assignments remained throughout the day, so as not to waste any time. If you dared ask to switch partners, you would just be adding uninvited attention to yourself and that was never a good thing.

As Ryu made his way to the steps that led to the elevators and out of the locker area, he ran into Angela again. She looked a bit different now, and not just because she was glistening and clean from the shower. She looked a bit less formal, as if her guard was down, though was still in her military uniform, adorned with blue and white as the main colors and pressed to perfection. The women’s uniform didn’t differ much from the men’s. Ryu always thought this was done so as to not treat anyone any different. Nonetheless, he could still make out the silhouette of the female body, at least, those who had a female body. Angela was no exception.

“You’re not a bad looking guy you know,” she said as she waltzed over to him, inspecting him from head to toe.

He blinked at her, aghast. “What did you just say to me?” He frantically looked around, hoping no one else had heard her comment.

“Look it’s just something I wanted to say. If it’s gonna rile you

up, just forget it,” Angela responded as she looked away.

Ryu’s heart was pounding fast. Did she just compliment me out of the blue? Did I do something different? The manual doesn't state how to continue in this situation, of course, it doesn't, it frowns heavily on these types of conversations. But this girl is obviously not worried about it.

He couldn’t blame her, Ryu thought to himself, smirking a little. He kept his back straight and poised himself so as to seem unfazed by her comment. He remembered how popular he was with the girls back in high school. But there was no fooling her; they’d gone beyond the point of being strangers.

“I bet you're used to getting all the girls,” she said now, looking up with her eyes closed, not allowing Ryu to read her facial expression. “Just so you know, I have high standards, and I have yet to see anyone come close.”

“I never had time for a girlfriend; I was too busy with sports. So, I wouldn’t know if I was or not,” Ryu replied nonchalantly.

“That explains everything. You think this stuff is easy don’t you, and this whole time you’ve been making fun of me? You’re just a jock with a pretty face,” Angela continued.

Ryu scowled at that. “Enough,” he said. “Let’s go, we’re going to be late.” He reached for Angela’s hand to direct her next move.

Deep down he wanted to reply and continue this conversation because, well, it felt right. But, he couldn’t, for his sake and hers... He could not afford to let his guard down. The GWO was absolute and would not tolerate it. It was best they forget these things and carry on as if they’d never happened.

Though he was going to have a hard time forgetting the things

she'd said.

What's with today? Ryu kept asking himself. Was it the way he'd slept, or the dream he'd had last night?

"No, I didn't have THAT dream last night," he muttered to himself.

When he glanced at Angela again, she was back to looking serious and astute, like she was when they first met. They eventually made it in time, and not a minute too late, for the doors locked right as they stepped into class.

"Everyone, take your seats," said the instructor. "We will not waste any time."

The mental part of training involved reading, planning, and learning military strategy. Each classroom held 34 students, and had no windows, like everywhere else. The temperature was kept at 85 degrees. Cameras blinked in the corners of the room, recording every second that went by, so tiny they were almost invisible, but everyone knew they were there. All this was in place to continue the grading of each individual accordingly. There was no clock in the room—watches or any form of technology were not allowed—but Ryu knew it was around 14:00, based on how every day progressed. He often wondered whether this was what it felt like to be a prisoner or a slave perhaps.

Each day, everyone was given a scenario, and as a pairing, they had to work together to find the best solution possible. By "best," the instructor meant what was best in terms of the GWO. There wasn't any room for loss of resources, lives, time, or diplomatic solutions; the answer was clearly implied. Do whatever is necessary to achieve victory. Even if it meant sacrifice.

As an instructor had explained before in other scenarios, “We are mere pawns in this new world and as dispensable as the paper we use to wipe our asses with.”

After assessing the scenario, a memory came to Ryu that made him grimace. He recalled a previous incident in the classroom, where a classmate had challenged the instructor and presented an alternate approach that had, well, not gone over well.

Hopefully, Angela won’t make the same mistake, Ryu thought fearfully. He’d better guide her in the right direction, to be sure

But as he opened his mouth to make the first suggestion, to initiate the strategy they needed, Angela’s voice cut him off.

“Sir, if I may have a word.” Her voice broke the silence in the room. She wasn’t talking to Ryu; she was talking to the instructor.

“I don’t understand, why are we always given scenarios that lead us to choose an option where our comrades die?” Angela asked boldly.

Ryu froze in his seat. Was this a curse of some sort, what was happening to him today?

Did I honestly just hear her say THOSE words? Dammit, I didn’t ask for this kind of shit. Everything has been the same for the last 2 months and 15 days, why does this have to happen now? Is this a sign? Are we going to die soon? No, hell no, this is not going to end here.

As Ryu moved to address Angela, the instructor marched towards their table with the look of an executioner sharpening his axe for the final blow.

“Stand up, soldier,” he commanded in his boisterous tone. “What is your number?”

She stood up. "I am number 176, Angela Fitzgerald, sir."

Angela's face was as calm and focused as ever, but Ryu caught the slight twitch in her lower lip. She had a revelation, a split second of time to assess her actions and read the atmosphere of her response. It wasn't the type that felt welcoming, but the total opposite. She knew she screwed up

Dammit, why did she even ask? Did she not know? Once again, Ryu asked himself, can she not read between the lines?

Of course not, she was new and possibly from a wealthy background judging by the way she held herself, how could Ryu forget? He thought she could read the environment, but it was a misunderstanding. She wasn't that skilled yet.

"Are you an officer in disguise?" snapped the instructor. "No of course not, you're just a trained pawn who doesn't know her place. No one is allowed to think outside of the proven methods explained in these scenarios. Countless amounts of battle data have proven this to be correct. 10 LASHES AND GET HER OUT OF MY FACE."

Immediately the door swung open, and two guards walked in.

"Come with us," ordered the guards.

Angela, who was visibly trembling now, nodded to express acceptance. 10 lashes, not the worst of punishments, but Ryu remembered the last time this had happened, a few weeks ago when another student made the mistake of speaking up, and how he never saw him afterwards.

As the guards grabbed Angela by the wrists and started to lead her from the room, Ryu was overcome by the urge to do something,

But why am I getting these feelings now? Why? And what is it

I should do? Dammit, think, Ryu.

Time was moving faster than he had ever felt it move. Angela, with both guards at her shoulders, started towards the door.

“SIR, IF I MAY HAVE A WORD,” Ryu shouted, standing up quickly.

All eyes turned to him, of course, and he clenched his shaking hands into fists at his sides. He knew he’d just done the same damn thing that he had chastised Angela for, but he had to do something, regardless of what was to come next. Angela’s face turned from fearful to that of confusion, and then something almost like gratitude.

CHAPTER 4

“What is this?” asked the instructor in a soft voice that was almost worse than his loud, gruff one. Like the edge of a blade gently running down a chalkboard. “Another pawn attempting to cause a ruse?”

Ryu could feel all the warmth and confidence starting to drain from his face. The tenseness in the room and in the eyes of his staring classmates—some looking astonished or frightened on his behalf, others simply staring stiffly like they didn’t care what happened to him—was a lot to withstand. *What the hell was I thinking? Why did I do this for this girl? Crap, I’ve always had a soft spot for cute girls and their smile.*

He casually looked over to Angela for a split second, and it was only the terror still flickering in her eyes that jolted him out of his frozen silence. He had chosen to make his bed, now he had to lie in

it. *Think of some excuse. Say something.*

“Please excuse my disruption, sir.” Ryu forced the words out of his mouth in a respectful and submissive tone, trying to keep his voice from wavering. “I merely want to clear up the misunderstanding my partner has caused.”

Of course, that was his terrible attempt at trying to prolong the situation, so he could think of something more credible to say, an actual excuse that would get himself and Angela off the hook. *But what excuse will he take? Think fast, come on.*

And then it came to him. He remembered something. There was a day when he was a young boy when he was horribly sick in bed, with a fever so high he couldn’t go out to play with his friends. He remembered his mother had told him that he had to let the ailment run its course, but Ryu had no patience for it. He hated sitting still and all he wanted to do was have fun with his friends. That day Ryu didn’t heed his mother’s words and said some rather unfortunate things without knowing why he said them; in other words, the fever was so strong that he became delirious and misspoke.

“Sir,” he said now, quickly, “my partner has been feeling ill all day long, and I apologize for not bringing it up earlier. I didn’t want to disrupt the routine, so I let number 176 work through her ailment, but I now know that I was wrong and will accept my punishment as well.”

Ryu pressed his lips together when he finished, hoping his words would mend all problems caused, and looked towards his instructor.

The look on the instructor’s face didn’t give a hint of what he

was thinking, which Ryu expected. Military men were never easy to read. Ryu waited, standing as firmly as possible, for his response, trying to calm the hammering of his heart.

Could there be any form of leniency in this man's heart? No, of course not, who am I joking, he thought, as he acknowledged defeat.

"Hmm," replied the instructor, slowly. "A feeble attempt to lay blame on yourself in order to divide the punishment." He was silent for another moment, then made a sniffing sound. "Very well. 10 lashes for you, and your friend will administer them."

Relief had rushed into Angela's eyes for a split second, but now it fell away to a look of shock and horror. Her legs seemed barely able to sustain her weight; she started to bend at the knees, and only the guards' firm hands kept her standing.

"What?" she said. "You can't be serious. I mean—I won't—I've never—I can't—"

"DID I NOT MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?" roared the instructor, spinning on his heel to face her, practically spitting his words. She shrunk even further into herself that beneath that look.

"Apologies, sir, we definitely understand, and we hear you loud and clear," Ryu swiftly replied.

He resolved to accept his punishment. He'd gotten what he wanted, hadn't he? Diverted the attention away from Angela and onto himself.

Am I an idiot for doing this? he thought to himself. He honestly didn't feel that way at that moment. He felt something had to be done and he had to be the one to do it. Had he gotten a conscience all of a sudden? Maybe so, but he felt compelled to the point that

he knew he would live with the guilt if he didn't follow through with what he'd started.

A lashing wasn't something to be ignored, Even though it hadn't resulted in someone's death as of yet, it was still one of the proven methods the GWO used in dealing with any insubordination. Ryu and Angela were about to find out firsthand what it meant to be at the end of the whip.

Both he and Angela were escorted out of the classroom and down the hallway, held tightly by each guard and moving with purpose. At the end of the hallway was a set of doors that read "Military Personnel Only."

Ryu almost blanched at the sight of it. The last time a classmate had been removed from the room, was this where they'd been taken?

If so, there was nothing that could be done at this point. Expecting the worst, Ryu turned to look at Angela and attempted to assure her of her duty, forcing confidence into his voice.

"Do not even think of letting me off easy. They won't allow it and you'll just make things worse for the both of us. Please endure it and see to its completion," he muttered to Angela with a tone of that of an officer giving orders to a subordinate. "Got it?"

Angela's eyes were still as wide and fearful as ever, but she nodded tightly.

As they entered through the doors, they were led into another room. Immediately, the stench hit Ryu's nostrils.

"Ugh, what's that smell?" Angela murmured, coughing.

The smell was like that of fresh vomit, probably the vomit from the students who'd been brought here before. The walls looked like

they'd once been an off-white color, but now they were covered with heavy bloodstains that had dried out over the years, leaving a brownish tint. Ryu tried to breathe through his mouth, so he wouldn't vomit, too.

What did you expect? A nice room with an invigorating smell? No, of course not, this is the reality we live in now, this is the GWO we're dealing with.

"You there, number 101," snapped one of the guards. "Take off your shirt and step forward." He tugged on the end of a pair of handcuffs attached to the wall.

That was his cue, and Ryu wasted no time. He wanted to get this over with and get back to normalcy if you could call it that. He pulled off his shirt and stepped forward, and let the guard cuff his wrists.

The other guard handed Angela a whip that looked like it had come from medieval times. Worn down at the handle, it had clearly served these guards loyally many times, and once again it meant to do its worst.

"11 lashes," the guard said. "Go on."

Angela nodded tightly and then looked at Ryu one last time. Her hands were visibly shaking as she gripped the end of the whip. Ryu blinked hard against the tears threatening his eyes, and forced his face into a look of determination, for her.

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?" he shouted. "HIT ME, HIT ME NOW."

Angela stared frozen at him one more moment. Then she gritted her teeth and raised her arm and brought the whip down.

Shlaat

That was the sound of the whip as Angela cocked it back and released its fury on Ryu's back. *One, two, three...* He silently counted, his teeth clenched hard. The pain was unbearable—no, it was worse than that. Cold and sharp, a burning sensation that increased after every lash. The sound of the whip cutting into him grated at his ears, and he was trying desperately not to scream.

Shlaat

Shlaat

Shlaat

Ryu managed to look over his shoulder for a brief second as the seventh strike tore at his back, and he saw tears running down Angela's face.



She shook her head and her hands faltered before she raised the whip again, like she was going to give up. He had to keep her focused.

"C'mon Angela, hit me like you mean it!" Ryu screamed out. It was necessary; he had to convince the guards. "Show me your rage!"

Nine...

Ten...

Eleven...

Just like that, it was over. Angela stepped back and let the whip drop from her hand and knelt to the ground and bowed her head. She kept silent, and Ryu let out a gasp of relief. They both had endured. His knees were slightly shaking from the pain and the adrenaline, and his back felt soaked with sweat and blood. The guard released his wrists from the handcuffs.

"Go on," was all he said, gruffly.

"It's over," Ryu said to Angela, breathlessly, as he attempted to take a step. He ran his arm down the wall at his side, hoping to find something to sustain himself with. "Let's go. You did good." He hoped his reassurance would help ease her guilt. He reached for his shirt and swung it carelessly over his back with his remaining energy.

Angela stood up, walked over to Ryu, and assisted him to the door. They both started their retreat towards their rooms, clearly drained both physically and emotionally. As they continued on, Ryu noticed Angela was still in a state of remorse as she waddled towards the elevators that led to the female dorm.

"Angela, wait," said Ryu.

Angela immediately froze in place. She nudged her head slightly, which favored a shameful gesture.

"How can you even speak to me after what I put you through?" Angela replied in a soft tone, still looking down.

Ryu stopped and grabbed Angela by her arm with an unwavering grip, moving her towards him with determination.

“Hey, look at me,” he said. “Do not let them win, do you hear me? Do not show any sign of giving up.”

Angela looked up. “But why? Why do you even care?” she replied with emotion as a tear ran down her face.

Ryu released the tension of his grip. Stepping closer to Angela, moving his hand in a gentle manner, Ryu touched her chin, lifting her head to gaze into her eyes.

“Do I look troubled to you, Angela? Do I look as if I have given up on life? Please don’t think so low of yourself. You did what had to be done, and I’m proud of you.” Ryu spoke calmly. “You made the right choice. The choice to live.”

Angela looked shocked at his words. Tears slid down her cheeks again, and she wiped them away, attempting to fix her composure.

“You’re an idiot, you know that?” she said. “What kind of guy says that to a girl he just met? That’s right, you’re a jock, I shouldn’t expect much.”

“That’s more like it,” Ryu replied with a smile on his face. “Welcome back, Ms. Fitzgerald.”

He watched, still smiling—almost forgetting about the burning pain in his back for a moment—as Angela boarded the elevators and waved goodbye to him.

CHAPTER 5

A week later, lying in bed fumbling to shut off the blaring morning alarm, Ryu was still contemplating what had led him to go against every instinct on behalf of Angela. *Am I in love? No, jeez, you just met her, dummy. You're not that stupid—you just got carried away. But you need to snap out of it and start minding your own business again, or you won't last long.*

He hadn't seen much of her or Turbo in the past week of the same old training exercises since he had a different partner every day. He wondered how both of them were fairing without him there to get them out of trouble.

Well, at least the workouts are paying off, he thought, admiring his reflection in the small mirror in his bathroom. His muscles were definitely getting more toned. He flexed and grinned to himself.

There was suddenly a knock on his bedroom door.

Ryu frowned, freezing with his muscle still flexed. No one had never knocked on his door before. According to the military manual, page 36, paragraph 9, *No visitors are allowed in your dorm room at any time*. So who had just knocked?

He stepped slowly out of the bathroom. “Hello?” No one answered. His eyes caught a slip of paper on the floor like it had been shoved under the small slit of the door. “What the hell?”

The sight of that paper made him stiffen, caught in a semi-state of shock. Something told him he wouldn’t like what was on it. *Could this be my expulsion? Crap, I’m a goner, aren’t I? No, stop being a coward and pick up the paper.*

Before he could talk himself out of it, he grabbed the paper off the ground. Whether it is bad or not, he had to know what it was. The paper was thick and sturdy, not your regular type of 8 x 11 paper; it was almost as thick as a postcard. Paper this thick could only mean one thing: this was something of great importance, something that could not get wrinkled away or destroyed easily.

He turned the document over, and his eyes went to the top of the page, to the title in big bold letters:

GWO Training Exercise

“A training exercise? Oh.” Ryu sighed to himself, relaxing his shoulders.

He read on: *You are hereby required to attend the training exercise at 08:00 hours. This will be a real-world scenario.*

A real-world scenario, meaning not within the confines of the

academy, but outside on a battlefield. Somewhere Ryu had not been before. But he'd heard of this type of military drill—it was designed to test soldiers in the most rigorous ways. His imagination started racing as he read the paper again.

Will there be bodies scattered on the floor? Will it be dark and hot as hell itself?

Even so, a summons was nothing to be ignored.

The final words at the bottom read: *Anyone absent will be considered a traitor and receive a grade 5 punishment.*

Grade 5 punishment, the highest form. Ryu knew this meant death, but not the type that's just a bullet to your head; it was the type of death where you were tortured first and then left to die in some painful way. At least, that's what he remembered from the manual. Definitely not something he wanted to learn anything more about firsthand.

Noticing the time, Ryu hurried to finish getting ready, preparing the equipment requested for this kind of exercise. The document called for tactical wear, which meant the dark green camouflaged garb that was given to him at the start of the academy. It was made for outdoors, thick fabric, fabric that felt like a weatherproof tarp. Its multiple pockets and holsters were designed to carry equipment with ease, and he also put on a pair of goggles and a helmet to protect his eyes and head.

"Done," Ryu exclaimed.

He was ready and a bit unnerved. Not knowing what to expect, he headed off for the location indicated in the document: Zone 5, a semi-remote location, about 10 miles from the campus. He had to take a shuttle to get there. During the ride, Ryu looked out the

window and was reminded of what the outside world looked like. He hadn't seen it since before his entrance into the academy. He thought about the clouds of smoke and the dark skies that covered the land. The town in which he lived had once been a sprawling area full of life, trees, and vegetation, but now it was a wasteland. The war had consumed everything. Nothing remained except for the remnants of what used to be skyscrapers. Sometimes he wondered whether any part of the world had escaped this devastation.

Arriving at Zone 5, Ryu looked around.

It was somewhat different than what he had imagined, actually a lot different. No bodies on the floor, no one covered in blood, no flames or signs of Satan himself, a total let down if he was being honest. Instead, it was a huge, open area of dirt and the occasional clump of grass. There seemed to be no end or beginning to it, a few trees and mountains in the background and some torn down buildings used as props for the exercises.

Looking on, Ryu noticed that only about 16 of his classmates



were present, nowhere close to the number he'd observed in the morning briefings. He looked around, trying to spot someone familiar when he heard that voice again...

"Everyone in formation, NOW." It was the same instructor who'd sent him to the lashing room, and his voice was the cue to get into serious mode.

People scurried into position, and Ryu moved too until everyone was standing side by side on a thick red line spray-painted in the dirt, just as the document had described.

"Listen up," said the instructor, speaking into a loudspeaker atop a podium facing the students. "I will only say this once. Each of you will be given an armband with a color. This armband represents the color of your team. Once in your groups, you will choose a captain. This person will read a closed envelope, and then you are required to start your drill. Everyone has 2 hours to complete it."

As he spoke, the armbands were passed out by the guards. There were 4 colors—blue, yellow, red, and green—which meant 4 teams if Ryu was correct in assuming 16 students. The order they were given out in seemed random, but Ryu knew based on his time at the academy that the GWO never left anything to chance. Ryu's armband was blue, which gave him a sense of calm. He'd always liked blue; it was a heavenly color, his mom used to say, and it meant good, or something like that. Whereas red meant you had the highest form of bad luck.

What's next? Ryu thought to himself, looking around until he saw what looked like a wooden post stuck on the ground, with a colored flag waving around on top. It was a red flag though, not his

color. He squinted to look farther, trying to find a post with a blue flag.

“Ryu, HEY, over here!” a voice shouted at him.

“Huh, what? Oh... Hey, Turbo! What's up?” Ryu replied as he noticed his pal Turbo walking towards him.

“You’re blue too!” said Turbo excitedly.

“Yeah, I guess we're on the same team.”

“Awesome, that means we're gonna kick some ass today.” Turbo grinned. “You'll see, no one is gonna beat Team Enforcers.”

“Enforcers, huh? I like it. Has a nice ring to it.” Ryu smiled. “Let’s find our post and meet our team members.”

Both Turbo and Ryu sped off around the nearest fallen structures, as it seemed their blue flag was hiding somewhere out of sight. The posts were purposefully scattered throughout the area so that the teams had ample distance between each other.

“Look! Over there,” said Turbo pointing.

As they drew closer, they both saw the silhouette of a tall male, and soon they could tell a female was there already too, trying to start a conversation with him.

“So, you’re just going to stand there and ignore me?” snapped Angela. “I asked you what your name was, you punk.”

“Angela!” said Ryu, a bit surprised but also pleased to see her. Only, she didn’t seem to hear him. “Angela, it’s me, Ryu,” he said when he was almost to her, and he put his hand on her shoulder in an attempt at getting her attention. Big mistake.

Angela reacted by grabbing his hand and flipping Ryu over her back and onto the ground like it was total instinct.

Ryu groaned, lying on his back. “Argh, dammit, Angela, what

the hell?" He coughed, in pain.

"Oh my gosh," Angela replied in disbelief, her eyes widening as she recognized him. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know it was you." She quickly knelt down and offered Ryu a hand to help him up.

"Is this how you reward someone after they risk their neck for you?" Ryu said with a light laugh as he struggled to his feet.

"No, of course not," she replied. "But you should know better. We're in a live military drill, in a remote location, and I was distracted talking to this dork over here, and you put your hands on me. How else would you expect me to respond, huh?" She closed her eyes and crossed her arms, in full denial that she had done anything wrong. But a second later she added, "I'm sorry, ok?"

"No, it's fine, it was my fault," replied Ryu.

"Oh yeah, was it now?" She rolled her eyes. "Just make your mind up already."

"Look let's just forget about it, we have more important things to worry about," said Ryu as he held his back, trying to rub out some of the lingering pain. "I gotta say, you're pretty quick. You've got some skill, I'm definitely impressed."

"Oh, so you're still thinking in terms of girl vs. guy huh?"

"No, no, not at all," Ryu replied in a shameful voice. "I was honestly just giving you a compliment."

"Ok... well.... Thanks, I guess," Angela muttered back.

Ryu glanced at Turbo, who had the look of a twelve-year-old savoring a chocolate bar right before it hit his mouth. *Oh great, here we go...*

"Hey Ryu," Turbo said as he leaned over to whisper into Ryu's ear. "Is this your girlfriend? I thought that wasn't allowed."

"SHE IS NOT MY GIRLFRIEND!" Ryu shouted back.

And then he froze, suddenly aware of all the eyes on him—Turbo, the guy behind them, and Angela. *Did I just scream that out loud?* Well, this was definitely awkward now. He caught Angela's eye, then looked down and away immediately.

"Hey, so are you going to tell us your name or what?" Angela said, turning to the individual she was speaking to before the incident. She was obviously trying to change the subject, and Ryu was grateful for it.

"We don't go by names here, or have you forgotten?" the guy said. "We go by numbers, and I don't respond to random people of no significance."

"Why, you—!" started Angela, her eyes narrowing as she stepped towards the guy with her fists clenched.

"Wait, Angela," Ryu said, quickly placed his body in between the two of them. This time he knew better than to rest his hand on her shoulder. "I know who you are, you're Hiro, number 102, am I correct?"

"Yes, you are correct," Hiro said, stiffly. "It's not uncommon to know my number. I am definitely someone of extreme importance here, you know."

Ryu knew somewhat about Hiro, not just because of the race involving Turbo, but because of his first day at the academy, orientation day. Hiro had been next to him in line when they were assigned their numbers, so it was common sense to assume he would be number 102 since it was the number that followed 101.

"So, you're on the blue team as well, huh?" said Turbo, glaring at the guy who was in a way his arch nemesis. "Is this some sort of

a joke? Or did the General tire of you so quickly?"

"You amuse me, number 190," Hiro replied. "I'm here for one purpose. To teach you fools firsthand what it takes to be at the top."

"Why you piece of..." Now Turbo was the one clenching his fists.

"Turbo, just chill out and let him speak," Ryu interrupted. "We have stuff to do, so just hear him out. He isn't going to shut up."

Thankfully, Turbo listened and fell back, though he remained glaring at Hiro, who began to speak in his haughty, dry voice.

"I have already assigned myself as the captain of this team."

"What? The hell you are," said Turbo.

"Turbo," Ryu said again, giving him a look.

"I have read the sealed envelope," Hiro continued. "We have been assigned as part of a unit under the GWO. Our mission..."

He looked around at the three of them with a hint of a smirk at the edge of his mouth, like whatever they were about to do he couldn't wait to get started.

"TO DESTROY THE RESISTANCE."

CHAPTER 6

Hiro being assigned to the blue team was not a coincidence, Ryu was certain of that. He had an eerie feeling every time Hiro was around.

Hiro had always been an exemplary model for the academy. He was introduced to the school as someone with top talent, an individual selected by General Gohan himself. Hiro hadn't been afraid to challenge even the top students in the academy, and his relentless attitude had soon shot him to the top as well. He was physically fit, like a middleweight boxer, around the same height as Turbo, with dark brownish hair almost crossing the line into red. His eyes were blue like the sky before the wars. Ryu hadn't missed how some girls at the academy swooned over him, even with the rules in place; they were willing to risk isolation just to be in his presence.

Yet he was now faced with the task of rearing a group of nobodies, as Hiro surely would've called them, into a team worthy of defeating the Resistance.

Ryu and Turbo glanced at each other as Hiro continued explaining the details of their mission.

They'd been assigned as a unit within the GWO, but two of the other teams had received different orders in their sealed envelope, and they would be playing as the Resistance. The goal was simple: to repel the opposition. All GWO units were required to use all necessary force in order to win the confrontation. Ryu's team had mere minutes—if not seconds—before another team might come after them. Of course, the instructions were all in the typical GWO jargon, sparse and to the point with nothing else explained, so the team was a bit confused.

"How do we plan on fighting? With our bare hands?" asked Angela.

"Not a bad idea," Hiro replied. "Open that box." He pointed to a worn-down crate at the bed of the post with the blue flag.

Ryu hadn't noticed it until now because it looked like it was part of the structure. It had some worn-out writing on it that he could make out when he stepped closer to it— "EQUIPMENT." He rushed over to open and reveal its contents, but just as he reached for the handle, Hiro grabbed his arm to stop him.

"Wait," snapped Hiro.

"Wait? Why?" Ryu replied, shaking Hiro's grip off him.

"Understand one thing," Hiro said, to him and then to Turbo and Angela. "These are just tools. Your body must be your ultimate weapon. Learn to confront your enemy with your physical and

mental skills above anything else.”

He went on for several more moments about how relying on equipment was for the weak, and how a true soldier of the GWO took extreme pleasure in killing with his bare hands. Basically, taking the words right out of the General’s handbook on “how to be a ruthless badass.”

Ryu rolled his eyes at Turbo and said under his breath, “Hey, listen.”

“Yeah?” murmured Turbo.

“Whatever happens here, be on high alert. I don’t trust this guy.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” Turbo threw a dark look in Hiro’s direction. “I’m already at I want to kill him.”

As Hiro finally finished talking, Ryu grabbed the crate’s handle and opened it. He, Angela, and Turbo hunched over the box to observe its contents. Inside was a set of rifles, two military-grade knives, a pair of what seemed like grenades, and a set of binoculars. The equipment looked in poor shape. The handle on one of the rifles had the word “DIE” engraved in it. The knives felt dull when Ryu touched them with his thumb, and there was nothing in the box that looked like a sharpening stone. There didn’t seem to be any ammo for the guns, either. Everything indicated that they were meant for training purposes only.

Angela grabbed one of the half-deteriorated rifles from the box and blew the dust off its grip. “Does this thing even work?” she asked. The scope was broken, and the rifle made a clicking sound as she hoisted it over her shoulder. Ryu didn’t think it could possibly still fire.

“Get whatever you need and get ready,” Hiro ordered, ignoring Angela’s question. “I see them coming.” He reached into the box and grabbed one of the knives.

“What the hell are we supposed to do with these?” Ryu asked, grabbing the second knife from the box and spinning towards Hiro. “Ambush them with our fake weapons and somehow convince them to surrender?”

“Don’t worry about that right now,” replied Hiro as he lowered himself behind the box. “Everyone, follow me, we need to get into position. They’re coming.”

Hiro started to speed off, his aura shifting from pompous to that of a lion stalking its prey. Ryu narrowed his eyes but gripped his knife and followed him, and so did the others, hunched and moving swiftly. They reached one of the remnants of a building, a maze of sorts. It had no doors or windows, but enough cover to hide and wait for the other teams to get within striking distance.

“Wait until you can hear their breathing,” whispered Hiro. “If we stay in here, they’ll have to come through the doorways one or two at a time. That’s when we’ll strike. Number 190, on your six, watch that opening, I saw one coming.”

Angela and Ryu looked at each other, clearly having the same thought, *why is he getting all hot and sweaty?* They were all tense and a little nervous—this was a training session after all, and there’d be observers watching them—but Hiro sure seemed more anxious than all of them. Ryu could sense his animalistic desire to strike at something, and it was unsettling. This was just a training exercise; it wasn’t like they were really supposed to kill their own people. But it was probably just Hiro’s way of getting into character.

He had to demonstrate to the team the characteristics he believed a captain of the GWO should exemplify.

“Shhh,” Hiro said as he bowed his head behind a pillar that was cut in half.

Just then, there was a clunk on the floor. A sound that was undeniably a footstep. Ryu glanced in Turbo’s direction; it was coming from somewhere behind him. Turbo gripped his rifle in his hand and lifted it, at the ready, waiting as another footstep fell...and then one more....

“Surrender NOW,” he shouted, jumping up and pointing his rifle in the enemy’s direction. Ryu could hardly see the person, it was so dark, but he could hear their gasp of surprise. “You are surrounded.”

“Wait, what?” sputtered the enemy, the member of another team playing a resistance fighter, stumbling back at the sight of the four of them on all sides of him. Clearly, he’d been caught completely unaware. Hiro had done a pretty good job with this plan.

“SHOOT! GODAMMIT, SHOOT HIM!” Hiro shouted at Turbo.

Ryu looked at him. “Shoot him? With what?” Their weapons were fake, useless. No one had mentioned how intense this would play out, but Ryu was beginning to suspect that Hiro was either delusional or totally messing with them. “Look, we’ve got him surrounded; he’s gonna surrender.”

Turbo hesitated, clearly torn between following orders and following reason. “Yeah, umm, these aren’t loaded right?” he started.

Hiro was already shoving him out of the way moving with speed straight at the enemy. The stunned guy finally managed to

fumble for his weapon and raise it. Only, he was too slow.

“No—!” shouted Ryu, but it was too late. Hiro had slashed the guy’s neck with his dull knife. The guy choked and swayed on his feet, and then fell to the ground, blood splattering from his neck onto his uniform. Ryu’s eyes immediately opened wide as he took in the twitching body. *What the hell?*

Before he had time to react more than that, more footsteps pounded across the dirt nearby, coming in the direction of the old building. It was the rest of the opposing team; they had heard the voices and were responding.

“Watch out, 3 o’clock,” Hiro said, looking towards Angela.

But Angela was completely immobile, staring with huge eyes at the guy lying on the ground, soaking in a puddle of his blood.



Hiro ran towards Angela, grabbed the rifle, and within seconds, fired a shot.

Boom. The bullet screamed out. It hit its target, and another individual went down, shot dead in the head.

“What the hell is going on?” screamed Ryu. His mind was reeling. Hiro didn’t have to *kill* them—they were just supposed to make the Resistance surrender.

Two out of the four individuals on the opposing team were disposed of in seconds, all by Hiro himself.

“Is it...real blood?” asked Angela, her voice practically trembling.

Ryu leaned down and touched the red substance coming from the head of the individual lying in front of him. The body was still as a piece of wood, no heartbeat. The blood was wet and warm and sticky. This was real. Definitely real.

“Of course it’s real blood.” Hiro scoffed. “You fools, do you think we have time to waste with fake scenarios out here? You have no idea what’s at stake.”

He stepped towards Ryu, angrily, and grabbed him by the neck of his uniform. Ryu looked up into his eyes and all he could see was the General. “You have been given a chance to live or die. That is the only choice right now. So, you either fight, or you die.”

Hiro glared at him once more and then released him before turning to glance around the surrounding area for the rest of the opposition. “Come on, there are more of them out there,” he barked. “Let’s keep moving.”

Ryu stared after him, breathing hard. This shouldn’t have surprised him; he’d read the manual. He had expected this... But it was so much worse to be living through it. So much worse to know that *he* could’ve been the one lying on the ground with a knife wound in his neck, bleeding out, if he’d been unlucky enough to end up on a unit chosen to play as the Resistance. The other

students' fates were decided as soon as they opened their sealed envelope and read its contents.

This was not a game. This was real life.

Kill or be killed.

CHAPTER 7

Before he followed after Hiro, Ryu looked towards Angela, who was now curled up in a corner of the room, her eyes wide with fear, her face pale and clammy, waiting for the next wave of attacks.

“Angela,” said Ryu, hurrying over to her and dropping to a knee beside her. “Angela! We have to fight! Do you hear me?”

She didn’t look up or even acknowledge him. Her eyes were unblinking, and she sat frozen in place.

“There are still two left,” said Hiro as he positioned himself at Ryu’s side.

Ryu nodded and glanced at Turbo. “Turbo, get ready.”

The faint sound of voices reached their ears, and Hiro, Ryu, and Turbo all tensed. But Ryu couldn’t make out the exact direction of the voices; the wind was starting to blow, fading out any chance of hearing the enemy’s approach.

Clonk, thump, thump

"GRENADE!" shouted Hiro.

Ryu, fearing the worst, turned to look, noticing immediately it had dropped near Angela.

"ANGELA, WATCH OUT!" he shouted.

Angela grabbed her knees and tucked in her head as if to admit defeat. Like she was just finished, done with this nightmare.

"This...is...not...GAME OVER!" Ryu yelled, leaping towards the grenade. He grabbed it with his right hand as if it was a football he had to retrieve from a fumble. He had mere seconds to get it out of here before he'd be done for—there was a small opening in the wall above Angela's head.

Swoosh went the grenade as Ryu threw it with purpose.

He immediately grabbed Angela and covered her body with his, hoping to shelter her from the shrapnel.

"Aaah!" a voice screamed out on the other side of the wall.

BOOOOOOM went the grenade as it exploded, just outside of Ryu and Angela's immediate surroundings.

Splat. Thump. The sound of flesh hitting against a wall.

Ryu slowly lifted his head. His heart was pounding. It was clear he had succeeded in thwarting the attack. He somehow had also managed to calculate the correct location of the voice he'd heard earlier, killing off the individual that threw the grenade.

"Angela," said Ryu once again, knowing someone else could strike at any moment. He grabbed her by both her arms, slightly lifting her up, and looked at her. "Please Angela, you have to get up, you have to try. I won't let you die here."

"101, 190, we have to leave. Our position has been

compromised,” said Hiro as he looked through an opening for an escape. “Grab your gear, and let’s move out,” he continued.

“Ryu” said Angela, still in Ryu’s grasp. “Thank you, thank you for saving me again,” she said.

“Don’t thank me yet, we still have to make it out together, ok?” Ryu replied as he helped her to her feet.

There was still one individual on the opposing team they had not accounted for, the only one they had yet to face. Hiro, who was clearly growing less and less patient with Ryu and Angela’s pleasantries, motioned silently to everyone with a wave of his hand.

“This way,” he whispered, pointing in the direction they needed to move.

The small opening required everyone to crouch in order to fit through. It was a crack in the wall, not even a doorway, but it was a way out. Turbo followed behind Hiro and glanced back at Ryu.

“C’mon, she’s gonna be all right,” he whispered.

Ryu understood, and motioned to Angela to follow behind Turbo. He would cover the rear. Angela grabbed her rifle and moved towards the opening. Both Hiro and Turbo took position outside, watching carefully while the rest of the group followed.

“YOU PIECE OF SHIT,” a voice shouted immediately.

Ryu, still inside the building, gasped as a body jumped on top of him from behind. It was the fourth and final individual. Ryu immediately went into a struggle with the assailant. The enemy held a knife in his hand and slashed at Ryu’s chest.

“DIE, YOU RESISTANCE SCUM!” he shouted as he continued his attempt to overwhelm Ryu’s defenses.

Ryu grabbed both his arms, but this guy was bigger and

stronger. Ryu knew he couldn't hold him off for long; he had to think quickly.

He attempted a head-butt, hitting the attacker on the nose. Blood splattered onto the guy's snarling face. Ryu had hoped this would force him to release the weapon...but nope. It backfired, instead, fueling the attacker's rage even further. His grip became stronger and resolute, forcing Ryu to the ground and pushing his knife towards Ryu's chest, just an inch shy of its target—his heart!

Bang

Suddenly the attacker's eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he fell limp on top of Ryu.

Behind him stood Angela, with her rifle in hand, breathing heavily. She must've used it to knock him out. Ryu looked at her in surprise. He shoved the body of his attacker off of him and onto the ground.

"Angela, how?" he asked.

"I heard him just as I was about to go through the opening," she replied.

Still gripping the rifle in her left hand, with blood dripping from its handle, she reached out to Ryu, offering her right hand.

"C'mon, we have to meet with the others, we're not giving up," Ryu said, grabbing her hand and getting to his feet. "Thank you, Angela, you saved my life."

Angela acknowledged Ryu's gratitude with a nod. She didn't smile.

They both knew how serious this was now.

They continued to the opening and exited the building. As Angela and Ryu emerged, they were immediately signaled by Hiro

to join him at his location. Both Ryu and Angela nodded back and moved to meet him with more determination than before. This time looking around before every step, ensuring no surprises awaited them.

“What happened back there?” said Turbo as they walked up.

“It was an ambush, the last guy, I think he was their captain,” replied Ryu.

He started describing what had happened, but suddenly Hiro disrupted their conversation.

“Look, over there.” He pointed

Everyone turned in the direction. It was a timer, a timer that stood atop the podium where the instructor had first described the details of the drill. It was counting down; an hour and twenty-six minutes had passed. Ryu remembered the instructor stating that the drill would end in two hours.

“Looks like we finished early, I guess,” said Ryu.

“Incorrect,” replied Hiro. “We still have 34 minutes remaining.”

“What do you mean? Are we not done yet?” asked Turbo with a look of desperation.

“We continue until the timer stops at two hours,” replied Hiro.

“Continue? But we killed them? They’re dead...” said Angela with a confused expression.

“Yes, one team is dead, but there are still more of them out there,” he replied, “This time we attack and do not show any mercy.”

Ryu, frustrated at the whole situation, looked down at his hands, at the rough cuts he had received from the battle thus far. These were not the same cuts he endured while working out. These

were different, a symbol of his progression from the academy to the battlefield.

And this was just the beginning.

CHAPTER 8

Having 34 minutes left on the timer felt like an eternity.

The blue team was positioned just off to the side of the field, about 100 yards from the podium. They had taken shelter just behind a slope, and Ryu and his teammates were lying low, chest to the ground, attempting to scan the area.

“Did anyone grab a set of binoculars?” asked Hiro.

“No, we each grabbed a weapon,” replied Turbo.

“Aren’t the binoculars something a captain should carry?” said Angela in a frustrated tone.

“Binoculars? Why do you need binoculars when we are right here!” said a new voice.

Ryu spun around, getting to his feet and holding his knife at the ready. The newcomer was from one of the other teams. The smoke from his cigarette barely allowed Ryu to make out his face.

He was accompanied by two others, and all three of them were wearing red armbands.

"I see you have managed to survive as well, Torch," replied Hiro as he stood up.

Ryu narrowed his eyes at the newcomer. He knew this guy. Dirk Satzu, a.k.a. the Torch, was a friend of Hiro's, at least as far as Ryu could guess from all the times he'd seen them together both in and out of training. It made sense; the two seemed like they were the same kind of assholes with killing agendas.

"Torch?" said Angela, raising an eyebrow. "What kind of nickname is that?"

"It's not because of the smoking if that's what you think," said the Torch with a smirk.

"Torch and I were on a team in a drill like this one, before," said Hiro, also smiling. "Let's just say he liked setting his kill up in flames."

Just then, Ryu looked beyond the Torch and his teammates, squinting out at the desolate landscape. In the distance, sure enough, plumes of smoke were rising from what looked like bodies on fire.

"Seems it's just us now," said Hiro.

"Yeah, like old times aye, Hiro," replied the Torch with a smug look, puffing at his cigarette. "Why don't we make this interesting, eh? Your team against my team."

"Sounds tempting," replied Hiro.

"Wait," cut in Ryu.

He was tired of playing their games. He wanted full control of his own fate now.

“I have a better idea.”

Both Turbo and Angela glanced at him with confusion. But Hiro looked curious.

“I challenge any individual on your team to...” Ryu paused briefly.

“A DUEL!” he shouted, pointing towards the Torch.

“Let’s decide this match based on the life of one individual,” Ryu said, “What do you say?”

“Ha Ha Ha,” the Torch laughed back ferociously. “A bout in single combat?” He paused momentarily, stroking his chin in contemplation. “Very well, how do we decide?”

The Torch, holding his cigarette in his mouth, looked to the others on his team. He obviously wanted to take all the glory for himself—Ryu had a feeling he was gunning for a promotion, same as Hiro. The others from the red team looked at each other and then nodded to the Torch, accepting the challenge.

“Let’s leave it to chance,” said Hiro as he walked over to Ryu.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out what looked like a coin. An insignificant item in this new world, but Hiro was carrying it around like a souvenir. He lifted the coin to show two sides, heads, and tails.

“Let’s flip this coin” he suggested. “Whoever wins gets to choose their opponent.”

Hiro, still holding the coin for everyone to see, turned with a conniving look towards Angela and Turbo. They looked right back at him with pure determination. They were ready for anything.

“Very well, seems we’re all in accord,” replied Hiro as he laid the coin on his thumb and flipped it into the air.

"Call it in mid-air," he shouted.

"Heads," said Ryu immediately.

The Torch, understanding he would be tails, kept silent. The coin landed on Hiro's hand. Hiro flipped his hand over and revealed the side that had won.

"It's heads. 101, you choose," he said.

Ryu looked at each of the red team's members before him, sizing them up. He wanted the advantage, of course. He hadn't thought about how the duel would conduct itself, but he knew he was better off selecting someone he believed he would be able to overwhelm in any activity. The trouble was, time was running out, and he was having difficulty deciding.

"Let me make this easier for you," the Torch said as he reached into his pocket and grabbed what seemed like a pistol.

BOOM went the sound of the pistol as the Torch fired it.

Angela gasped aloud, and Ryu ducked his head, half-expecting the shot to fly in his direction. But it didn't.

When the smoke cleared, the other two members of Torch's team were on the ground. Dead. Both shot in the head by Torch's single bullet.

"There, that's better," he said, spinning his pistol on his thumb before tossing it aside. He grinned. "Now you only have one choice. Me."

Ryu stared at him, hardly believing what had just happened. *Wrong choice*, he realized now. He'd rather fight anyone besides this insane monster.

But he shoved those feelings of fear and disgust aside and set his jaw hard. This was his chance to strike that stupid grin from

Torch's face, and from Hiro's. Clearly, they were in on this, whatever it was. But Ryu wasn't about to fall prey to these thugs.

"Sure," Ryu said, with a shrug. "Ready when you are."

CHAPTER 9

Ryu positioned himself on the same area of ground where the Torch stood. His comrades back up atop a slope in the dirt, which allowed them a better vantage point to observe the fight.

“OK,” shouted the Torch with a cynical grin.

“Time... To... Die...” he said as he lunged himself towards Ryu.

Torch was barehanded, no weapons in sight like he was certain he could crush Ryu with his fists alone. He was bigger than Ryu, very stocky and muscular, and he moved like a strong gust of wind, reaching out with his giant arms to grab Ryu. But Ryu was faster and leaped aside just before Torch got a hold of him.

“Stop squirming, you piece of shit,” said the Torch as he attempted to grab Ryu a second time.

Ryu just grinned and kept moving like he used to when he was playing football, juking and weaving out of the way, staying well out

of arm's length from the Torch. He was reading his opponent, while also devising a plan of attack. The Torch shouted in frustration and, beginning to tire of the game, grabbed something from one of the corpses of his fellow comrades. Ryu could not make out what it was but knew it meant danger. The Torch raised his arm and revealed a whip.

Damn, they really like their whips here, don't they, thought Ryu, thinking of the whip Angela had been forced to punish him with.

Slaaash went the sound of the whip as it cracked against the air.

The Torch began a relentless assault towards Ryu, slashing and slashing away.

"This will slow you down," he said, as he made contact with Ryu's skin.

"Aaah!" Ryu shouted as the whip hit his chest.

"RYU!" yelled Turbo, from nearby. "You can do this!"

Ryu backed off a bit, paused for a moment, and began his approach towards the Torch. He was determined to avoid his lashings. The Torch grinned and continued with another wave of attacks.

Slaash—Slaash—Slaash went the whip.

Ryu jumped out of the way of each attack a split second faster. Soon, he was closing in on the Torch. Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed Turbo and Angela watching intensely, while Hiro stood with his arms crossed, and closed his eyes and looked away like he could foretell the outcome of the bout.

"You shouldn't get too confident!" shouted Ryu, reaching out with his arm.

Grabbing the whip with his left hand, he curled it up around his arm, pulled himself towards the Torch, and slid through the opening between his legs. The Torch, who was caught off guard and in a state of confusion, was not able to follow Ryu's speed. Ryu then jumped up from behind him and pulled out the knife he'd slipped into his pocket before the fight started.

But before he could slash at the Torch, a loud buzzer sounded.

Ryu stood still, one hand holding the whip, the other the knife. The Torch paused too, sweat dripping from his cheek onto his chin. The edge of the blade that Ryu held stopped just shy of piercing the Torch's neck. The timer had saved him, and the drill was over.

The instructor emerged from wherever he'd been hiding and took to the podium.

"EVERYONE LINE UP!" he shouted through the loudspeaker.

Ryu stepped away from the Torch, and they all made their way back to the red line where they'd started. The same red line where 16 individuals had stood at the beginning of the drill, now only had 5 present and accounted for.

"I congratulate you all on your successful completion of the drill," said the instructor, observing the few who remained.

He glanced at each individual, pausing to relay information to someone taking notes next to him. As the instructor continued, a sudden thought came to Ryu. He turned to Hiro and asked, "What exactly did the envelope say?"

Hiro, who was brushing off some remnants of dirt from his coat, looked at Ryu. "I told you what it said," he replied.

"I don't think you told us everything," Ryu remembered the last words from the attacker he had faced earlier, the words the

guy had said right before Angela bashed his head in with the rifle. *DIE, RESISTANCE SCUM!* At the time, he'd been too distracted by trying to survive the attack to notice, but why would a member of the Resistance team have called *him* Resistance scum?

Hiro didn't reply.

"ALL ABOARD THE SHUTTLES," shouted the instructor.

It was finally over, this drill, which had felt more like a slaughter free-for-all. Sixteen came and only five survived. Even so, Ryu was grateful he and the others had made it out alive, not unscathed of course, but alive.

Before they boarded the shuttles to head back to the academy, Angela paused beside Ryu.

"They lied to us," she said, as she looked back towards the battlefield.

Ryu and Turbo both stopped to listen.

Angela handed Ryu what appeared to be an envelope. It was opened and somewhat wrinkled. Inside was a letter, addressed to Cadet Hiro by name.

You will successfully test every subject in the field, using any means necessary to prove their worth, read the first line. All subjects are to battle to the death until the timer rings. Survivors will continue on to the next phase.

"I grabbed this from Hiro's back pocket during your fight with the Torch," Angela explained. "So, he was part of this plan all along." She turned back towards the shuttle. "This whole drill was just a ploy to thin out the herd."

"He didn't lie to us," said Ryu as he sat down next to Angela. *He just didn't tell us the whole truth.* "We underestimated them.

The GWO is cunning and ruthless, and even though we are fated to die at some point..." He paused and looked towards the window, catching the last glimpse of sunlight as it fell beyond the horizon

"We still have each other," he said, clasping his fist. "And to me, that's enough to continue on," he continued as he glanced towards the other shuttle, which Hiro and the Torch had boarded.

Exhausted and having been deprived of nourishment during the drill, Ryu and the others soon fell asleep as the shuttle carried them back home. A short while, or maybe a long time, later, Ryu startled awake to a shout of, "GET UP. GET UP, GODDAMMIT." It was the driver.

Even he spoke like every instructor in this academy; all of them were trained to follow the narrative. Ryu stood up, and the others followed behind, only dragging their feet a little. As they exited the shuttle, they were each given another slip of paper. It was the same kind of paper as the one that had summoned them to today's drill.

Ryu was too tired and hungry to read it just yet.

CHAPTER 10

At night, Ryu often dreamed about his parents and his past.

He and his dad would be outside on the lawn of dirt and dead grass before the old house Ryu had grown up in, practicing throwing a ball back and forth. The house was somewhat dilapidated and worn out due to the stress it had received during the conflict. There wasn't much left from a leisure perspective, but Ryu and his father made do.

"Extend your arm like this," his father would say. "Lean forward as you throw it."

"Ok, Dad," Ryu replied as he mustered the strength to follow his dad's instructions word for word. He pulled his arm back, leaned forward, and sent the ball flying. His dad caught it and grinned at him, and Ryu let out a whoop of delight.

Other times, Ryu would be half-asleep in his old bedroom,

groaning as he woke up to his mother's loud knocking on his door.

"RYU!" she would shout. "You're gonna be late for school again!"

She was a physician, but also a dedicated mother. Every morning while he ate his breakfast, she asked him, "What do you want to be when you grow up, Ryu?"

"I want to be like dad," Ryu always said. "Strong and cool."

"That's great, son," his mother replied with a warm smile. "You are very special to me and your father. You will be better than both of us."

"Ryu, you have a gift, my son," said his father.

"A gift, Dad?" asked Ryu.

"Yes, you are very special, and one day, you will have to make an important decision," said his father, with a crease of worry between his eyes.

He explained to Ryu that his path in life would be treacherous and not an easy one. He told him one day he would understand why he was special, and that when that day came, he would know his purpose. Ryu, being a child, didn't fully understand what his father meant, but he nodded and smiled back anyway. Part of him wondered whether it was somehow connected with the constant trips his parents would make.

Whenever they had to leave, Mr. Alita and his wife would take care of Ryu. They were close friends of the family. Ryu would stay at their house and check the mail every day, eager for another letter from his dad. After the war, the government had kept some of the normal services afloat due to necessity. It was because of this that Ryu could even receive notices from his father. His father

wrote him every day, describing the scenery and the affected areas of wherever he was visiting, and always including a postcard. Ryu loved the fact that he could see the rest of the world through his father's eyes. At the end of each letter, his dad would sign his name, so that Ryu knew it was authentic. Besides being a standard practice for his father, this was also a necessity. The mail in this new era was always being watched and filtered through the GWO. Sometimes even changed completely to reveal falsehoods that fit the GWO narrative. Other government-run facilities also shared the same common theme. School was taught outdoors and in plain sight of the elements. This was done to prepare the minds of the students before they were taken off by the military.

But the happy, carefree parts of these dreams of his past never lasted long. The scene would shift again, and Ryu would be standing in Mr. Alita's living room, the day everything changed.

"Ryu, please have a seat."

"What is it, Mr. Alita?"

"Son... it's about your parents."

Ryu glanced behind Mr. Alita, to where his wife was standing in the doorway, using a handkerchief to dab her eyes.

"What about my parents?" asked Ryu, forcefully.

"They...were... They were in an accident."

"An accident? Why? Where are they?"

"They didn't make it, son." Mr. Alita stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Ryu's body and held him tightly. Mrs. Alita could be heard crying in the background.

Ryu pulled away from Mr. Alita, shaking his head. "No," he said. "You're lying. They're coming home next week. They're—"

"I'm so sorry," was all Mr. Alita said.

"NOOO!" Ryu shouted, collapsing to his knees as the world spun around him.

That was when Ryu awoke, with a pounding heart and sweat and tears drenching his face.

His alarm was blaring, and he rolled over to switch it off, then sat up and held his head in his hands until his heavy breathing started to return to normal. "It was just a dream, it was just a dream," he said out loud as a form of therapy.

It had happened so long ago, but it haunted him every night.

"They're gone, nothing I can do will change that," he said to himself. And then he stood up to get dressed and ready for another day of training.

* * *



On the other side of the academy, Hiro, number 102, was on his way for a meeting with General Gohan. The General had an

office in the main building, on the 3rd floor. Security clearance was necessary to enter this area, due to the many thwarted attempts at assassinating the General in the past. But given Hiro's ranking and his special assignment, he had no doubt he'd be allowed inside.

At the entrance to the elevators, two guards stood on either side. Hiro flashed his badge, which displayed his name, rank, and number. The guards quickly scanned the barcode at the bottom to verify authenticity and then nodded him through. Hiro smirked to himself as he took the elevator up to the 3rd floor, exited, and then walked down the hallway until he reached the door at the end. There, two guards met him to escort him onward. Through the door, another guard waited at a table where every visitor was required to submit paperwork detailing the reason for their visit with the General. Hiro knew the routine and reached into his coat to expose a piece of paper, which he handed to the guard.

"Cadet 102, Hiro Fudo," said the guard as he read the paperwork.

He glanced thoroughly at the document, occasionally glancing back and forth between Hiro and the piece of paper. The guard then reached out his hand and exposed a device. "Place your right hand here," he said.

Hiro did so. The device made a faint scanning sound, and light emitted from it, moving from the top of his hand to the bottom.

"Ok, you may proceed, 102," said the guard.

Hiro acknowledged and was led into the doors that were opening as he took his first step. Once inside, the doors automatically closed behind him. The room he'd entered was ample in size and hazy with smoke, about 30 ft. by 30 ft. The back

wall was made of glass and had a clear view of the whole facility. On both sides of the room, portraits hung in perfect alignment with each other. These looked like images of historical individuals. Hiro recognized every single one; he was well versed in military history. The portraits ranged from the beginning of time to the current century. Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec Serpent God, Merlin, the fabled Wizard of Arthur, and Julius Caesar, the conqueror and ruler of the Roman Empire, were some of the faces he observed. In the middle of the wall was a slightly bigger portrait of Adolf Hitler, the leader of the 3rd Reich during the 2nd World War. As Hiro moved forward into the room, he stopped between a set of couches that sat close to the walls on either side. At his feet lay a giant rug with the insignia of the GWO. He looked forward and addressed the General, who was sitting in his chair behind a giant desk.

“General Gohan, sir,” Hiro said as he positioned himself at attention. “I have the full report you have requested, sir.”

His body was in perfect compliance with the military code: back straight, chest high, hand perfectly above his eyebrow in salute form. Hiro waited for the General to respond.

“Cadet 102, please have a seat,” said the General as he puffed at his cigar and released a cloud of smoke.

Hiro left his attention stance and sat in a chair directly in front of the General.

“Sir, we have finished conducting our 7th drill and here are the results,” he said as he handed the General the piece of paper he had in his coat.

The General reached for the document and began to read its contents. He looked over it for a while as he continued to smoke

his cigar. Hiro noticed what seemed to be a map with markings on the General's desk. The document was tucked slightly under a stack of papers, which made it difficult to make it out completely.

"Good," said the General in a loud tone. "We now have enough personnel to move forward."

"Yes, sir," replied Hiro.

Hiro understood based on his previous visits that there was a process in place here at the academy. This process was considered sort of a cleansing. It was conducted via drills to prepare and filter individuals needed for military missions. A set number of troops were needed. Once that number was reached, the General would move forward with the next mission.

"Plans have already been made," said the General, setting the piece of paper on his desk. "We will move to strike at the enemy." He pulled out the map Hiro had noticed earlier. "Our objective is to render the Resistance immobile by eliminating a strategic power source."

The General, now on his feet and hunched over the desk, pointed at a red X on a map. Hiro stood up and leaned closer to see it better. "In Japan, the Resistance has a hidden facility that they use as a power station. It is located within a mountain, which is used as a decoy. Inside there are tunnels and personnel. Your mission is to infiltrate the facility and destroy it."

He continued explaining the importance of the mission, how this could allow the GWO to push forward beyond the technological capabilities of the Resistance. The facility in question was used as a fuel station, which powered droids, vehicles, and cybernetic suits that the Resistance used against the GWO. The

GWO, being more about numbers than technology, did not believe in supplying the military with such equipment. They believed their soldiers to be dispensable and easily replaced. Yet Hiro, being the disciple, would be allowed access to some equipment that was reserved specifically for higher personnel.

Having explained the scenario, the General sat back down. Hiro was still on his feet.

"I understand, sir," he replied. "We will be victorious for the GWO!" he shouted.

"I have no doubt you will be, number 102, or should I say lieutenant?" said the General.

"Sir?" said Hiro, in surprise. He was unsure as to where the General was leading him with that statement.

The General grinned and reached into a pocket on the side of his coat. He removed a small vial, which he placed on his desk in front of Hiro. "You have not disappointed me thus far," said the General.

Hiro looked closer at the vial. It was a green clear liquid, some type of medication, Hiro guessed.

"You might be thinking to yourself, what is this for?" said the General.

Hiro stood still and observed the container. Still not understanding what it meant.

"This serum represents the type of technology WE have at our disposal. BUT..." He paused "It is not for the weak. This serum will allow you to remain young and vibrant, regardless of your actual age."

Hiro's eyes grew big with excitement. A serum that would

allow him to remain young in both looks and energy? The Elite of the GWO must have requested its design. Eternal youth, ultimate strength, and power... Of course Hiro wanted it. But he knew there was something he had to do in return.

“As you have assumed to this point, this cannot be handed out freely,” said the General. “This serum is only for those of higher stature, for the privileged.”

The General grabbed the vial from the desk and tucked it away, back into his coat pocket. Hiro was practically foaming at the mouth, envisioning the endless possibilities he would have with such a serum.

I will sacrifice 100 soldiers if needed, he thought to himself. I will get my hands on that serum no matter the cost.

“Thank you, sir, for this opportunity. I will not disappoint you,” he said, saluting the General.

The General nodded, dismissing him.

With an about-face, Hiro made his way towards the doors and out of the room. As he exited he wore a devilish smirk on his face. He knew what he wanted, and he would move heaven and earth to get it.

CHAPTER 11

Ryu was dressed and almost on his way out the door when he remembered the letter he'd been given when he exited the shuttle the previous day. He pulled it out and read: *You are required to report to Briefing Room 23 at 09:00 hours.*

Another damn drill? thought Ryu.

After yesterday, he'd never been more aware of how vicious the GWO truly was. He'd always had an idea, but now he felt like even that wariness had been naïve. The reality was so much worse. He wanted to continue having some sort of hope at a good outcome, for himself and his friends, but he could no longer pretend it was likely.

Is all of this death necessary to replenish the Earth? he wondered. That had always been the purpose for all this fighting, supposedly—to make Earth a viable and enriched planet once

again. Two factions in opposition, each having their own method, disagreed on the implementation and process. Nothing else was known, and nothing else would be presumed, Ryu reminded himself. The GWO's secrets were theirs to keep alone.

He got to his feet and prepared himself mentally by smacking his face with both his hands. He looked himself in the mirror and said, "If I am going to die, I will make sure I die in a manner of my choosing. No longer will I be a puppet for these bastards."

As he stepped out of his room, he strode with a new confidence and determination. His uniform was properly ironed, no stains, perfectly assembled. His posture was straight, and his vibe was astute. His eyes were clear and held no signs of sleep deprivation. His movement was purposeful.

Briefing Room 23 was on the 2nd floor and to the left, down a corridor as he exited the elevators. All military documents had the location of every meeting place described in its contents. It was necessary to minimize misunderstandings. As Ryu entered the briefing room, he noticed the room was almost full. There were 34 seats and only three were vacant, which meant there were two others still missing. Ryu sat down in one of the empty spots. He crossed his arms as he observed Hiro at the front of the room. He was conversing with the Torch. Ryu looked around, trying to see if Turbo or Angela had been assigned to the briefing.

They walked into the room just then. Coincidentally, they were the last two individuals. Though Ryu was happy to see them, grateful they were in this together, his heartbeat picked up for a moment. But he shoved those feelings of fear down. Both Turbo and Angela were focused on the front of the room, their faces were

expressionless as they walked over to the last empty seats.

"Everyone is here? Good, let's begin," said Hiro as he stood up. "We have an important mission to undertake. Your prowess and determination in previous drills have made it clear to the GWO that you are all ready for a higher purpose," he chanted with a boisterous tone, wearing a smug look. "Your defeat of every obstacle thus far has not gone unnoticed. The fact that you are here, breathing, is a testament to your readiness. This will not be a drill, I repeat, this will not be a drill."

Ryu tensed a little in his seat but stayed focused, listening as Hiro continued speaking.

"We will fly into enemy airspace, and drop above these coordinates," Hiro said, pointing to the writing on the board, which revealed a diagram of a giant mountainous area on an island. "Once on the ground, you will move based on your assigned team, and follow instruction. We will split into two teams: Charlie and Bravo. Charlie will drop first for recon, while Bravo will drop afterwards."

Each individual in the room was given a number, and then they were told to look at the board for their placement on a team.

"If you are Charlie, your lead will be the Torch," Hiro said. "If you are Bravo, you will be in my group," Hiro said as he looked towards Ryu.

Hiro had the look of a fiend. His head slightly shifted upwards, his eyes open, glaring down. Ryu looked back, still poised with his arms crossed, and shifted to his left.

"What group?" he asked Turbo.

"Charlie," replied Turbo. Only his lips moved when he spoke; his body was motionless.

Ryu nodded, then leaned over in Angela's direction. But before he could mutter the same words, she spoke up.

"Bravo," she said. There was a stiffness to her voice and to her stance that hadn't been there before. She was learning the way of things here, Ryu could tell. Yesterday had hardened her against the truth of what they would face in the days ahead, just as it had hardened him, too.

After responding, Angela bowed her head slightly and lifted her hand somewhat like she was placing it on her chest. Her face had an expression that could only mean she was deep in concentration. Ryu frowned, curious, still watching. Her cheeks blushed a little.

Not wanting to draw attention to himself, he turned his face forward, but he kept his eyes slightly shifted in Angela's direction. Angela looked over to Ryu right after. She didn't seem like she was paying much attention to the briefing anymore, given her unwavering stare. That look sent a shiver down Ryu's spine. It was the same look he got from girls that were interested in him. Warmth spread to his fingers and toes. *She is totally staring at me.* And they were not remotely alone.

Immediately, Ryu let out a slight cough, as he turned towards Angela and gave her a light smile. He wanted to clear the air and reset the situation, so he could feel at ease again.

The briefing soon concluded, with everyone aware of their responsibilities. As the room began to empty, he was still sitting in his chair, looking over to Hiro. He wanted to decipher if this mission had an alternate agenda. His intuition told him not to trust everything Hiro said.

“101, the briefing is over, report to your quarters,” said Hiro.
“Or do you have something you want to share?”

Ryu stood up, initially looking down as if he was thinking to himself. Then he lifted his head to look straight at Hiro.

“Nothing, sir,” he replied as he began to walk towards the front of the room.

Hiro narrowed his eyes a little, clearly uneasy at the way Ryu was approaching him so defiantly. He tucked a hand into his pocket and turned to meet Ryu halfway.

“Here, I believe you dropped this,” said Ryu as he handed a piece of paper to Hiro.

* * *

Hiro stood in place, his hand still in his pocket, gripping the object hidden inside as he took the paper from Ryu.

“What is this?” he said, turning the paper over to the other side.

He glanced over it and immediately recognized it as the mission briefing from yesterday’s exercise. He was careful to keep his expression the same as before, even though inside he was seething. *How did he get this? How dare he?*

He looked up to respond to Ryu, but Ryu was gone. He had walked off without notice. *The cunning bastard.*

Hiro scowled, alone in the room, and made a fist with one hand, then crumpled the letter with his other hand. “I’ll teach you to not mess with me, number 101,” he hissed. “I’ll make sure you know who is in charge.”

He released a loud cackle, like a lunatic in a straitjacket, and removed the knife that was in his pocket.

“I hope you’re ready, Ryu.”

* * *

Ryu was making his way to his room when he felt a tug at his sleeve. “Huh?” he said immediately. He turned around, tensing, half-afraid it was Hiro coming after him, but it wasn’t him—it was Angela. She was looking down at the floor, and her fingers were still clasping at his sleeve.

“Angela, what’s going on?” he asked, curiously.

"I need to ask you something," she said.

"Um, sure," said Ryu.

"Is today your birthday?" she asked as she released Ryu's sleeve.

"Uh, what?" Ryu's cheeks warmed a little. "How do you know that?"

"Is it or not?" she asked again, this time with a bit of frustration in her tone.

Ryu was caught off guard. After all this time at the academy, never having the opportunity to think about himself, he had to think long and hard to remember if today was indeed his birthday. Shamelessly, he looked back at Angela.

"Um, what's today's date?" he asked.

"It's March the fifteen," she replied immediately.

"Ah hah!" he said. "It is my birthday. How did you know?"

She shrugged. "Turbo told me."

Ryu paused, his thoughts immediately turning to somewhat of a jealous type. When did they have time to talk about these things?

"I see," he said, stiffly. "So that's why you guys were late to the briefing," he added in a sarcastic tone.

"Hey, we were not late," Angela retorted loudly, scowling. "I got there early, and I saw..." She stopped in the middle of her sentence. "What the hell does it matter? The point is, it's your birthday."

"Yeah, it is," said Ryu, trying to shove the jealousy away. He didn't want to get Angela all riled up. "Thanks for being considerate."

Immediately, Ryu felt warmth spreading through him again, as

he had before. Sure, girls had ogled at him before, but he had never received attention quite like this, which was why the whole conversation threw him for a loop. The fact that this was coming from Angela also startled him a bit; he'd expected her to always be on the receiving end of compliments, not the one giving them. But he was wrong for once in his lifetime, and it felt good.

"How old are you?" Angela asked him now.

"18," said Ryu.

"Look at you, a real adult and everything," she teased with a smirk. "How does it feel to be so old?"

Ryu laughed and as they carried on conversing, he fell into a nostalgic state, smiling and enjoying himself like he hadn't done in a long time. At some point, he noticed Angela was holding her hand once again against her chest like she had in the briefing room. Ryu's heartbeat picked up a bit faster with every second that went by. *Why am I feeling this way?* he asked himself. Angela's eyes were shining, and her cheeks were a bit flushed, and he wondered if she was feeling it, too. She looked as if she had something on her mind and wanted to say it but was having trouble mustering the courage to do so.

She suddenly seemed more somber. "Is everything ok?" Ryu asked.

Angela moved her hand and grabbed Ryu's. She bit her lip, her cheeks flushing a little, and seemed like she was going to pull back but didn't. Ryu, sensing her light touch against his skin, immediately responded with a slight twitch.

"Huh," he said awkwardly.

"Listen," said Angela. "I know we can't really celebrate

anything here. But... either way," she said, pausing after each sentence. She was sure unnerved. "I want to give you something."

"Angela, you don't have—" Ryu started, but Angela shushed him with her finger.

"But..." she paused briefly. "I have one condition. I will *only* give you this gift when you make it back alive."

She spoke fiercely, her eyes looking dead into his. She was not joking around. She stared back at Ryu, waiting for his response.

Ryu shifted backwards a bit, blushing again, his heart beginning to race. He could hear his own breathing. He was caught in the moment and he didn't want it to end anytime soon. *When did she become so bold?* he wondered. He wanted to be like her, he wanted to let his feelings overtake him.

But that was dangerous in a place like this. If he told her how he felt, Angela might grow attached to him. And then, if something happened to him...he knew what it was like to deal with such grief. Something he did not want to do to anyone he cared about. But brushing her off and shutting her out wouldn't do any good, either; that would cause her pain, too.

Torn between so many emotions, he couldn't figure out what to say.

Crap, he said to himself. *She's just staring at me. Ryu, say something, dammit.*

"Ok, Angela," he said, confidently. No matter what, he didn't want her to worry. "It's a promise."

"All right," Angela replied. "A promise is a promise."

CHAPTER 12

Ryu turned to his window, noticing the sunlight was no longer visible. “It’s time,” he said.

He was ready and awake. He hadn’t been able to sleep much, constantly thinking about the mission, counting each second as it passed by. With a sigh, he stood up, gathered his items, and picked up his bag. As he stuffed everything inside and shouldered his bag, he heard something slip out and fall to the ground with a clank.

“Crap, what now?”

It was a small picture frame that must’ve slipped out of the pocket. A photo of his whole family, taken at his seventh birthday party. The only item in his possession that showed him what his parents looked like, the most cherished piece of property Ryu had.

His eyes opened wide and he desperately reached for the frame. “Please don’t be broken, please don’t be broken.”

He picked it up and immediately let out a sigh of relief. It was undamaged and still in pristine condition. As he observed it once again, a single tear amassed at the bottom of his eye and then scurried its way down his cheek. He paused for a moment, closed his eyes, and attempted to envision them for a bit longer. But he knew he didn't have much time.

Ryu opened his eyes again and held the picture out in front of him. "Don't worry, I will be fine," he said as if he was speaking directly to his parents. "I will not let you down." He wiped away the last sign of emotion from his face.

He tucked the frame back into his bag, this time ensuring it was secure in a closed compartment, and then he turned an about face and left his room. His orders were to meet at 22:00 hours at the airstrip located on the east side of the main facility. This was a restricted area for newbies, but Ryu had advanced beyond the title of greenback and so he was allowed entry, after properly verifying his ID of course. Once inside the main entrance, he was motioned to board a small cargo van. Ryu boarded and decided to stand instead of sitting down. He wasn't going to allow himself any sort of rest; he didn't want to appear anything other than ready and awake.

"CLEAR," shouted a guard.

The door closed, and the transport van sped off into the darkness.

The mission was to take place at night, using the darkness to move unnoticed in the skies above Japan. This time they were given equipment that looked newer and dependable, pretty high tech, not anything like the old rifles and dull knives they'd been given in

the previous drill.

The van soon stopped and they boarded a Nighthawk 170, an airplane designed with the ability to cloak itself in mid-air, so it could fly through enemy airspace invisible to most radar. It used twin engines that were silent, the latest in propulsion technology. Inside the Nighthawk was a large cargo bay. Along the walls of the plane were numbered seats, each with straps to hold a person in place. Ryu and the others were told to check their equipment one last time and then strap themselves into place.

“We take off in 10 minutes,” shouted Hiro.

“Get in your seats, or die,” yelled the Torch. “This puppy flies fast. If you’ve never experienced turbulence before, you’ll see what I mean in a second.”

Ryu, having finished making his last-minute adjustments, took a deep breath and exhaled slowly as he sat down and pulled the straps over his shoulders. He was nervous. This was going to be the first time he would set foot in enemy territory. He was not worried so much about himself as he was for his friends. He didn’t believe himself to be the hero type, but he might very well have to be. Because he knew they would do the same for him.

His promise to Angela was also on his mind. His dad had taught him to never, ever break a promise, and Ryu didn’t intend to. But what if something out of his control made him unable to keep it? *Don’t think about that. Just stay focused on what you can control.*

Glancing around, he noticed Turbo sitting across from him. His eyes were immediately drawn to his suit. The suits had their numbers instead of their name above their pocket. He looked down and verified his own number, 101, was correct. He wanted to

ensure that everything would go as smooth as possible.

He felt the engines start and sensed the aircraft's ascent in a slow vertical motion. Ryu tensed in his seat. They were taking off.

* * *

Hiro, being the type that he was, opted to stand and hold onto a single strap, offering no worries on his expression as the aircraft shook relentlessly. He looked around with a devilish look as he shouted last-minute orders to the group they had chosen for this mission, telling his underlings where to meet after the mission had concluded. Only the team leaders were given the exact coordinates. The less privileged were just given a general description, to appease them, and then they would be on their own.

"HEADSETS ON," shouted Hiro. "We are now over enemy airspace."

He glanced towards the Torch. "This is going to be fun," he said.

The Torch nodded back with a giant smile. His definition of fun was on par with that of Hiro's. This mission would surely offer some sort of sacrifice, and that meant corpses for the Torch to play with.

Hiro, wanting to discuss something a bit more serious, leaned in and tapped the Torch's shoulder. The Torch acknowledged and turned to face him.

"You know your orders," murmured Hiro. "Once on the ground get to the target area and deploy the mini-scout drones."

"Don't worry about me," replied the Torch with a meager grin. "I'll do my part, you just worry about coming back with more than two alive." He let out a laugh under his breath.

He was speaking about a previous mission, one that had ended in misery for the rest of Hiro's group. Only two had remained alive—Hiro and his communications expert. There was no way he would've let that guy die, or else he wouldn't have been able to make it back. Even in spite of the carnage, the mission was labeled a success, as they'd been able to retrieve the data they were after. Some schematics for some type of weapon.

The Torch was continuing to boast when suddenly a heavy impact made the aircraft lurch to the side. The cabin immediately lit up red; sirens began to sound off.

"We've been detected," a voice shouted over the intercom. The aircraft pilot.

They had been spotted by the Resistance and were being heavily bombarded by ground to air missiles.

"EVERYONE, GET READY TO DEPLOY," shouted Hiro.

He knew there was no time to waste; every second counted. The Resistance was small in numbers, but that didn't mean they weren't dangerous.

* * *

Ryu, sensing the direness of the situation, unstrapped himself and attempted to maneuver his way to the rear of the aircraft. Some of the soldiers around him were still strapped in place while others bounced off the walls as the plane shook more and more. He looked around, trying to spot his friends, but too much was happening and there was not enough time.

"Hurry up, goddammit," said the pilot over the comm.

BOOM! The Nighthawk veered to the left. They had been hit. The explosion tore a hole in the main compartment and the wind immediately sucked four individuals into the night sky.

“MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!” said the Torch as he shoved a soldier out the rear opening.

“RYU!” shouted someone at the front of the plane. The voice was faint but enough for Ryu to make out its owner.

“TURBO, HOLD ON!” yelled Ryu. His friend was barely hanging on, clinging onto a piece of a strap that had managed to stay in place even after the explosion. “DON’T LET GO!” shouted Ryu again as he attempted to close the distance between himself and Turbo, while keeping a grip on the wall so he wouldn’t fly out of the plane, too.

The wind and the suction coming from the opening were clearly tearing at Turbo’s resolve. Ryu could barely see his face due to the debris flying everywhere, but he could tell Turbo’s eyes were frantic and his grip was starting to slip.

Come on, come on. Ryu was trying to get closer, but the wind was blowing way too hard.

It was taking too long. He was gonna be too late.

Suddenly, through the haze of debris, Ryu spotted someone grabbing hold of Turbo’s arm. Another soldier.

Hiro.

Ryu’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Thank you,” said Turbo with relief, as he reached with his other hand to embrace Hiro and pull himself up.

“THANK ME?” replied Hiro, snarling. “FOR WHAT?”

And just like that, before Ryu even knew what was happening,

Hiro raised his hand and released Turbo's arm.

"NOOOOOO!" Ryu shouted, as his friend fell through the opening and into the night.

"YOU BASTARD!" said Ryu, immediately trying to maneuver his way into position to confront Hiro.

BOOM! There was another explosion.

The aircraft tore in half, flinging the remaining crew out into the air like rag dolls. Ryu's hearing was temporarily impaired due to the explosion. He could not hear any sound, but he could feel the wind rushing between his limbs. He opened his eyes and observed the night sky light up with minor flashes in the distance.

He began to struggle, panicking for air, flailing his arms to maneuver himself as he spun and fell. He looked around again, trying to catch sight of anyone for assistance. Debris was falling all over. A piece was headed straight for him. He stretched out his arms immediately, attempting to mimic the shape of an aircraft's wings.

SWOOSH

His quick thinking paid off; he managed to move in time to avoid the debris. During his continued free fall, his thoughts flashed back to Turbo and his wide, frightened eyes as he fell through that hole in the plain.

He's not dead! he said to himself, as he remembered a crucial piece of information they'd been given at the briefing. *"The suits you will use will be outfitted with technology that will allow you to maneuver in air or land."*

That's right, he thought immediately. *Now, how the hell do I deploy this shit?* This crucial information must've been shared right

around the time he and Angela were not listening., thus he had no clue.

Ryu looked at his chest, hoping to see something that resembled a cord or trigger of some sort. The ground was starting to come into view. Knowing he had minutes at best, he resolved to press incessantly all over his body.

“IT’S ON YOUR WRIST,” said a voice coming from his headset.

“What? Who?” said Ryu.

“YOUR WRIST, 101.”

With seconds remaining, Ryu looked at his wrist. He had a bracelet-looking thing that had a small screen. He tapped on it frantically.

“DO SOMETHING!” he shouted.

The screen immediately glared to life. Ryu desperately scrolled for some sort of instruction.

“THAT’S IT,” he said as he slid his finger downwards on the screen.

SWOOSH! His suit deployed a type of webbing that connected his arms to his torso. Ryu felt the immediate change in control, but it was too late. He had lost valuable altitude and was headed directly towards a tree.

SLAM

Leaves flew everywhere as Ryu crashed into the tree. His suit had managed to slow his descent, but it did little to protect him from the thrashing as he hit branch after branch on his way to the ground.

THUMP—THUMP—THUMP

SLAM

Ryu's body hit the floor. He was somehow still conscious. He lay in place for a moment, staring up at the sky, barely visible because he could only see out of one eye. He spotted what looked like the remains of the Nighthawk as it made its way downward. It was engulfed in flames, veering down like a comet in the sky. He followed its trajectory, turning his head to his left.

BOOM! Another explosion. This time Ryu knew it was the impact of the aircraft hitting the ground about 120 yards away. He continued to lie in place; he wanted to wait just a little longer, thinking that maybe the pain would give in if he tricked his mind. As he lay there, he thought about Angela, wondering if she had made it out alive. His intuition told him they were both safe, but eventually, he knew he had to get to his feet soon and search for them.

The mission, as hopeless as it seemed, was still top priority. No one was excused, even in Ryu's condition.

CHAPTER 13

Ryu attempted to get to his feet. He was hurt, not badly but enough to make standing up seem like he had been suffering with arthritis all his life. He looked over himself, checking for any life-threatening injuries. He had some knowledge of first aid due to the manual page 47, paragraph 8, which covered most of the basic first aid training. Starting at his head and making his way down, he felt for pain that was hidden unless touched. He pressed against his abdomen and gripped his arms as he slid his hand towards each end. He continued by taking deep breathes and then pausing, to uncover any possible fluids inside his lungs. When he lifted his arms, he felt a sharp pain on the side of his chest.

“Ouch,” he said.

He moved his hands to examine the area. He pushed, and the pain

increased. He lifted his suit to uncover his skin. It was a purplish color, definitely bruised. He poked a bit and immediately felt his rib move, which caused an enormous amount of pain.

“Aaaaah!” he shouted. “Dammit, it’s my ribs.” Carefully, he lowered his suit.

It was his left rib, fractured as far as he could tell. In the scheme of things, it wasn’t too serious—he could’ve been hemorrhaging internally or had a severed limb. Despite the pain and his condition, Ryu knew he had to get moving.

“I’ve got to find the others,” he said to himself.

He looked up, trying to catch the direction of the smoke that billowed from the remains of the Nighthawk. It was to his left, still about 100 yards away or so. He grabbed his gear and followed the smoke. As he walked he noticed how dark the area was. Nothing indicated that there was some sort of facility here. The moon was at a crescent, providing just enough light to allow Ryu to make his way through the dense shrubbery and tall trees without tripping every step.

The smoke began to thicken, and Ryu caught a strong smell of burning debris. He looked onward and spotted a large plume ascending from a group of flames burning around a small area. The wreckage. As he was about to take his next step, a voice came from behind what looked like a portion of the aircraft’s cockpit.

“H-help,” said a choked, struggling voice. “Help me, please!”

Someone was trapped.

Ryu hurried closer. He had to maneuver cautiously between some debris that was still inflamed and dangerously unstable. Finally, at the center of the wreckage, he saw a dark figure standing

next to one of the pilots, whose body was half-buried beneath a giant piece of metal. Ryu knew it was a pilot because of the suit he wore.

The dark figure was Hiro. Ryu knew as soon as he was a few feet away.

Hiro briefly glanced towards him, then turned his attention back to the trapped pilot.

"Help you, you say?" asked Hiro, as he kneeled down in front of the man.

"Yes—please. Argh!" gasped the pilot, clearly in pain.

Ryu noticed a large pool of blood had amassed on the ground under the pilot's torso. He continued to observe as he stepped closer, moving slowly due to his own condition.

"Hiro, he's hurt badly," said Ryu. "We have to get him out!"

There was too much rubble holding the pilot down, though. They would need help. Ryu turned to look around, searching for signs of anyone else in the vicinity.

Hiro, still watching the pilot, closed his eyes and said to Ryu, "Let's go." He stood up.

"Let's go?" asked Ryu, gaping at him in confusion. "What do you mean? He needs our help, goddammit!" But then, he'd always known Hiro was trash. Hiro didn't care for anyone or anybody unless it was himself.

"We can't just leave him here," Ryu said, grabbing hold of Hiro's arm.

"Ok, 101, we'll do it your way," replied Hiro, wrenching out of Ryu's grasp. "I will help him if you like."

Ryu knew better than to believe Hiro's words; he had fallen

prey to his lies and deceit before and had paid dearly for it. But he couldn't help clinging to some hope, as he glanced at the wounded pilot once more.

"Don't do anything foolish," said Ryu as he stood toe to toe with Hiro.

"No, I'm not going to do anything foolish," said Hiro. "That's not what he asked for. He asked for help, right?" He grinned.

Hiro then slipped his hand slowly into his pocket. Ryu eyed his every move carefully and positioned himself, so he could thwart whatever malicious intent Hiro would surely attempt. But all of a sudden, Hiro stepped forward, grabbed Ryu's arm lifted it, and shoved Ryu to the ground before he could react. Ryu cried out from the pain burning in his ribs as he fell, dropping hard like a sandbag into a trench.

"HELP HAS ARRIVED!" shouted Hiro as he threw the device he had pulled from his jacket.

The device glided towards the pilot, landing and attaching itself magnetically to the piece of metal that held the pilot in place. Hiro then turned immediately to Ryu, grabbed him by his collar, and dragged him away from the area with his agility and speed.

BOOM!

The explosion rang through Ryu's ears. It was the end of that pilot and the only way Hiro would have agreed to help him, by ending his suffering in a dramatic fashion. Hiro had sacrificed another member and showed no remorse for it, as expected. Ryu immediately slapped Hiro's hand away. He was enraged; he wouldn't let Hiro get away with this.

"You S.O.B.," he said as he staggered to his feet, his fist

clenched.

He lunged at Hiro, wanting to make him pay for his actions once and for all.

"I'll stop your senseless killing myself," he said as he swiped at Hiro, trying to connect his fist with his face.

But Ryu's wound slowed him down; he moved slower and with less stamina with every punch he threw. Hiro, on the other hand, was in tip-top shape, no signs of bruises or injuries. He dodged with ease, his hands in his pockets as if he wanted to further tease Ryu by not attempting to block his moves.

"ENOUGH!" shouted Hiro, finally, grabbing one of Ryu's arms and holding it at mid-punch.

Ryu lifted his other hand, attempting to respond, but missed because Hiro wrenched at him, moving him in the direction of his own attack. Ryu immediately shuffled his feet to keep his balance, but Hiro reacted faster and swept Ryu off his feet. Ryu crashed to the ground like a ton of bricks. He was out of breath and not able to stop his lumbering fall.

"There is no need for you to waste your energy on me," said Hiro, looking at Ryu on the ground. "The pilot asked for help, didn't he?"

"Shut up," replied Ryu. "You *could've* helped him, but you killed him instead, you piece of shit."

"This piece of shit is all you have right now," Hiro replied.

"I would rather die than give you credit for saving me."

Hiro laughed. "Be careful what you wish for, 101. As always, your perception is sorely lacking. That pilot was dead the moment I walked up to him. His body was no longer connected at his torso.

You didn't notice, did you?"

"You liar!" Ryu shouted back.

Hiro shrugged. "Believe whatever you want. I did what I did in order to minimize our technology falling into the hands of the Resistance." He looked away.

Ryu thought back to the previous moments, to the pilot under the rubble and the pool of blood. Maybe Hiro was telling the truth... And maybe he wasn't. Either way, Ryu couldn't deny, even in his anger, that they might not have been able to save the pilot even if they could've pulled him out. Destroying the remains of both the wounded man and the aircraft may very well have been the right thing to do, though not necessarily the most humane way to go about it.

"Get up, 101, we have work to do," barked Hiro.

"I'm not doing anything for you," spat Ryu. Ryu was hurt and he needed to find his friends, and he didn't trust anything Hiro said. "You go on and I'll search for the rest," said Ryu, pushing himself off the ground and gritting his teeth against the pain.

"The rest?" asked Hiro. "Oh, yes, your friends I assume, correct?" he said with sarcasm. A grin spread across his face. "I can HELP you with that."

Ryu, now on his feet, immediately shouted, "I DON'T NEED YOUR HELP!"

But Hiro just ignored him, with that smirk still on his face. "Come in, Torch, come in," he said, attempting to reach the Torch via his headset.

"Torch here," came the reply. Ryu stiffened, listening.

"Have you deployed the drones?" asked Hiro as he pulled out

his device for confirmation.

“Yes, the drones have been deployed successfully and the area is 88% completed,” Torch replied. “We should have 100% confirmed, scanning in 2 minutes.”

“Good, I am commencing plan B,” said Hiro. “Also...” He paused to look at Ryu. “Any survivors?”

“Yes,” replied the Torch. “I have five here, including myself.”

“Can you confirm the status of 190 or 176?”

For a moment silence echoed across the headpiece. Why was the Torch taking so long to respond? Ryu’s heart raced with worry. He was bracing himself for the worst when the headset crackled again.

“Yes, both accounted for,” said Torch.

“Ok, standby,” replied Hiro.

Ryu let out a huge sigh of relief. His friends were still alive and that meant the world to him. They were the only people he had left.

Hiro was looking at him again, expectantly, and Ryu knew why. This whole conversation had been a threat. Hiro was using Ryu’s friends to change his mind. He knew Ryu would succumb to his ambitions as long as it meant his loved ones would remain unharmed. Ryu knew that Hiro could easily give the order to terminate anyone for any reason, so it was obvious to him that he had to comply.

Looking towards Hiro, he said. “Ok, what’s the plan?”

CHAPTER 14

“Follow me,” Hiro said as he grabbed a bag and flung it over his shoulder.

Ryu mustered the last bit of strength that he had and followed after him. Hiro led them both uphill, following whatever coordinates he was receiving from his device.

“This way,” he said as he pointed to a giant bush. “Clear this out,” he ordered Ryu.

Ryu looked at him, the anger stirring in him again, and thought to himself, *Just this one time, just a little longer. For Angela and Turbo.* He had committed to assist him, so he did as Hiro said. As he cleared the last remaining branches, he noticed the bushes had been hiding a ventilation shaft that protruded from the ground.

“This is our way in,” said Hiro.

He explained the plan to Ryu: They would follow the diagram of the facility and plant timed explosives around the core and in each hallway. Their objective was to destroy the core, which was the main power source of the whole facility. The GWO called it a "Syphon." It was a cylindrical crystal that held the equivalent amount of energy as that of a small star. Something they had not been able to replicate and highly unstable if removed incorrectly. The only option was to destroy it. The GWO had intel stating that these cores were difficult to come by but that the Resistance possessed several. Destroying even one of them would negatively impact their ability to fight remotely and give the GWO a leg up in the war.

"Be on the lookout for CBEs or Cy-Bernetical-Entities, while we're inside," Hiro told Ryu. "If you run into one, you're better off running."

Ryu didn't quite understand what a CBE was, and wanted to ask for more details, but understood it to be a moot cause. Hiro was done explaining and had begun to remove the cover from the ventilation shaft. It revealed a set of stairs, which Hiro started down.

"C'mon, we don't have time to waste," he said.

Ryu grabbed onto the railing and moved his body slowly over the opening. He positioned his weight on one foot, which helped ease some of the pain from his fractured rib. He climbed carefully down, into a long hallway with glowing lights. The facility was clearly on high-alert status. They'd shot down an enemy aircraft, so they would be expecting company.

"Take these," said Hiro, handing some explosives to Ryu. "They'll arm automatically when you attach them. We will move

down this hallway until we come to a set of tunnels. I will go left while you go right. We will meet at the center, which houses the core. There, we will plant our last explosives and retreat for detonation.”

Ryu nodded and moved to unstrap a rifle he had attached to the back of his suit. It was heavier than a regular rifle, and he remembered the officers describing its capabilities at the briefing. It used special ammo that could pierce armor. He loaded the weapon with a cartridge, and it finished automatically as if the rifle had a mind of its own. High tech for sure. Each cartridge held around 300 rounds. This seemed a bit extreme since they hadn’t yet encountered any opposition even though they’d been shot down, but Ryu supposed he would find out. He looked to his belt and counted two more cartridges, enough rounds to kill a whole army twice.

As he started to follow Hiro down the hallway, an alarm suddenly blared.

“INTRUDERS,” said a voice over the facility intercoms. “INTRUDERS AT SECTION 12.”

Hiro looked at Ryu immediately, then away. “DO NOT FORGET TO PLANT THE EXPLOSIVES!” he shouted as he sprung up and unholstered two pistols.

Ryu looked in the same direction. Something was coming; the ground trembled beneath him, and it sounded like multiple moving pieces were on their way. The footsteps grew louder and clearer with every second.

“THERE, at 12 o’clock!” shouted Hiro as he began to fire his weapons.

Ryu turned and pointed his rifle. He saw what resembled a swarm of spiders coming from down the hallway in their direction. They were moving fast and on all fours. They were clinging to the walls, literally ignoring gravity itself. There were hundreds of them.

Ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, ta went Hiro's pistols as he unloaded on the droids.

His pistols were shooting at an alarming rate. They were made specifically for this type of assault. Shooting automatically with easy reloading. Hiro had strapped himself with multiple cartridges around his chest and waist, and Ryu quickly realized he should've done the same.

"SHOOT AT THEIR HEADS!" Hiro shouted.

Ryu started firing, his rifle unloading three rounds per second. The world felt like it was moving in slow motion. Bullets flew in a volley, and there came the *crunch* and burst of metal being destroyed.

"KEEP MOVING!" shouted Hiro as he pushed forward, taking out droid after droid, attempting to clear a path.

Ryu followed, the adrenaline pumping through his veins making him forget the pain in his ribs for now. He aimed at the spiders' heads, which seemed to be the main control center of the droid, as taking out the head rendered the enemy useless and immobile. Both Ryu and Hiro kept pushing, and more and more droids kept coming at them; they changed cartridge after cartridge. The hallway was filling with smoke. Hiro pointed at a clearing and motioned Ryu to move forward.

"OK, GO, GO, GO!" Hiro shouted as he ran down the left-hand tunnel and out of sight.

Ryu took right, running swiftly down the tunnel. He stopped at each division and planted an explosive. He was given four total, which meant he could use three for the tunnels and one for the main core of the facility. He moved as fast as he could. As he was about to plant the third explosive, he glanced down the tunnel and spotted an opening at the end.

“That’s gotta be the core,” he said to himself.

“INTRUDER, INTRUDER,” rang the sirens again.

Ryu looked behind him. More droids were coming, scurrying towards him at a fast pace. Ryu fired.

Ta, ta, ta, ta, ta, ta went his rifle as he stood in place, blasting at their heads.

Droids dropped like flies being gassed out of the air with a poison that took immediate effect. Ryu kept firing. He was down to his last cartridge. He resolved to run in the direction of the core while still firing away. Hoping to stop the onslaught and plant his last explosive.

The core of the facility was like Hiro had explained it, a giant area full of wires that all led to the middle of the room and were connected to a cylindrical object that radiated with energy.

“That’s it,” he said, reaching into his pocket to grab the final explosive.

He knew he had little time to waste; the droids were still scurrying towards him. Was this Hiro’s plan all along? To destroy both the core and leave Ryu to die along with it. Ryu clenched his teeth and kept moving, unafraid. He turned to shoot his remaining rounds at the droids flooding into the room. They crawled all over the walls as Ryu shot at them.

"TAKE THIS MOTHERFUCKERS," he shouted as he continued his barrage.

Suddenly, Ryu felt another presence behind him. It was not the same feeling as the droids. It felt like something bigger.

"Crap," he said to himself, as he turned to observe the monstrosity that stood at his rear. He paused his shooting and looked in awe. He had no doubt what this was. "A CBE."

It was a lot bigger than the droids. It was double the height of Ryu and had some type of artillery mechanism on its right arm. Its left arm resembled a claw similar in function to that of a crab. It had a cockpit for a head, covered with dark glass, but Ryu could not make out what or who was inside it.

The spider droids who'd been skittering towards Ryu immediately stopped as if something had taken over control of their movements. They backed away from Ryu and formed a circle around him, blocking any escape.

The CBE stood staring down at Ryu. Ryu looked up at it, still pointing his rifle, and waiting for the CBE to make a move.

"Looks like we have some GWO trash," said a female voice, clearly coming from the CBE. So there was someone inside there driving it. "PREPARE TO DIE," the female shouted as she started her charge towards Ryu.

Ryu began to fire at the CBE, but the bullets deflected off one by one like sparks flying off a soldering stick. Even the cockpit seemed impenetrable. The CBE pushed forward. Ryu pulled the trigger again, but nothing came out. The rifle had emptied its last round.

"Shit," he said.

The CBE lunged its left arm at Ryu, attempting to grab him. Ryu just barely managed to evade it by ducking in place.

“Hmm, a feisty one,” said the pilot.

Ryu slid his hand into his pocket, attempting to grab the explosive before the CBE made another move. His plan was to rush the core, plant the device as fast as he could, and retreat if possible. The CBE caught on and turned its torso a full 180 degrees. Grabbing Ryu by the neck, the CBE raised him off the ground with little effort. Ryu choked and gasped for air. His heart beat strongly as he struggled to release himself from the CBE.

This is the end, isn't it? I'm sorry, Angela.

The CBE raised Ryu even higher and threw him across the room. Ryu hit the wall like a sack of potatoes and fell to the ground.

He was in the worst shape he had ever been. He could feel all of the damage his body had endured: broken rib, sprained ankle, bruised spinal cord, and blood coming out of his mouth and nose. He was done.

Even so, Ryu held himself upwards and spit out the blood that had accumulated in his mouth. He tried to lift himself one last time, to see his attacker give the killing blow, but he was too weak. The CBE, showing no signs of remorse, started towards him again, scanning his body like it was checking his vitals or something. It lifted its right arm to reveal a rotating artillery gun and pointed it at Ryu's face. The mechanism began to spin. The silence was so thin you could hear the rounds move into place one by one.

Ryu looked on, barely able to keep one eye focused on the CBE. The pain was too much; he couldn't take it anymore. He let out a sigh. His head cocked back slowly.

And then Ryu passed out.

CHAPTER 15

Suddenly the CBE stopped its approach. Its gun paused its spinning and froze in place. Inside of the cockpit, the girl driver stared at the screen in front of her.

“WHAT?” Airi said to herself.

She was reading the results of the bio-scan and couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Is this really him?” she said to herself. “The guy that the Professor has been looking for?”

She looked over the results a second time, attempting to discover some sort of glitch or error. The CBE was able to scan for almost everything, including the DNA structure of the individual it was scanning. The scan was positively correct; the person lying on the ground before her was an individual of extreme importance to the Professor. He’d once shared a story with her about a boy who

was the son of his closest friend, who was taken by the GWO before he could get to him. He'd told Airi how this young man would be key in stopping the war and ranted on about some type of prophecy. He'd instructed all of the resistance fighters to follow a unique protocol if they ever encountered this individual.

The CBE lowered itself by bending at its legs. The cockpit area pushed forward with the help of its arms, which held its weight. Immediately the door opened upwards, revealing Airi in her black body suit. She jumped off with ease, feeling no danger at the present time, and moved towards the unconscious boy on the ground.

"Wow, I can't believe this is really happening," she murmured. "Ok, Airi... Time to complete the mission."

Reaching into her jumpsuit, she pulled out an envelope. It had the protocol number 444 written on it. Airi looked at it for a second and then reached over Ryu's body, attempting to store it away in one of his uniform pockets. As she pushed the envelope under his jacket, her CBE unit sent her a warning that flashed on her wrist bracelet.

She looked up and sprung to her feet as fast as she could and retreated to the safety of the CBE's cockpit. The CBE took to its feet, transforming back into its original fighting stance. From inside the cockpit, Airi scanned the area. On her radar screen, a single blip was moving in her direction.

"That's probably his partner," she said to herself.

She checked her ammo and moved to position herself for an attack. The bleep was getting closer and closer. She knew it was human and that meant she would have the upper hand. She

ordered the droids back into attack mode.

The droids moved towards the opening. Seconds later, the bleep on the screen entered the core of the facility. Airi looked towards the entryway and spotted a single individual. He held a device in one hand and an explosive in the other.

Airi set her jaw hard and ordered the droids to move in on the target as one.

* * *

Hiro spotted Ryu's lifeless body slumped on the ground, as soon as he entered the core.

"Dammit," he said. "And this whole time I wanted to have the pleasure."

The CBE must've killed him. It stood now, ready and willing to face Hiro next. He narrowed his eyes and turned toward it.

"You there, inside that contraption!" he shouted. "You're in my way and I don't have any more time to waste!"

Hiro raised his hand to reveal an explosive to the pilot he knew was behind that glass, as a way of baiting them to make the first move.

* * *

Airi did not even flinch. She was a veteran of the Resistance; she knew how to read her opponents very well. There was something this soldier was planning, and she wasn't buying.

"Attack," she ordered the spider droids, her fingers shifting the controls to give the command.

The droids began skittering forward in a swarm, immediately launching themselves at the soldier. Strangely, he didn't try to run or even fight. He just stood there and pulled out a device from his pocket and pressed at its screen.

Vroom went the device as it sent a shockwave across the room.

The droids were immediately rendered immobile and froze in place. The device the soldier had used must've somehow disabled their circuitry. Airi ground her teeth together in annoyance, and immediately attempted an attack, but her CBE wouldn't move, either. None of the controls were working. The sound of the CBE shutting down rang through the cockpit; the screens immediately dimmed and then darkened.

"What the hell?" she yelled. *Was it an EMP?*

She'd heard of such a device but had never encountered someone with access to that kind of technology before. Her heart sunk as her predicament sunk in: her droids and her CBE were useless. She would have to resort to man to man combat, something she wasn't too fond of at the moment, but she would enjoy it nonetheless.

Airi moved to eject herself from the cockpit, but the ejection sequence would not respond. The EMP had disabled all of the circuitry inside the room. She was stuck inside of the CBE and had no way of escaping.

She let out a yell of anger, as the soldier out on the floor laughed up at where she sat behind the dark glass.

"It's useless, you're not going anywhere," he said as he placed the explosive on a panel in front of the cylindrical core. "But don't worry, soon enough this will all be over." He grinned with

anticipation. "Your precious source of energy will be no more, and we will be able to finally crush your pathetic attempts at undermining our progress."

"You bastard!" shouted Airi, but she knew he couldn't hear her.

She was trapped, and the timer on the bomb had started, and soon it would destroy one of their last remaining cores. She was overwhelmingly frustrated at herself, feeling that the whole thing about the protocol had been nothing but a waste of time. She would have been better off securing the core and moving out of the area. But it was too late for that.

The soldier shot one last look at both the CBE unit and his unconscious partner on the ground before turning to leave the room.

"Au Revoir," he said, and Airi screamed at his retreating back, still struggling to find a way out.

* * *

Turbo was pacing as he waited topside with the rest of his team's survivors, including Angela. She wouldn't stop biting her lip. According to the Torch, Hiro had set the final explosive in place and was on his way, but he hadn't mentioned anything about Ryu.

As soon as Hiro emerged from the ventilation shaft, Turbo spun to face him. "Where is Ryu?" he demanded.

Hiro climbed out and slowly pulled out the device that would serve as the detonator. "Oh, you mean 101," he replied sarcastically. "Hmm, I believe he is still inside."

With no time to waste, Turbo looked to Angela, and nodded as a way of saying, "I will save him." Within seconds he sped off,

jumping into the shaft, not caring whether he would catch a step in order to hoist himself down. He had to move faster than he had ever moved before. Even if it meant his life, he was going to give it his all. He had to save his best friend, the only guy who had ever cared for him.

Turbo landed on the ground with a grunt. He sped down the hallway and into the tunnel as if he were guided by Ryu himself. He saw a light at the end of the tunnel and moved in that direction. As he reached the core he noticed all the droids and the CBE unit but did not care to think about the situation. The only thing on his mind was saving Ryu.

“RYU!” he shouted. “WHERE ARE YOU?”

He looked around frantically, every which way, hoping to get a response.

Then he saw him, lying there limp and still on the ground like he was broken.

“Thank god, there you are,” he said as he moved to pick up Ryu from the ground. *Please be alive, buddy. Please be alive.*

Turbo hoisted Ryu onto his back. Just then, he noticed a beeping sound. He looked immediately towards the core. It was the timer on the explosive; Hiro had initiated the countdown.

“Shit,” he said.

The timer had started the countdown at 60 seconds. Turbo turned and started towards the hallway, moving as fast as he could.

“C’mon, Turbo, you’re faster than this,” he said to himself, hoping to encourage his agility.

* * *

Airi, who was still trapped inside the core room, shrieked in relief when she noticed the screen on her CBE light up. But of course, the EMP would've had to be temporary; otherwise, the soldier wouldn't have been able to detonate his bomb.

ALL SYSTEMS GO, flashed the text on her console.

She turned to look at the timer.

17, 16, 15, 14...

She did not want leave and allow the core to explode alongside the facility, but she was out of ideas.

"DROIDS, SURROUND THE CORE!" she shouted an order to the droids. If they surrounded the core, they might be able to use their bodies as a sort of shield and protect the core from the explosion. A risky approach, because she was unsure if the metal on the droids would hold up to such a blast. But it was worth a try.

"SURROUND THE CORE," she stated, "AND COVER IT ENTIRELY."

She immediately positioned herself next to the core, still inside her CBE unit, which would also serve as part of the shield. The timer was at 3 seconds. Airi braced herself for impact.

* * *

BOOOOOOM! A large explosion was heard topside.

Angela and the others felt the ground shake, and it kept shaking as multiple explosions followed. Turbo felt it too, still below ground and racing toward the stairs that would take him out of this place that was about to go up in flames.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM

"HELP ME!" Turbo shouted up through the ventilation opening, as he reached it. He attempted to scale the steps with Ryu on his back, but Ryu was too heavy. "SOMEONE HELP US!"

He glanced down the hallway, and within a fraction of a second, he felt the wind inside the tunnel heat up. The blast was making its way towards him. He pushed with all his might, climbing each step with determination.

Two steps away from making his way out, he felt Ryu's body slipping off his back. He moved to adjust himself and grab Ryu. The heat was getting stronger, and he could see the flames making their way towards the ventilation shaft.

"HERE!" shouted Angela. Her head appeared up above him, at the top of the opening. "GRAB MY HAND!"

Turbo was holding onto Ryu with his left hand and grabbing the railing with his right hand. As he moved to grab Angela's, he let go of the railing. It was a do or die moment, and it seemed to stretch on forever. Turbo reached for Angela's hand with a yell. Angela reached for his, her fingers stretching as far as she could make them.

And then she grabbed onto him with fierceness and strength and pulled.

She hoisted Turbo and Ryu out through the opening moments before the flames spouted out with force.

* * *

Back inside the core, the explosion was tearing at the wall of droids surrounding the core. Inside her CBE, Airi could see the fire piercing its way through as it melted the machines' metal. *It's not going to hold*, she realized. She moved her CBE closer and positioned its arms over the core as a last resort to protect it. She closed her eyes and let out a long scream.

"AAAAAAHHHHH!" she shouted.

The heat was so immense she was able to feel it even from inside the CBE. She wanted to open her eyes but was afraid she would see her own reflection in the glass right before she met her doom. This was something that haunted her. Seeing fear in her eyes was a sign of weakness. She was so fearful of it, she would've rather met death 100 times over. As she squeezed her eyes shut even tighter, she felt the heat start to dissipate. The skin over her eyes began to darken. She could hear the metal falling to the ground and sizzle as it came into contact.

Open your eyes, Airi. But she couldn't

She moved to pinch herself.

"OUCH!" she shouted as she forced her eyes open.

She felt her skin, her face, and her body. It was all still intact. Her plan had worked. The core stood next to her, glowing with energy, unaffected.

"YES!" she shouted with joy.

Her droids, on the other hand, were melted into a pile of molten metal. Well, at least they could build more. The core was way more important because, without it, the entire Resistance would be at risk of not being able to power and develop the machines they needed to restore the Earth.

Airi's next step was to secure the core and exit the facility. The CBE was capable of handling the core for a short period of time. This allowed Airi ample time to remove it and secure it inside a compartment made specially to house an active core. If not done in the allotted time, all the effort thus far would have been in vain as the Syphon would have become radioactive and exploded.

With the core safely secured, Airi ran to board a shuttle she had reserved as a means of transportation for her escape.

* * *

On the other side of the mountain, Turbo and Angela were carrying an injured and still unconscious Ryu, on their way to the Landing Zone for their retrieval, as they'd been instructed by the Torch. Hiro was a little ways behind them, talking to someone via his headset.

"Ok, yes, sir," said Hiro. "Roger that." He closed communication and walked towards the others.

Hiro caught up with the Torch. "The core is still intact," he said.

"What?" replied the Torch as he reached for a match to light his cigarette.

Just then a loud rumbling sound came from somewhere off to their left. They all looked up. It was a shuttle, rocketing into the night sky. *The pilot from the CBE* thought Hiro. Everyone watched as it disappeared into the clouds.

"The General confirmed it seconds ago, and that shuttle just confirmed it as well," replied Hiro as he looked away.

"There is going to be hell to pay," said the Torch as he released a puff of smoke.

“Yeah there is,” said Hiro with a slight grin, scheming again.

* * *

The Landing Zone was engulfed in light almost as soon as they reached it. A loud buzzing sound got closer and closer. Angela looked up and could barely see beyond the brightness.

“It’s a shuttle,” she said, pointing at its descent.

Turbo looked up. The giant emblem of the GWO was visible on its shell. “Yeah, it is,” he muttered.

Angela sensed his derision, and she understood it. Neither of them wanted to go back to that hellhole that was the academy. But they both knew there was nowhere else to go, especially when Ryu, needed medical attention.

“Do you think he’s going to be all right?” said Angela softly, as they boarded him onto the shuttle and lay him gently on the floor. She tucked a bag underneath his head for a pillow.

“Yeah,” Turbo replied. “This guy is like a freakin cockroach, he won’t die this easily.”

The sincerity in Turbo’s voice put Angela at ease. Ryu had proven he was resilient, time and again. She believed that someone like that was meant for a higher purpose. She had already succumbed to her feelings a long time ago, but she also held Ryu as a symbol of hope.

She reached out and took his hand as the shuttle lifted off. He was a bright light in a dark world.

CHAPTER 16

Back at the academy, the shuttles pulled into the empty parking spaces in the early hours of the night. As Hiro disembarked, he spotted a guard running towards him.

“Cadet Hiro, sir,” the guard said, a little out of breath, as Hiro turned to acknowledge him. “You have been summoned by General Gohan to report to him at once!” he said somewhat reluctantly

The guard stood at attention with his hand in full salute and slightly trembling beneath Hiro’s gaze, it made Hiro smile; clearly, the man feared him. The guard was sweating profusely, trying to hold back any signs of intimidation.

“Hmm,” replied Hiro. “As expected.” He turned away. “Torch!” he shouted.

“Aye,” replied the Torch.

"Can I entrust you with the rest here?" asked Hiro.

"Yeah," he replied as he let loose a puff of smoke, though he didn't look happy about it. Hiro knew he hated taking orders from anyone, and that the Torch wished *he'd* been the one called to report to the General. Hiro could see the envy in his eyes. When he turned away, he also glimpsed another look on the Torch's face—a look of scheming.

"Don't worry, I'm sure this will not be a pleasant visit," said Hiro as he walked off to meet with the General, smirking.

* * *

Turbo and Angela were making their way towards the exit doors of the shuttle with Ryu, who was on a stretcher. As they drew closer to the Torch, who stood at the shuttle's entrance, Turbo noticed he was blocking the doors.

"STOP!" shouted the Torch.

"What?" replied Turbo, angrily. Holding back the words he really wanted to say. He didn't want to waste any time getting Ryu to the infirmary but knew he couldn't address the Torch with disrespect because it would surely lead to something troubling. The Torch was a sadist, after all.

"We'll take it from here," said the Torch in a serious tone.

"What do you mean?" asked Angela.

"Exactly what I said," replied the Torch. "PUT HIM DOWN NOW," he screamed right after.

"Are you crazy?" replied Angela, gripping the stretcher with emotion. "You think we trust you to help him? I'm not letting you

take him anywhere.”

Turbo stood there not knowing what to do and imagined what might happen if he were to follow orders. He visualized the Torch dragging Ryu away and throwing him into a pit of rotting corpses. He saw the guards taking Ryu to a cell and feeding him to some rabid dogs. He heard the Torch cackling maniacally as he set Ryu’s body on fire. All terrifying scenarios. He had seen enough and resolved to disobey, whatever the consequences.

He was about to open his mouth and tell the Torch so when he heard a voice inside his head.

“Stop,” said the voice.

“Huh?” said Turbo, in his mind.

“Put me down, I will be all right.”

“What? Who is this?”

“Please, Turbo,” replied the voice.

Turbo attempted to clear his throat. Was he hearing things? It sounded like Ryu.

“But, you’re...” said Turbo, as he looked at Ryu still lying on the stretcher unconscious.

“I have seen what the Torch has in mind, and I want you to comply,” replied Ryu’s unconscious voice.

“NO, I can’t.” Turbo closed his eyes in frustration. *“I can’t let them take you away like this,”* he replied as a single tear fell from his closed eye.

“Listen to me, Turbo. You don’t have a lot of time. I will be all right; you have to trust me. Do not put your life and Angela’s in danger. You...must...trust me,” said Ryu’s voice as it faded away.

Turbo did not know what to believe. He thought he might be

going crazy. It had sounded like Ryu, though...it had sounded real... But how could it possibly be real, when Ryu was lying there knocked out?

Turbo had to make a decision. The Torch was running out of patience and also cigarettes.

"Put him down," said Turbo, just as the Torch stepped forward with narrowed eyes.

"Huh?" said Angela.

"Just do as he says," replied Turbo.

Turbo moved to lower the stretcher. He looked over to Angela, who was still holding on and clearly not wanting to oblige. He stepped towards her, leaning in close enough to say something private.

"He'll be all right," he whispered. "They won't kill him."

"How do you know? How can you be sure?" replied Angela.

"I just know, you have to trust me. Please, Angela."

Angela's jaw was hard as she looked over towards the Torch, and then back to Ryu. Like she was still considering refusal. *Trust me, please*, Turbo begged her, silently.

Then slowly, tense as ever, she lowered the stretcher and stepped away. She looked towards Turbo and gave him a blank stare like she was saying, *You'd better be right about this. Or else.*

Yeah, I hope I am, thought Turbo, shifting uncomfortably. He hoped he wasn't crazy. He hoped he'd made the right choice.

"Grab the stretcher and follow me," the Torch ordered the two guards standing nearby. With Ryu in their possession, they began to lift the stretcher from the ground.

Turbo glanced at Angela again. She looked like she might cry,

but she was forcing the tears back.

“You’ll see him again,” Turbo murmured.

She nodded tightly.

* * *

Hiro had made his way to the General’s quarters and stood outside his office door.

“He’s waiting inside,” said the guard

The guard opened the door and motioned Hiro to enter. As Hiro did so, he began to think about what words would be directed towards him. He knew that the mission had failed and that he was somewhat to blame, but he felt no fear nonetheless. Worry was for foolish men. He was a proven soldier, through and through. As stern as they come and rigid with his belief in the GWO. He’d proven his loyalty to the General. He had no doubt he would be forgiven for his mistakes.

Even so, he took a deep breath as he stepped farther into the room.

The General was sitting on the couch in front of his desk. He was not alone; he was speaking to a little girl. Hiro stopped shy of stepping on the giant rug between the two couches, frowning a little. *Who is she?* He came to attention and paused his salute so as to not disturb the General’s conversation.

The General was laughing. “You’re quite the storyteller, Alison.”

The young girl smiled up at him in delight. From the few words, it sounded like they were having a conversation about conquest and the glory of being in battle.

The General being as stern as he was, was also very discreet. No one had observed or heard mention that he had any family. Hiro felt as if his eyes deceived him. He had never witnessed the General smile at anyone. It was always the same face, blunt and emotionless. Yet this young girl had him beaming.

“Ah, Cadet Hiro, come in,” said the General as he noticed Hiro’s presence.

His tone, still somewhat melancholy, caught Hiro by surprise. *What the hell?*

“Look, Alison, this is Cadet Hiro. He is an upcoming recruit who loves the heat of the battle as well,” the General continued.

Alison drew a big smile and looked towards Hiro, who still stood at attention. She had a huge look of curiosity on her face.

“He’s fought for us and has even spilled blood for the GWO,” said the General.

“Papa, Papa,” replied Alison in amazement. “Is he the hero you talk about in your stories? Is he, Papa?” She reached out and held the General’s hands with excitement.

He laughed again. “That’s enough for today,” he said. “Papa has business to attend to.”

“Ah, no fun, you always leave me in suspense,” she pouted and turned her head downwards in defiance.

The General took to his feet and the door swung open immediately. A guard walked in followed by a lady, who addressed Alison by name.

“Alison, let’s go, you can visit again some other time,” she said.

Alison sighed, turned to the General and nodded goodbye, then turned towards Hiro and skipped in his direction with delight.

She stopped right in front of him and looked up to meet his gaze. Hiro did not move an inch; he understood the code clearly, and no one, not even a little girl, would make him relinquish his stance.

"I know you're the hero," she whispered gleefully.

Hiro, still motionless, continued to look forward. He heard the words but felt it pointless to address the child. He wasn't aware of the stories the General shared with her, so it was of no interest to him. He was still awaiting a response from the General to begin his briefing.

The lady took Alison by the hand and motioned her to the door. Alison turned towards the General and waved goodbye. The door shut behind them. The mood in the room went from light to dark immediately. As if the General had turned from Dr. Jekyll back to Mr. Hyde.

"Sir, I have news of the mission," said Hiro as he saluted the General.

The General walked alongside the desk and made his way to his chair. He sat down and opened a drawer, from which he pulled out a cigar. He struck a match and raised it to the cigar as he took a deep puff. He then released a plume of smoke.

"Stop," he said.

"Yes...sir," replied Hiro, a bit confused by the General's interruption. Maybe the General wanted to enjoy his cigar in peace before Hiro delivered the bleak debrief?

"I already know the mission resulted in failure," said the General. "I didn't summon you here for that."

"Yes, of course, sir," replied Hiro, pretending he understood.

Why else would he have summoned me? The General

continued to puff on his cigar, already half finished with it. He stood up, put his hands on his desk, and leaned forward. Hiro stiffened, lifting his head, to prepare himself for whatever the General would say.

"Did...you notice anything out of the ordinary?" asked the General, slowly.

"Sir?" replied Hiro, his brow creasing.

"Did you observe anything or...anyone acting unexplainably?"

"Um, no, sir. Aside from the unexpected attack from the Resistance, there was nothing else strange that I observed."

"Very well," said the General as he took a step back and into his seat.

As he sat in his chair, he looked deep in thought. Possibly trying to dissect every minute of the mission in his head. Hiro was looking at him and thinking hard, trying to figure out what kind of intel was the General referring to. What he was hoping Hiro had seen. He had been in many altercations in the past and had never been asked such a question.

"Cadet," said the General once again.

"Yes, sir?"

"Do not disappoint me again," he said sternly. His eyes looked up with fire in them and burned into Hiro's. "We do not accept anything but success in the GWO."

"Yes, sir," said Hiro, swallowing hard.

"I will not be merciful next time."

"Understood, sir."

"You are dismissed."

Hiro felt like he'd been physically castrated by the General's

words. *You're better than this*, he thought, angrily. He turned an about face and swiftly exited the room. This time he moved with determination and clenched his fist as he made his way to the elevators.

"I will never fail again," he said under his breath, as he displayed the look of a fiend. "I am Hiro and I shall have my revenge."

CHAPTER 17

While still unconscious, Ryu began to have visions. He saw a meteor hit the earth and cause an explosion. He witnessed a massive black cloud move to areas of the earth that were still green and vibrant, only to see them converted to darkness and destruction as the giant cloud consumed them. In another vision, he saw his parent's bodies floating in the air with a huge glowing sphere inside of their chest area emitting almost blinding rays of light.

Then, he saw himself in his current state and noticed the same light his parents had been emitting, now also in his body. As he looked on, the light began to fade, eventually dimming to a barely visible glow. He couldn't breathe—it was like the light itself had something to do with his vitals. He began to struggle, reaching for that light again, urging to grow brighter so he could save himself.

Ryu lurched awake with an enormous gasp for air. A choking breath. The air rushed into his lungs, but it didn't fill him completely. He struggled to get more in, and slowly, slowly, he started breathing normally again.

What's going on? What's happening?

He attempted to move his arm and felt an immediate sharp pain. He looked around and could see nothing but total darkness. The shifting of his head sent fresh pain to the area of his ribcage. A feeling he remembered. He was alive, then, finally awake. Clenching his teeth, he tried to roll over and get to his feet, but he suddenly hit his head on something hard.

"Ouch," he shouted. "What the hell?" Where was he, and why couldn't he move?

Ryu extended his arms but was only able to stretch them out halfway. He used his hands to feel around and found walls on all sides. The space was about 4 ft. in width, by his guess. But he couldn't see anything at all. A tight boxed-in space with no light and no sound. He was totally trapped.

"This is the goddamn isolation chamber?" he said angrily.

Ryu had no idea how long he had been in here, how long he'd been unconscious and dreaming those strange visions. All he knew was that he was starving, and he thirsted for water. It was hot in this place, and he was sweating profusely. He positioned his hand onto the floor of the chamber and felt something sticky and slimy.

"This is ridiculous," he said to himself.

There was also the odor... It was like that of a wet dog rotting in the baking sunlight. A very foul stench, which had Ryu in tears.

As he crouched there in the chamber, he tried to remember

what had happened to him. But his memory was somewhat hazy. The last thing he recalled was that giant CBE taking him by the neck and lifting him off the ground. Almost choking him to death. During that moment, he'd managed to make out a female inside the CBE right before he was thrown against the wall.

Who was that girl? he wondered.

He was having trouble understanding how he had survived. He'd been told multiple times that the Resistance never took prisoners, and yet, he'd been able to escape with his life.

As he continued to deconstruct the situation in his mind, the faint scrape of a door cell sliding open caught his ears. Immediately footsteps followed. A sliver of light spilled in from small breathing slits in the walls that became visible. Ryu paused and squinted hard. He could hear multiple people based on the footsteps. They grew louder and louder, which meant they were getting closer. He felt their presence right outside his chamber.

"Grab that end, and pull that latch," said a voice.

A second later, Ryu cried out, suddenly blinded by the meager light that emitted from the bulbs inside the cell outside, as the chamber opened. They were nothing compared to the brightness of actual sunlight but still had the same impact.

"Come out, you piece of shit," said one of the guards as he kicked at Ryu, who was in a fetal position inside the chamber.

Ryu stretched his leg to oblige and let out a sound of heavy discomfort. "Aaah!"

He stretched out his other leg but this time he braced himself, so he wouldn't shout out in pain. He pushed against the back wall of the isolation chamber. Using the slimy goo at the bottom of the

box as lubrication, he slid out of the box effortlessly.

The two guards waited impatiently on Ryu to get to his feet. He was smelly and sweaty, and they were definitely not going to give him any aid.

“Hurry up, goddamit, we don’t have all day,” said the guard.

Ryu was barely able to move due to his condition, but he mustered enough strength to stand. The guards motioned to Ryu the direction they wanted him to move to. He took his first step and felt the pain again; it was throbbing all over his body. Had anyone even diagnosed his condition? His instincts told him no. He moved out of the cell and into a hallway with red arrows marked along its wall. He was motioned again to follow in the direction of the arrows.

“Keep going and move it,” said a guard as he pushed at Ryu’s back with his baton.

“This will teach you to never disobey orders again,” said the other.

It hit Ryu, suddenly, that the mission must have failed and somehow, he had been blamed for it and cast into the Isolation chamber as his punishment. At the moment, he didn’t care about this false narrative. He was more worried about getting to his quarters and applying his own form of first aid.

Ryu continued on as the guards shoved at each step. They were clearly mocking him, attempting to anger him as they prodded and poked. Ryu knew that the guards wanted nothing more than to have him retaliate so that they could have some fun with him. They were probably bored of being assigned to the isolation chamber duty. Nonetheless, Ryu was not going to give in.

I'll take punches and kicks all the way to the room if I have to.

The guards eventually seemed to grow tired of their taunts not working and began talking among themselves.

"Did you hear about the last group of recruits?" asked one guard.

"No, what do you mean?" replied the other.

"They went on their third mission, you know the one where you technically graduate, get to go onto the battlefield as a soldier if you pass," said the guard as he grunted sarcastically.

"Right, yeah."

"Well, the officers, you know the guys who make the final decision, had themselves some fun, you see. They got all of the females from the group and forced them to strip."

"WHAT?" the second guard's eyes opened wide.

"Yeah, and you know what happened next? They had their way with them and if you refused you were given a failing grade."

"Damn, those lucky bastards... So what happened?"

"What do you mean what happened?" The first guard scoffed.
"THEY ALL GRADUATED WITH HONORS!"

Both guards broke into a huge laugh as if they had just heard the best joke ever told. Ryu's entire body had gone stiff as he listened. Now, he came to a complete halt. In that moment he stood up straight and ignored any pain his joints were trying to subdue him with. His weak, frail body was brimming with rage. His heart began to pound as his pressure rose.

"You think it's funny when you prey on the innocent?" he said softly, still looking forward.

The guards stopped their chatter and drew their attention

once again towards Ryu.

“You say something, maggot?” one of them asked.

Ryu did not respond; he continued standing motionless. He pictured Angela and her face, her blonde hair, her beauty, and how eventually she would face the same predicament. And in that moment, he could no longer deny he had feelings for her. Without hesitation, he turned towards the two guards with his fists clenched.

“I WILL KILL YOU IF YOU TOUCH ANGELA!” he shouted.

The guards looked taken aback, clueless as to why he was shouting at them. “Who’s this Angela?” one said.

“No one told you to stop walking,” said the other with a growl. “And you’re not going to kill anyone, you piece of crap.” He lifted his baton to strike at Ryu.

Ryu moved immediately to respond to the guard’s action and grabbed his baton midway. He held it with determination, not allowing the guard to push beyond his grip. The guard froze for a second, clearly caught off guard by Ryu’s strength. He adjusted his grip, attempting to push his baton forcefully, but it was of no help. With a snarl, he motioned to his partner for assistance.

“Why you—” said the other guard as he reached for his baton.

But Ryu had predicted this, and he stopped the second guard before he could unholster his weapon. The guard looked up at Ryu in shock, and then anger. Ryu shuffled his feet and made a move as to bring the two guards together. He moved in seconds and wrapped them face to face using their own batons and arms as if they were rope.

When he stepped back, the two guards were tied together,

facing each other. If they moved half an inch they would touch lips and eventually kiss each other if they continued to struggle.

“So, you guys felt left out, right?” said Ryu with derision. “Well here’s your reward. Have at it.”

The guards froze in fear, looking both amazed and slightly terrified.

“Don’t move,” said one guard.

“I’m not moving,” replied the other.

Ryu looked around to make sure no one had witnessed his assault, but the area was clear. He started to trot down the hallway and eventually moved into a sprint. He wasn’t sure if it was the adrenaline that gave him strength, but he was feeling better. He moved quickly, following the arrows to the elevators and then back to the dormitory.

He entered his dorm room and let out a sigh of relief. He wanted to see his friends and warn them of what he had heard the guards say, but he knew first he had to apply some treatment to his wounds. He disrobed and moved into the shower, gritting his teeth as the water washed over his cuts. Once he dried off, he applied antibiotics to any opening on his skin and added dressings to areas where he felt sore. After assessing his condition, he grabbed some bandages and wrapped them around his waist and towards his shoulder. He tied them tightly so that they would restrict movement and allow the area to heal. He looked at the soiled clothing he had worn and knew that there was nothing he could do about the smell and its condition.

“This has seen better days,” he said to himself as he reached to grab his suit.

He'd hoisted it up and was preparing to throw it into the wastebasket when he noticed a piece of paper fall out of the pocket.

"What the..." He moved to grab what seemed to be an envelope.

It was a white envelope, stained somewhat with the same crap that had been inside the Isolation chamber. On the outside face was some text, the words "Protocol 444."

"Protocol 444?" muttered Ryu. "What the hell is that?"

He tore at the envelope and grabbed hold of the sheet of paper that was folded inside. He unfolded it and laid it out flat on the ground, so he could make out every single detail of the message. He began to read...

Ryu, my son, if you are reading this message then that means that I am unfortunately not going to be coming back home to you. I wanted to clear up some things that I never had a chance to explain to you, and I felt that this would be the most appropriate way to do so. Your mother and I are not your normal day-to-day doctors; we are and have been working undercover for the Resistance as spies. We infiltrated the GWO under the cover of scientists working alongside General Gohan on an experiment that could potentially lead to the destruction of the human race.

The GWO has a secret initiative called "NEW HORIZON," in which they plan on renewing the Earth's surface by eliminating the human traits known as prejudice, greed, hate, and ambition, which they believe led to the wars that ravaged the Earth. They plan on doing this by uniting all of humanity under one bloodline. A bloodline free of the genetic coding that connects us to these

human traits. Once they create this new race of “clones,” they will eventually kill off any normal humans who do not possess the same DNA structure, and eventually, they will recolonize the Earth.

The Resistance has been the only group of individuals that has tried time and time again to thwart the GWO’s efforts. They believe in another way to renew the Earth and save its people, by using technology. I have entrusted this letter to a dear friend of mine and colleague in the Resistance, his name is Jacob Penski. You must seek him out! It is imperative that you heed my words as soon as you read this letter. I fear that it might be too late. We must put a stop to the GWO and end their barbaric massacre of all humankind. It is our duty as protectors of the Earth.

Remember, Ryu, remember what I have always told you... You are special, my son. You have a gift inside of you that no one else has, and this gift is for you alone. You must harness this power and save those whom you hold dear. You MUST continue where your mother and I left off!

I apologize, son, for burdening you with this heavy task, but it is something far more important than the struggle of one man. Find a way to meet with Jacob and STOP THE GWO.

As Ryu finished reading, he knelt there in disbelief, practically shaking. How had this letter ended up in his pocket? This was a trap, wasn’t it? A setup by the GWO, to see what he would do with this false, fake letter from someone dear to him.

But as he looked towards the bottom of the letter, he saw a familiar signature, which he recognized immediately.

Your father, Sam Kendo

It was unmistakably the same signature that Ryu's father signed on each postcard back when Ryu was a child. The GWO couldn't have replicated it... This had to be real. It sounded like his dad, the way his father had always sounded in the letters he used to write to him.

Ryu picked up the paper and began to cry. The tears spilled down his cheeks and around the edge of his mouth. But these were not tears of sadness—they were tears of hope. Maybe, just maybe, his parents might still be alive.

He had to find this Jacob Penski. He needed answers. And to find him, he would have to break out of the GWO facility.

CHAPTER 18

I've got to get to the others and warn them, thought Ryu as he finished putting on his clothes.

His resolve was to take every bit of his father's letter as truth, including the GWO's plans, at least until he could prove otherwise.

"Where the hell is Turbo's room?" he wondered aloud. He had never been there because of the strict rules of not allowing visitors. Yet he had to figure out a way to communicate with him and explain the situation. An idea came to him. Opening his bedroom door, he looked outside down each direction of the hallway for anyone patrolling his section. It was all clear.

Rising up onto his tiptoes, he checked the top of his door and there he saw what he was hoping for. Number 101. His number.

Damn, how stupid could you be, Ryu?

Of course, it made sense that the academy would mark each

dorm room with its inhabitant's number to avoid any confusion. He really should've noticed that before. *Okay, so, what's Turbo's number again?* It took him a few seconds to remember. *Ah, yes...190!*

That meant that Turbo was on the same floor as Ryu, and all Ryu had to do was follow the numbers in order until he reached the room labeled 190. He looked to his left, spotting the door of the room beside his, which was marked 103. Ryu's room was located at the end of the hallway and it was going to be a long way to Turbo's room. Across from 103 was 102, and so on and so on.

He paused, realizing something. *102. That's Hiro's number. Could... it... be his room?*

A chill slid down his spine as he stood there in his doorway. The air circulating down the hallway was freaking cold.

Before leaving his room, he dashed back inside and grabbed his belongings. He found his duffel bag and verified that his heirloom was safely tucked inside. He wouldn't be able to return to the academy once he left, and he had every intention of doing whatever it would take to get to Jacob Penski and find out more about his parents. He stepped into the hallway and slowly closed his door behind him. There was no one in sight, at least at the moment, so he sped off in the direction of room 190.

"154, 155, 156, 157...," he said to himself as he verified each door.

This facility needs to fire their engineer, this is exhausting, he thought.

The pain throbbing lightly in his chest and arm reminded him he couldn't move too fast. His throat was dry, and his stomach

began to grumble, which didn't help either. Even in his state, he felt a little better than he had when he was inside the isolation chamber, but that didn't mean he was healed and in great shape. If he ran into anyone, he might have trouble fighting them off, so he kept an eye on all of his surroundings.

"...188, 189, 190!" He'd made it. He raised his hand and knocked on the door to Turbo's room. *Thump, Thump*. He leaned in and put his ear against the door. He heard some movement inside.

Good, he's in there.

"Hey, Turbo... It's me... Ryu... open up!" he said, raising his voice slightly.

"Huh?" replied a voice behind the door.

"I said it's Ryu. Open the goddamn door!"

The door swung open to reveal a sleepy-eyed, yawning Turbo. "Huh, what... time is it?" Turbo mumbled half asleep.

Ryu did not waste time and instead of answering his friend, he opted to shove him back into the room and close the door.

"What the?" shouted Turbo, as he tumbled to the ground, getting more awake by the second.

Ryu put his bag down immediately and pulled out the envelope that was tucked inside. "Listen carefully, I don't have a lot of time to explain this to you, but we're in extreme danger."

"Ryu?" said a slightly coherent Turbo.

Turbo blinked again and then his eyes widened as he looked up at Ryu, who was standing inside his room, alive and well.

"RYU!" he shouted with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. He jumped in a split second to his feet, moved forward,

and embraced Ryu with emotion. “You’re alive! You’re alive!” he shouted as tears of joy poured down his face.

“Yeah, it’s me, buddy,” said Ryu, wincing at his own foolishness. The letter had made him forget everything that happened beforehand—namely that he’d almost died, and Turbo had saved him. “I’m all right,” he said in a somber tone.

Turbo continued gripping Ryu with even more force, for quite some time, which began to pull a bit at Ryu’s patience. “Hey, Turbo, I said I’m ok,” said Ryu, attempting to pry Turbo’s hold from his torso. “Let...go...already,” he said as he managed to pull Turbo off.

“Look, I’m fine, I’m good, I’m here,” he said again, hoping that Turbo would concede and understand.

Turbo having been shoved slightly towards the ground, pushed himself up slowly with his arm, and looked again towards Ryu with a confused expression. “I’m sorry, man,” he said shamelessly. “But, I honestly thought I had made the wrong decision back there when they took you away. I could have sworn it was you that was telling me what to do, but... I don’t know.” He scratched the back of his head. “It’s like you were inside my head or something, but... even so, it just kept bugging me this whole time. I was worried I had made the wrong choice.” He turned his head and looked away.

Ryu paused, hesitating. He didn’t fully know what Turbo was talking about, but his words did stir some recognition inside him, a faint memory locked away in his head. After a small moment of silence, Ryu looked over to Turbo in an attempt to clear up the remorse his friend felt.

“You know, it’s kinda weird,” he said, “But after hearing you say those words, something in my mind clicked on, like if it was déjà

vu.”

“Deja what?” said Turbo, the warmth in his expression reverting back to his normal confused demeanor.

“Anyways,” Ryu shot back after noticing his friend had missed the whole point of his conversation. “Look, like I said before, we’re in danger, we have to escape. You’ve got to hear me out.”

“What are you talking about, man?” replied Turbo, as he stepped closer to Ryu. “Of course we’re in extreme danger, you just busted into my room, which is clearly an offense and—”

“Shut up and LISTEN TO ME!” said Ryu, as he stopped Turbo midway. “The GWO, they are planning on killing everyone, including us.”

“What do you mean? That’s absurd, they need soldiers to fight”

“Yeah, but they are making their own. Look... I don’t have a lot of time to waste on this, we have to escape.”

“Calm down, you’re talking nonsense,” said Turbo, getting back on his feet.

Ryu could see he was getting nowhere with Turbo. Those guards he’d tied up would eventually get free and then they would come for him, and possibly alert Hiro, too. They had to escape *now* and fast. Ryu let out an annoyed breath, then moved to grab Turbo’s arm and hand him the letter from his father.

“Please read this but read it quickly. I know it won’t mean much to you, but it’s real and it’s the truth,” said Ryu. “Don’t ask me how I know, but those are the words of my father, and I can’t explain how I got this, but something tells me that we need to listen to it.”

Turbo grabbed the letter and read through the document. His

eyes drew bigger and bigger. He stopped midway and looked at Ryu and must've seen emotion in Ryu's eyes because he nodded instead of questioning.

"This sounds like something the GWO would do," Turbo said. "I knew all along those bastards were going to kill us off; I felt it my first day in this hellhole." Turbo paused and took a deep breath. "So what do we do?"

Ryu let out a sigh of relief, his face bursting into a smile, and he embraced his friend sarcastically.

"Finally, you understood something," he said.

"Umm, dude, you don't have to get too emotional. I mean, cmon man, let go," replied Turbo as he attempted to shove Ryu off not knowing he was being ridiculed

"Ok, first things first, we have to get Angela," said Ryu, reaching for his bag.

"Angela?" asked Turbo.

"Yes... Angela" replied Ryu.

They both looked at each other and immediately read each other's thoughts.

"But Angela is in the girl's dormitory," they said at the same time, both groaning.

It was unavoidable; the two now had to devise a plan to get into the girl's dormitory without anyone catching them, something that had never been attempted by anyone. If you got caught, you were dead on the spot. No questions asked, no feeble punishment given. You were just killed with no remorse and hauled off to the trenches.

Turbo and Ryu stood in place, wondering how they would

reach the last member of their group. They had no way of knowing what was beyond the set of elevators that Angela took each day on her way to her room. Turbo glanced down at the letter one more time so that he could finish reading the rest.

“WAIT,” said Ryu. “Gimme that!” He moved to grab the letter from Turbo’s hand. “Look at it.”

“What about it?” said Turbo. “I was looking at it when you took it from my hand.”

“No, look at it again,” said Ryu.

He lifted the letter and held it up to the moonlight that was shining through the small opening in Turbo’s room.

“It’s a blueprint,” said Ryu

“Yeah, I can see it.”

“It’s the academy. How did they make this?” he wondered aloud.

“I don’t know but look, it clearly shows the way to the girl’s dorms,” said Turbo.

“Quickly, grab a pen and trace the outline,” ordered Ryu.

Turbo nodded and traced the whole area of the blueprint as Ryu held it against the glass in the light. He covered every inch and section as best he could.

“Ok... Done,” he said.

“Good, let’s go,” said Ryu, starting for the doorway.

“Wait,” said Turbo. “How are we going to get there undetected? Have you forgotten that we’ll still be two guys moving suspiciously within the confines of a girl’s dormitory at the wee hours of the night?”

“Hmm, you’re right.” Ryu scratched his head, wanting to clear

his thoughts. "I've got a plan," he said immediately.

"What, that quick?" replied Turbo.

"Yep, it's not the best plan, but we're in this till the end, right? We do whatever it takes. No regrets."

Turbo nodded his agreement. "No regrets." He moved to fist bump his friend, but Ryu was already turning and looking away. Turbo lowered his fist in defeat and shrugged his shoulders.

"Get your stuff," said Ryu. "We're not coming back!"

It was do or die all over again, but this time it was on their terms. They were not being forced by anyone's hand. This was their own choice and they were glad that they were able to make it.

"Oh, one last thing... Um, before we leave," said Ryu to Turbo as they were about to step out. Turbo looked at Ryu with a bit of doubt.

"What? What?" he said somewhat frantically, turning his head in every direction.

"Umm, can I have some water?" said Ryu shamelessly.

"WHAT!?" replied Turbo.

Outside in the hallway, Ryu verified the area was clear before leading the way. "Ok, follow me," he said as he ran in the opposite direction.

"This isn't the way to the girl's dorm," whispered Turbo after a few minutes, frowning.

"I know, but it is the way to the guards I had a confrontation with earlier."

"WHAAT?" asked Turbo.

"Just follow me, hopefully no one has found them yet," said Ryu.

They ran down the hallway, out of the dormitory area, and into a set of elevators. Ryu pressed the button that would take him to the lower floor of the building. As the elevator reached its destination, the doors opened, and Ryu took off once again.

“We’re almost there,” he said to Turbo.

“You sure you’re okay, though?” Turbo asked, pointing at Ryu’s bandages. “You got hurt pretty bad, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m fine, don’t worry,” said Ryu, trying to ignore the throbbing in his ribs. They turned a corner and he stopped abruptly. “There, they are still here.”

The two guards were fast asleep on the ground. They were still tied together with each other’s batons, clothing, and appendages.

“What the hell happened here?” asked Turbo, ogling.

“Don’t worry about that now, I’ll explain later,” Ryu replied. “Help me get their clothes off.”

Ryu untied the two guards carefully so that they would not wake up. Turbo followed his lead. Once the guards were unrobed, they moved quickly, changing into the guards’ clothes.

“This guy needs to lose some weight,” whispered Turbo as he put on the uniform, which hung over his much smaller frame like a curtain on a window.

“Just hurry,” replied Ryu.

They managed to fit into the clothes in a matter of minutes. They looked at each other in order to ensure proper fit and helped each other adjust their garments until they were satisfied with the disguise.

“Ok, now we’re official,” said Ryu, pulling out the letter again to check which direction to take. “We need to go through these

doors and into these elevators.” He pointed at the blueprints. “The girl’s dormitory is on the first floor in building B. We take the elevator back up, turn left, go down the corridor to enter building B. Once inside, we’re going to split up. I’ll move to Angela’s room while you keep watch outside the hallway.”

“Why am I keeping watch?” asked Turbo.

“Because you’re faster than me and can easily warn us in time,” said Ryu as he tapped Turbo on his shoulder.

“Ok... makes sense,” replied Turbo.

“Let’s go.”

Both Turbo and Ryu took off and left the guards once again. They followed the plan step by step. They made their way down the hallway into the elevator up to the first floor, then down the corridor to the left and into building B. They were getting close.

Ryu motioned to Turbo with his hand. “Look, that’s where you need to wait and keep an eye out.”

“Ok, but don’t take long,” said Turbo. “Get in there and get out.”

“Sure, that’s easier said than done,” replied Ryu. He was panting from all the running. And his heart was beating rather fast now, too.

He knew that Angela wasn’t as close to him as Turbo, and he worried how she would react once Ryu explained the dangers of their plan. Would she trust him? Even so, he had to try. He had to do whatever he could in order to save her from certain death. Ryu left Turbo and rushed down the hallway, looking desperately for 176, Angela’s number. He remembered it from the first day they met, when they’d been assigned training partners.

“There! That’s it... 176.”

He stopped before her door and stared at it. The only thing left to do was muster enough courage to knock and hope that she was still inside alive and well.

CHAPTER 19

Ryu knew that a guard—or worse, an officer—could come down the hallway at any moment, so he braved his reluctance and put his knuckles to Angela’s door, loud enough for her to hear it but hopefully not so loud it would alarm anyone else on the same floor. *Knock, knock.*

“AN-GE-LA,” he whispered with his head against the door. “It’s me, Ryu, open the door.”

Ryu waited for a few seconds, but no one answered. The other side of the door was quiet. Starting to grow anxious, he knocked again, this time slightly louder.

“ANGELA, *please* wake up and open the door...”

He’d barely finished speaking before the door sprung open. Ryu was blinded by a blur of a person lunging at him, and hugging him so forcefully he stumbled backward a step. Angela wrapped

herself around Ryu's waist and held on tightly as if she would never let go. Ryu caught off guard, held his arms in the air, not knowing what to do next. But the familiar scent of her warmed his heart and put him at ease.

"RYU, YOU'RE ALIVE!" shouted Angela as she hugged him.

Her head leaned into Ryu's chest, and she clutched him like she'd been terrified she was never going to see him again. Ryu was still well aware they were standing in the middle of a hallway, and that they were running out of time, but he paused at the emotion in her voice, understanding how important this moment was for Angela. If their roles had been reversed, and he'd thought she might die, he would surely have responded in a similar manner.

"It's really you, right? You're really here?" Angela asked. "I was about to lie down and fall asleep, but then I heard a knock and a voice... And it sounded like you, but I thought it was just me hearing things. But then you knocked again, and your voice got louder, so I pulled myself up, and prayed to God that it was true..."

"It's true, I'm here, it's really me, Angela," said Ryu, laughing a little. He was moved emotionally, and he felt his body tingling inside waiting for him to respond. He bent himself slightly in order to wrap his arms around Angela as she continued holding him. "Don't worry, I'm ok, but... we don't have much time. Angela, you have to come with me."

Angela released a bit of her grip and pulled away slightly from Ryu's waist, enough to look up at his face. As she looked, she seemed to notice he was wearing a guard's uniform for the first time and blinked in confusion. "What's with the clothes?"

Ryu held Angela with his left hand and moved his right hand to

scratch the back of his head as he squinted his eyes slightly in a guilty manner. “Umm, I’ll explain later. Let’s just say I needed a disguise to make escaping this place easier.”

Now she looked even more confused. “What...what are you talking about?”

“Look, I know I keep asking you to trust in me and listen to me, and I know you have no obligation to do either, but I need you to. Our lives are in EXTREME danger—the GWO is planning on killing everyone after they complete some kind of experiment,” he said quickly, looking both ways down the hallway and keeping his ears perked for the sound of footsteps or a shout from Turbo. “We have to leave this place, Angela... We have to leave now, or it will be too late.”

He kept talking, skimming through some details but telling her about the letter, and how Turbo was keeping watch down the hallway. When he finished, he pushed Angela gently off his chest and looked her straight in her eyes.

“You have to believe me,” he said fiercely. “I want to save you.”

Ryu paused, waiting for Angela to speak. He was sweating profusely, and he was still unsure of what she would say. *Please say yes, please say yes, please say yes...*

Angela pulled herself even farther from Ryu, then raised her arm and grabbed his left hand. Slowly, she moved it off her shoulders and turned her back on Ryu. He gasped, his eyes opening wider, and he took a big gulp. Was this her answer? Maybe she wasn’t ready for something like this... Maybe she thought he was crazy... As Angela walked off into her room, Ryu looked up at her and positioned his arms at his sides, his head crouched down and

his back hunched. He looked like someone who had just been rejected by their crush.

As he continued soaking in his failed attempt at convincing Angela, he stared into her room, his eyes locked onto her silhouette. He felt this was the last time he would get to gaze his eyes upon her, so he savored the moment.

Suddenly, a piece of clothing hit his face. It had the same scent as Angela. The garment, responding to gravity, slipped off slowly from his face, allowing Ryu's eyes to once again peer into the room. And then he was staring in shock and amazement, because Angela had removed her clothes in seconds and stood on the dark side of her room, her back towards the door, starkly naked.

Ryu blinked his eyes immediately, and then closed them while stuttering out the words. "What—what are you doing?"

"What do you mean what am I doing?" she replied casually. "I'm going with you, you idiot..." she said as she reached for her regular attire.

"BUT...BUT...you're not wearing anything..." Ryu stammered, as he positioned his hand over his face, hoping to seal away Angela's body from his eyes and put an end to his lewd thoughts.

"Stop staring then," said Angela, matter-of-factly.

It took her a few minutes to put on her clothes, grab her belongings, and move back to the door where Ryu stood, his cheeks hot with embarrassment.

"Ok...you can open your eyes now, I'm decent, jeez...men," she said in a frustrated tone.

Ryu, not being fully convinced, spread his fingers as he covered his face, allowing him to peer out of one eye to make sure she was

covered. He looked down and around until his eye caught a frustrated Angela looking straight at him. She was grumbling somewhat and had the look of someone disappointed. Ryu lowered his hands and let out a sigh; he was flustered a bit and his face was tainted with reddish accents above his cheeks. As he regained his composure, he noticed that Angela was holding her duffel bag and tapping the floor with her feet.

“Well, are we going or what?” she said.

Ryu looked at her and then closed his eyes again, this time in relief. He wanted to thank god himself for having convinced Angela. He opened his eyes again, looked towards her, and smiled.

“You bet your ass we’re going,” he said. “This way.”

Angela followed closely behind Ryu as they moved quickly down the hallway, towards the entrance to Building B.

“We have to hurry, Turbo is waiting for us at the entrance,” he said.

“Don’t worry about me, I can keep up,” she replied.

When they caught sight of Turbo, he looked somewhat impatient. His head was turning frantically in all directions, and he was holding the letter in his hand like he’d been reading it over again. Ryu hoped he’d been mapping a way for them to get out.

“Turbo,” said Ryu as he sped up to meet him.

“There you are,” Turbo said, exasperated. “You guys made it!”

“Yeah, I hope we didn’t take too long,” replied Ryu sheepishly.

“Hmmpff,” said Turbo as he crossed his arms and looked away.

“I appreciate you keeping lookout,” Ryu said. “You’ve always been reliable, and I appreciate that.” He smiled at him, hoping it would make things better.

Turbo's expression softened, and he nodded. "Thanks," he said stiffly. "Listen, I've been planning out our next move."

"Great," said Ryu.

Turbo held the letter out for all three of them to see and pointed to an area on the map that was marked with a giant X.

"Ok, so it looks like whoever gave you this letter already thought out this whole process because it's clear to me that we need to go to this giant X," said Turbo.

"Hmm, I think you're right," replied Ryu as he moved closer to the letter. "The only problem is that it's on the other side of the facility. Lots of chances for someone to catch us along the way. We're definitely going to have to move with extreme caution."

"Yes, and we have to go now," replied Turbo.

As he folded the letter to stow it back into his coat, a loud voice beckoned their attention.

"YOU THERE!" shouted someone. "WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?"

Both Ryu and Turbo looked towards the doors and spotted a guard marching toward them from the girl's dormitory. She was making her rounds, ensuring that everything was calm and quiet as expected. She must've heard them talking. *Dammit*, thought Ryu.

Thinking fast, Ryu turned to Angela and grabbed her by the arm with force.

"C'mon BITCH!" he shouted as he shoved her to the ground. "HURRY YOUR ASS UP! WE DON'T HAVE ALL DAY!"

He'd remembered him and Turbo were wearing guard uniforms, so he'd decided a little while ago that the only way to play this if they got caught was to pretend they were escorting an

offender—Angela—to the isolation chamber. His only flaw was that he had not shared this plan with Turbo, which meant he could potentially derail the situation by not following along. Ryu looked towards Turbo now, hoping he would catch on and follow his lead.

Turbo was staring right back at him, his eyes fully opened, turning in all directions like he was trying to discern the situation. After a few seconds, Turbo stood up straight and let out a slight cough. He closed his eyes and altered his demeanor to imitate a guard as best he could. He leaned over to Angela and looked at her with despire. He lifted his leg and began kicking at her.

“YOU HEARD HIM,” he yelled, kicking away at her torso. Angela curled up and whimpered in response. Ryu hoped she was only acting. “GET UP, YOU MAGGOT.”

Ryu was glad Turbo had followed his lead but was also somewhat displeased at his form of complacency and his bad acting. For a second, Ryu almost moved himself to block another kick from Turbo but held back as soon as he realized he was going to step out of character and confuse the guard who was watching the situation unfold.

Argh, this idiot could have been a bit more subtle, he said to himself. *But, I know he doesn't want to hurt Angela. This is the only way to make this whole scenario believable.*

He quickly tried to draw the guard's attention towards him.

“WE'VE GOT THIS UNDER CONTROL,” said Ryu as he attempted to imitate the voice of a disgruntled guard. “THIS PIECE OF SHIT OF AN EXCUSE FOR A SOLDIER IS GONNA SPEND SOME TIME IN ISOLATION.”

He motioned to Turbo to pick up Angela and continue on.

Turbo nodded back and bent towards Angela. As they met eye to eye, he winked at her, like he was trying to put her at ease. But Ryu didn't miss the scowl of disappointment on her face or the way Turbo's face paled in sheepish response. Turbo continued nonetheless and grabbed her with force, pulling at her and shaking her a bit, all in order to make this seem real.

Ryu turned towards the two of them and was beginning to follow, when the female guard said, "WAIT."

Ryu and the others froze in place, fearing the worst. All had the same look on their faces. They feared they only had two choices: either they had to risk making a run for it and the guard alerting everyone, which could potentially lead to their deaths, or they needed to kill this bitch as soon as possible without causing a huge commotion and *then* make a run for it, hoping they would make it out of there together and alive. Ryu knew he had to respond soon.

He turned his neck slightly, just enough to look over his shoulder. He curled his fingers to form a fist and stiffened his body. He was ready to do whatever it would take to escape this hellhole.

The guard took a step closer to Ryu, and then another, until she was right behind him. Ryu held in place; he wanted her to make the first move. The others watched heavily, as they prepared for the worst.

The guard lifted her arm and revealed her hand. "You dropped your orders," she said, holding out the folded letter.

The letter from Ryu's father, that Turbo must've dropped when he went to tuck it into his coat pocket. Ryu held his breath as he stared at it in the guard's hand.

"Eh...yes...I must have dropped those, I apologize," he said

tensely.

He lifted his arm and grabbed the letter from the guard, who handed it back. Afterwards, the guard turned around and walked off.

Ryu stood in place for a second, gulped again, and lifted his gaze towards Turbo. He was engulfed in rage after going through that dramatic moment. He looked at him and wanted to release his fury with his hands, but he knew he could not. They had lucked out partially due to Turbo's quick thinking, even if it had almost come crashing down by a simple mistake. Ryu shifted his mood back to a serious one. He had forgotten for a brief moment the danger they were in and as he reminded himself of his duty, he wasted no time in continuing.

"I'm going to hold onto this from now on," he said as he walked past Turbo.

Turbo looked on with shame. He turned towards Angela and said, "I'm sorry for kicking you."

"That's ok, I expected you to do worse, but in the end, it worked out," she replied.

"Ok, well... Follow Ryu, and I will cover our rear," said Turbo as he pointed towards the way to the elevators.

Ryu peered into the door that led into the elevator's area, trying to catch a glimpse of any other guards, before proceeding towards the elevators. He looked in both directions, and judging the coast was clear, he nodded to Angela and Turbo to follow closely. Their journey had just encountered their first obstacle and Ryu knew that they would surely encounter more as they made their way to the X on the map. Nothing had been easy for them

ever since they'd been in this godforsaken facility, and this wasn't going to be anything less.

CHAPTER 20

Inside the elevator, Ryu pulled out the map one more time to look it over. He wanted to ensure they knew the best possible route they could take to escape the facility. He checked every exit marked on the map. Some sure seemed closer and a lot easier to get to than the one marked by whoever had slipped him the letter.

“Look here,” he said as he placed his finger on the map. “If we go here, we can avoid possible confrontation. It’s closer than the X.”

“No,” replied Turbo, shaking his head. “There has to be a reason why THAT exit is marked, and the others are not.”

Ryu didn’t disagree, but, he was having serious doubts about their ability to reach that exit without losing their heads. Doubts because what if this plan did the opposite of what he intended, and got both his friends killed? “I know, I know,” he said, running a hand

through his hair. "It's just... If we go that way, and we get caught again, there's a good chance we won't be able to fool anyone else. We could get in real trouble, the kind that we won't be able to escape."

"It's a risk, yeah," said Angela, with a shrug of her shoulders. "But we've gotta take it. We've come this far already."

"Are you sure you mean that?" asked Ryu.

"Have you forgotten about everything we've gone through—the situation in the classroom, the lashings, the drill, the mission...?" asked Angela, fiercely. "In all those moments we could have easily died, yet we still managed to make it out alive, because we didn't give up. This is no different, Ryu. It's like you said, if we don't leave this place or at least try, we won't have the opportunity of choosing our own way of meeting our end. If we stand down, we choose to die like everyone else but... if we go forward, we choose our own destiny. You helped me understand that even with the odds stacked against us, if we make the choices that follow, it's still worth seeing them through... Because they're *ours*, and no one else's."

Angela wore a hard, resilient look on her face. She placed her hand on Ryu's shoulder and looked into his eyes. "I've made my choice, Ryu. What's yours?"

Ryu smiled at the way she'd turned his words back on him. He looked at her and Turbo, and he was happy that he had friends like them despite the situation they were in. *You are special, my son*, his father had said, in the letter. *You have a gift inside of you that no one else has, and this gift is for you alone. You must harness this power and save those whom you hold dear. You MUST continue*

where your mother and I left off!

Ryu took a deep, shaky breath. "You're right," he said. "We have a lot to do and little time. Let's head to the X and leave this awful place once and for all."

Turbo let out a whoop and shouted, "Let's go!" and Angela grinned.

Ryu swiftly pushed the button on the elevator, which initiated its descent towards the first floor.

"Once the doors open, follow my lead," he said. "We'll have to move quickly."

The elevator came to a halt, and the doors opened. Ryu once again peered out to make sure the area was clear.

"Clear!" he whispered.

He moved out, into a lobby of sorts, that he'd never been in before; it was the area between the courtyard and the main building. Giant pillars rose up from the floor to the ceiling, spread out evenly alongside each wall and down the center. Before each step, Ryu glanced around, watching and listening for guards or anyone else up late at night who might stumble into them. Angela followed behind him, and Turbo was covering their rear.

"Use these pillars for cover," said Ryu as he moved to conceal himself behind the first one they came to.

One by one, he slipped out from each pillar and ran into the shadows of the next, until he'd made his way around the perimeter of the room. As he positioned himself behind the last pillar, which was closest to the doors leading to the courtyard, he looked behind him and waited for the others to catch up. Angela was one pillar away; Turbo was a pillar behind her.

Ryu was edging closer to the doors to peer out into the courtyard when he noticed footsteps coming from the floor above them. He looked up and stiffened as he noticed for the first time that the lobby had a high ceiling, which gave each floor above them a view of the lobby. The footsteps got closer and Ryu motioned Angela and Turbo to stay where they were, hidden in the shadows. He could hear voices—two of them in conversation—but could not make out the dialogue.

“Psst,” said Ryu softly, to get Angela’s attention.

She turned towards him. Ryu pointed upwards of his position. He wanted Angela to position herself somewhere along the pillar, which would allow her to see above Ryu’s position. Thankfully, Angela understood. She shifted her position a little and looked upward, squinting her eyes to see.

After a moment, she held up two of her fingers to Ryu, confirming what he thought he’d heard: there were two people up there. Guards, most likely. The intensity and worry in Angela’s face told Ryu the guards looked angry about something.

Ryu nodded his thanks to Angela. But he still desperately wanted to know what they were talking about. He closed his eyes and began to concentrate, thinking it might help if he cleared his mind, to drown out every other sound in the room and focus on those two distant voices.

The room became extremely silent. And then, a moment later, he heard them. Each word came to him as clearly as if he were standing right next to them.

“They found them naked and tied up...” said one guard, in a rough, furious voice.

“Whoever it was, they dug their own grave the moment they stepped out of character” spat the other guard, in a boisterous tone. “They have the whole facility coming down on their asses, and it serves them right. I bet they’ll end up using those bastards as an example, you know, heads on a spike somewhere where everyone can see them.”

Ryu jumped up slightly and out of his concentration. That was all he needed to hear. He glanced towards Angela and Turbo with a strong look of concern. *They found the guards I tied up*, he tried to convey with his eyes and his silent lips. *They’re looking for me*.

Ryu pulled out the letter from his pocket to glance at it one more time. They were literally about 80 yards away from the big X on the map. No one knew what was beyond that area since they had never ventured this far away from their quarters. But Ryu was certain that once they reached the X they would be able to see some kind of indication or a clue of what they should do next. He felt this way because so far, the letter had not disappointed him and his comrades. Whoever had planned this was either a psychic or could tell the future, thought Ryu.

The guards’ footsteps began moving away from their position above Ryu’s pillar, and fast. Ryu looked to Angela, who gave him a thumbs up, indicating the guards were out of sight. Nodding in confirmation, Ryu turned and ran to exit the lobby and slip out into the courtyard. A moment later, the others emerged from the doors behind him, breathing heavily. Ryu slowed down a bit as he jogged down the center of the courtyard, allowing the others to catch up.

The courtyard was a giant, open square scattered with small bushes. The whole facility had a perimeter wall which was about 30

feet high and non-scalable. There wasn't any cover out here, but it was dark enough that Ryu wasn't too worried about anyone spotting them anymore. They were located on the rear side of the main building, which had no special purpose. An area that was rarely monitored.

"They know about the guards," he said to Angela and Turbo as he ran. "We have to continue without stopping. The exit is across this courtyard and over where those lights are." He pointed to an area just beyond the courtyard.

Turbo and Angela sped up behind him. They ran through the cool breeze with determination. Their faces bore the look of people who were at the last point of salvation. Freedom was coming closer with each step.

On the opposite edge of the courtyard, they ran on, into a narrow space between two buildings that looked like a path normally used for vehicles to make their way to the rear of the two buildings to drop off cargo. This path led to the lit-up area. They were less than 50 yards away, by Ryu's guess.

"We're almost there, guys," he said as he gasped for air.

But he was starting to get a little worried. The area they were aiming for was exceptionally bright, which would make it a whole lot easier for anyone giving chase to spot them. But there was no other explanation.

They reached the area and stopped for a moment. Ryu looked around and noticed giant statues which stood in a line alongside the two walls on either side of them. The area was heavily lit due to the overhead spotlights, which were needed for late night deliveries. The ground was covered in dark pavement and had

street markers painted on it. The rear of the buildings had two giant rolling doors, which were shut and looked like they could only be opened by a switch inside. Swallowing hard, Ryu ran forward again, following the line of statues to the end, which wasn't very visible due to it being farther away from the lights.

Finally, reaching the far side of the area, he stopped in his tracks. It was sealed off.

"No!" he shouted.

"It's a dead end," breathed Turbo, as he looked around, trying to find an explanation.

Ryu stepped towards the wall that stood in their way. He looked up, frantically looking for a way they could somehow scale it. But it was a good 30 feet tall and had a smooth surface to it. No hand or footholds; no way up without sliding right back down. Ryu slammed his fist into the wall in desperation.

"WHY?" he shouted. "Why did that letter lead us here? It's a *goddamn* dead end! It makes no sense!" he continued as he pounded away.

"The X has to mean something," said Turbo, "or why put it on the map?"

Ryu dropped to his knees and began to envision their deaths. He saw them being tied to a post and the GWO firing squad pointing their rifles at them and pulling their triggers. He saw Hiro standing on the sidelines, watching their bodies crumple and fall with a big smile on his face. He saw their heads on a spike as he had heard the guards mention earlier.

They shouldn't have done this. They shouldn't have come here.

"Kind of late for a midnight stroll," said a voice, suddenly. A

new voice, eerily close behind them.

“Shit,” said Angela.

Ryu snapped out of his dream state and turned his attention towards the others. His nightmare scenario had become reality.

There stood Hiro and the Torch with a group of guards. They had been discovered.

Was the letter even real? Ryu wondered, as he shakily turned to face his enemies, clenching his fists at his sides. *Or was it all just a trap created by the GWO to weed out any form of mutiny or retaliation?*

Whether it was real or not, this was over. They were cut off from any sort of escape, and Ryu’s friends were in danger, and it was all his fault.

He would be the one to end it. Right here and now.

CHAPTER 21

Hiro stood in front of his entourage with the look of a conqueror who'd just witnessed a major victory. He bore a huge grin at the shock and terror on the faces of Ryu, Turbo, and Angela.

"So, it seems you guys were trying to leave," said Hiro, crossing his arms and tapping his foot on the ground. "But... I don't understand why... It's so fun here, and we've provided for you this whole time, have we not?"

Hiro spoke with pure arrogance and amusement. These three weren't stupid enough not to realize they were at their end, but Hiro wasn't going to let such an opportunity go to waste. He had an audience and he was on the main stage. He was ready to act out his lines as if he was the main character in a Shakespeare play. He continued antagonizing the group with every word he spoke, taking mental jabs at their already weak mindset.

"Before we move to end your pathetic lives, I will grant you your last words. But please, make sure they are meaningful because I won't give you a second chance."

Hiro finished his dialogue and crossed his arms. He looked at his side and noticed the Torch with a lit cigarette in his hand, looking eager for the moment when he would be able to light them on fire. The guards stood with their weapons pointed and at the ready. Once Hiro gave the signal, they would fire immediately without remorse. Everyone was in a state of suspense.

"Hiro," said Ryu as he stepped in front of Turbo and Angela.

"No, Ryu—" started Angela.

"Wait," Turbo said to Angela, as he put his hand on her shoulder to stop her from moving forward.

"Listen to me, Hiro," said Ryu as he moved closer to Hiro, unafraid.

Hiro was a little surprised at this. *Maybe he's more of a fool than I thought.* He raised his hand and pointed at Ryu. "Do you know how much I despise you?" He snarled. "I have waited a long time for this moment, an opportunity where I can finally crush your feeble body with my own hands. All I needed was an excuse, and finally, it's here. Ironically it's all thanks to you." He snickered and took a step towards him. "You have no idea what I've had to endure, watching your every movement, like some kind of watchdog. I had better things to do with my time, but I was told time and time again to keep an eye on you."

A crease of confusion touched Ryu's forehead. "What are you talking about?" he said.

"YOU ARE THE REASON AS TO WHY I AM NOT YET WORTHY!"

Hiro shouted as he lunged himself at Ryu, striking his face immediately with his fist.

Ryu's head shook like a punching bag being hit in slow motion. He was clearly caught off guard or possibly didn't care to even attempt a block at this point. As he fell to the ground, Angela shouted his name again, but Turbo held her in place. His eyes flickered to the Torch, he was looking dead at them, and to the guards, who stood there ready for the order to shoot.

Hiro continued his assault on Ryu. "YOU—MADE—ME—WASTE—PRECIOUS—TIME," he shouted, punching Ryu again after every word. Hitting him specifically in areas he knew were still sore from his previous wounds.

After the initial barrage, Hiro paused for a short moment as to antagonize Ryu, Ryu looked up at him gasping, with blood dribbling from his nose. His unsteady, weak legs nearly gave out underneath him.

"Hiro...I...want...to...save...you..." said Ryu struggling to get the words out. He spat out blood from his mouth as he remained poised and defiant

Hiro laughed and released a final blow, knocking Ryu back towards the wall. Ryu's body slammed into it, and he slid down onto his knees.

"Save me?" Hiro scoffed. "I don't need *saving*, you fool. You're the one who needs saving, but we're a bit past that point, I'm afraid."

* * *

Ryu looked for a brief second at Angela, who was still crying out his

name. He looked at Turbo, who was also tearing up as he held onto Angela.

Ryu's clothing was torn and tatted from the blood seeping out of his mouth and his nose. His eyes were swollen, and he felt a sharp pain coming from a gash on the back of his head. His condition was worsening, and his breathing was more and more painful after every breath. But he gritted his teeth and mustered enough energy to get back onto his feet and look towards Hiro.

He didn't want to give up yet—he wouldn't—but he was too weak to fight anymore. All he had left was his voice.

"Hiro, I don't know what this pain is that I've caused you, but I apologize," he said as he wiped the blood coming down his cheek. "It doesn't matter to me anymore whether you beat me to my last breath and I die here, but I want to tell you that I do not regret anything I have done thus far. The GWO is not what you think. If you think you're safe from them because you're better than everyone else, you're wrong. They're planning to kill all of us off—and they'll kill you, too."

"NONSENSE!" shouted Hiro as he kicked Ryu in the face.

Ryu fell to the ground again but somehow endured the strike and once again, after a few struggling moments, got back on his feet.

"I didn't expect you to believe me," he said. "You'll learn the hard way someday. But I am willing to give my life for everyone here, as long as you see that they are taken care of."

"SHUT UP!" shouted Hiro, punching Ryu again.

Ryu's head was knocked back as Hiro's fist released its force on his face. His legs were locked in place and trembled from the pain,

but Ryu continued to stand. He was giving it his all. He had to convince him!

"No matter how evil you think you are, no matter how ruthless you have treated me and my friends, you are still the same as us," shouted Ryu.

His face must've been swelling from all the punches, because he could barely see Hiro out of one eye, and his other was forcefully closed.

"I made a promise and I am going to keep it," he said, forcefully. "I made a promise to save everyone, even if it's you, Hiro, even if you're my worst enemy. You still deserve to be saved."

"I SAID SHUT UP," shouted Hiro, but there was a waver in his voice now, and a spark in his eyes almost like fear.

It was working. Ryu's words were slowing him down. Hiro's small brain couldn't comprehend why Ryu would worry about him, and that confusion was eating at his insides.

"HIRO," the Torch suddenly shouted, stepping closer to them. "Control yourself, we have our orders."

Just then the area was illuminated with multiple spotlights coming from above them. The rumbling sound of an aircraft filled the air. The ground shook and even the walls trembled a bit. Ryu looked up and was immediately blinded by the light.

But before he could make out what it was, his body lost its will to stand, and he buckled at his knees. With everyone distracted by the light and the rumbling, Angela finally pulled away from Turbo's grip and ran to him. She caught his arms just in time to stop Ryu from face planting onto the ground. She used all her strength to keep him on his feet.

“What is it?” mumbled Ryu, trying to look up again, but it was too bright.

“There’s an aircraft,” Angela said, with awe in her voice. “There are droids coming down from it. I think it’s the Resistance.”

Relief flooded every inch of Ryu. This meant that the letter was real. The Resistance was coming to help them escape.

“FIRE!” a voice suddenly shouted. It was the Torch, and he was pointing at Ryu. “KILL THEM!”

It happened so fast.

Ryu looked toward the guards, who aimed their rifles at him and Angela, who was holding him. He tried to speak, tried to shout, tried to move, but he was too weak. In that moment he felt Angela’s arms grasp him harder, and her body pressing against his like a shield. Ryu’s face turned to fear as he realized what she was doing, but it was too late. She let out a gasp of air as the bullets submerged themselves into Angela’s back. Ryu felt her body twitch as each bullet hit.

“NOOOOOOOO!” he shouted louder than the noise of the aircraft. His head and posture turned stiff.

Hiro became unfrozen again and retreated a bit to face the droids that were pouring down on them.

It all came flashing back to Ryu—every moment he’d spent with Angela in this place. Their first day of training together. Her teasing. Her tears after she had to give him those lashes. Her fierceness. Her laughter. The way her touch had made his skin feel like it was on fire.

Angela’s body buckled and fell limp in Ryu’s embrace. Ryu looked down at her as her body nestled itself into his arms. His eyes



began to water, and his heart began to beat with extreme pain.

“WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY? WHY?” he shouted louder and louder after every word. “SHE WAS INNOCENT. SHE WAS PURE. SHE WAS GOOD.”

As Ryu spoke an aura began to form itself around him. He was raging uncontrollably and the lights all over the facility and around them began to flicker. The ground started to shake beyond the rumble that was caused by the aircraft.

* * *

Turbo was a bit away to Ryu’s right side, his eyes wide in fear, struggling to cover his face from the debris that was being tossed around by Ryu’s aura. He was trying to get to him and tell him to stop.

“YOU KILLED HER, YOU KILLED HER, YOU KILLED HER!” Ryu shouted with more and more rage.

The statues around them broke from their pedestals as the ground continued to shake. Hiro and the Torch were being pushed

back by the constant barrage of droids that came at them, one after another. The aircraft was getting closer to the ground. A hoist fell to the ground and Turbo looked up to see a girl, who was trying to get his attention.

“YOU HAVE TO STOP HIM!” she shouted as she spun uncontrollably, holding onto the ladder.

“I CAN’T REACH HIM,” replied Turbo.

* * *

Ryu continued his spiral out of control, unaware of everything else. His body was fully consumed by the hatred he felt inside his heart. Angela was still in his arms, motionless. She was still dead...gone...all because of him.

His aura got even brighter, making the wind and rubble fly even fast around him. As tears started to fall down his cheeks, he felt a hand touch his face.

“Ryu...” said a voice in a soft tone. “Ryu...please...stop.”

There was pureness in that touch, and it jolted Ryu into awareness. His aura began to diminish, and he regained consciousness. He grabbed the hand that held his face and felt Angela’s presence.

“Angela,” he said through his tears. “You’re still alive!”

“Ryu...” She started to speak but coughed, spitting out blood.

“Angela, please don’t talk,” he said. “We have to get you to a doctor, so they can save you.”

“No, there isn’t any time,” she replied as she looked into Ryu’s eyes.

“No.” Ryu shook his head desperately. “We can still save you—”

"You already saved me, idiot," she said softly. "You saved me a long time ago, and I am grateful for that," she continued as Ryu cried profusely. "When I was a little girl I used to dream about what it felt like to be in love, and who the person I would fall in love with would be. I'm glad I got to know the answer. And it's all thanks to you, Ryu."

"No, Angela, don't say those things," replied Ryu. "We can still be together, don't give up on me!" he shouted as tears continued down his face. Angela's hand moved around Ryu's face, tracing his silhouette.

"I can't see your face anymore, Ryu," Angela said, her voice breaking. "I'm fading in and out, so please allow me to give you your gift." Even in her last moments, she wanted to fulfill her promise to Ryu. She reached with both hands, barely able to lift her fingers, and attempted to pull herself towards Ryu. Ryu, having understood her intentions, met her halfway.

She pulled at him and pressed her lips against his. She kissed him with emotion. And he kissed her back just as fiercely, trying to convey all the feelings he'd never said in that kiss, the only kiss they'd ever have.

When she pulled away, there was a peaceful smile on her face.

"Ryu, do not let this destroy you. I want you to live your life for me and those who are yet to pierce your heart. Please, Ryu... you must live on and save..."

Angela didn't finish. Her last breath left her, and her head rolled limply to the side. She had passed away and her body turned cold and heavy in Ryu's arms.

"No," he said, his tears trickling onto her face. "No—!" his

hands and body shaking

He started to shout the word, as his rage built again, but something pressed against the side of his neck, and then everything went dark.

* * *

Airi had managed to make her way to his side as he held the dying girl, and she had planted a device on his neck that, with a stroke of the device on her wrist, knocked him unconscious.

Airi then looked towards the other boy. “What’s your name?” she asked.

“Turbo,” he said, staring at her in slight astonishment.

“Turbo, help me. We need to get out of here.” She was aware of the type of technology the GWO had and how it could threaten her droids, which meant they could risk everything if they did not move with purpose. Turbo nodded back, still somewhat in shock, and assisted her in hoisting the unconscious boy and the girl’s body onto the aircraft, which took off once everyone had boarded safely. Its destination was the Resistance home base in Japan.

CHAPTER 22

A week had passed since the events that took place outside of the academy. Ryu was recovering from both the physical and mental breakdown he'd incurred at the hands of the GWO. He was being held in a facility that was deep underground in an undisclosed location somewhere in Japan. His recovery was being monitored by Professor Jacob Penski, a scientist and trusted friend of Sam Kendo, Ryu's dad. Turbo was told that Ryu's body was undergoing muscular and tissue regeneration, something that seemed impossible to him based on what he knew of the world through the GWO. Professor Penski explained to Turbo that technology had been greatly obscured by the GWO, kept secret from those who were destined to die, teens like Turbo and Ryu. He explained that technology was far more advanced than Turbo was aware.

As Ryu lay in his regeneration capsule, the Professor asked Turbo to follow him. He wanted to share with him an example of what he meant. "You see this machine here, my boy," he said to Turbo as he adjusted his glasses. "This is a Mind-Meld 3000. This is state of the art stuff. Allow me to explain. You see Airi over here?" He reached to grab Airi and move her to his side. "This poor girl didn't know what was right from left—"

"Shut up, professor!" cried Airi, her cheeks turning pink. Apparently, she knew where the Professor was going and didn't like it one bit, which made Turbo even more curious.

"As I was saying, she was not what you see today," the Professor continued, waving her protest away. "In fact, the total opposite. Airi had no clue about self-defense or warfare training. No, she was more concerned about being a good citizen and living a normal life. But in this age, that is a no go. In this new world of ours, you either die or survive. Therefore, with my vast knowledge of technology as well as my caring demeanor, I was compelled to help this defenseless soul into becoming a weapon of mass destruction, so to speak."

"Can you just get to the point, Professor? Sheesh, I swear, this isn't a soap opera or anything," said Airi, impatiently.

"All right, all right, I'm getting there. You, young man." The Professor pointed to Turbo. "Grab that gun-looking thing and fire a round at Airi."

Turbo blinked at him in astonishment. "W-what? I can't do that—you want me to shoot her?"

"Pick up the damn gun, you loser," replied Airi with an eye roll, moving so she stood about 5 yards away from Turbo.

“Look, son, this isn’t going to work if you don’t trust what we’re telling you,” said the Professor. “Just pick up the gun and shoot her!”

Turbo hesitated for a moment, thinking these guys were crazy at best. But he knew somehow that they weren’t going to stop insisting.

“Ok, I’ll do it, but you asked me to,” he said as he grabbed the gun.

He lifted it and pointed it at Airi, who had an eerily calm look to her. She was standing there in front of Turbo, looking bored, but eager to get this over with.

“Ok, SHOOT!” shouted the Professor.

Turbo jumped a bit as the Professor shouted, and immediately squeezed the trigger, which gave out a loud bang.

Swoosh!

The bullet left the chamber and flew toward its target, but its target was no longer in sight. Turbo looked around in confusion. Somehow, in an instant, Airi had managed to move with enough speed to dodge the bullet and get behind Turbo. She tapped his shoulder softly, just enough to get his attention. Turbo, still holding the gun pointed in the direction he’d shot in, stared at her.

“How the hell?” he asked.

Airi walked over to position herself by the Professor’s side once again, crossing her arms. “Now do you believe?” she muttered to Turbo with her eyes closed.

Turbo certainly couldn’t deny what he’d seen. He lowered his hand, shaking his head, and put the gun back on the table.

“You see,” the Professor said, smiling brightly, “that machine that I spoke about earlier, that masterpiece of mine, it connects

with your mind via a mind-meld session. Once connected, I can upload any form of training to the mind, kind of like uploading something to a hard drive. In Airi's case, I have uploaded countless amounts of hand-to-hand combat training. Which her brain then absorbs and learns instantly. Very similar to reading a book or joining a martial arts school, except here with this technology, such skills can be learned in moments."

"Wow, I never knew that we had reached such levels, this is AMAZING," said Turbo as he wondered in anticipation if he would eventually mind-meld as well.

"Tell him the other stuff, Professor," said Airi.

Some of the excitement in the Professor's eyes faltered a little at her forceful words.

"All right, all right." He hesitated, just for a moment. "There is a bit of a drawback, you see. You can only mind-meld for a few minutes a session. This is due to the side effects of the mind-meld, which can cause brain deterioration if you mind-meld beyond the limits of your brain. Therefore, we have to complete multiple sessions before you are able to learn the data needed to successfully prepare yourself for active duty."

"Oh, I see," said Turbo, his own face falling. "Even with this technology as advanced as it is, there are still limits. I guess it makes sense." He moved to scratch his head, now feeling somewhat reluctant to give the mind-meld a try.

"Professor, Professor!" said a person as they ran into the room.

"Yes, Benjamin?" replied Professor Penski.

"The subject, 101, his vitals have spiked, I think he's about to wake up." said the young, vibrant sap whom Turbo had learned was

known as the nerd around these parts.

“Ah, that’s good news. Let’s go see how our new guest is doing.”

The Professor exited the area on his way to go see Ryu and ascertain his condition. Turbo and Airi trailed behind him, Turbo eager for his friend to wake up, Airi looking like curious in spite of herself.

As Turbo followed the Professor into the room, he noticed Ryu struggling with his eyes closed.

“No, please...listen, I want...to save you...” Ryu murmured in his sleep, clearly having a bad dream.

“Hmm, the poor boy is remembering the last moments before that girl died in his arms,” said the Professor, as he looked onto a screen that showed Ryu’s brain waves and vitals. “Well, it can’t be helped, we need to wake him fully, so he doesn’t hurt himself. Ben, jolt him a bit, I’m sure that will help him regain full consciousness.”

“Right away, Professor,” replied Ben, as he pushed some buttons on the screen.

Ryu’s body received a slight jolt of electricity, which made his hands and legs twitch in response. But when it ended, he was still slumbering. “What are you doing to him?” asked Turbo, frowning with concern as he stepped closer to the terminal in front of him.

The Professor, who was fixated on Ben’s actions, unwittingly ignored Turbo’s question. “Try again, but a bit higher,” he said.

“No, WAIT!” said Turbo, growing a bit more panicked now.

Airi, who was close behind him, stepped in and held him by his shoulder. Turbo turned slightly in response. “Trust the Professor, he knows what he’s doing,” she said.

Turbo looked at her face, trying to read beyond her expression

for a positive sign in the hopes that it would help put him at ease. Airi stared back with a resolute look, no signs of worry in her demeanor. He gulped a bit as he made the decision in his mind to not interfere. *What else can I do?* he thought as he turned his attention back to Ryu.

Ben nodded and increased the output from five to ten jolts.

Ryu's body twitched again, more of a fierce tremor this time; his feet and fingers stretched out as the energy coursed through his body. Ryu gasped for air, opening his eyes.

"ANGELA!" he shouted loud and with emotion

Turbo looked on in panic and worry as Ryu tried to break free from the straps that held him down on the regeneration table.

"You, umm, what's your name again?" said the Professor, turning to him.

"It's Turbo, the name's Turbo," he replied.

"Yes, sorry, Turbo... umm, can you please let him know everything is ok? We cannot afford to have him hurt himself again after all of the regeneration he has gone through."

Before making his way inside the chamber, Turbo paused and looked at Ryu, who was shaking in his restraints. He knew that for him, it had been days since Angela's death; he'd had plenty of time to grieve, and realize his guilt, and accept what happened. But Ryu, on the other hand, had been asleep this whole time, possibly even going through that same moment over and over in his mind up until he awoke just now. *What can I possibly tell him?* Turbo clenched his fists and stood straight. Maybe his faith could help him find an answer. *I apologize ahead of time, Angela,* he said inside his mind. *I know it's cowardly of me to even ask for your help, but please give*

me the courage and knowledge to find the words to say to him.

Turbo took a deep breath, nodded at the Professor, and moved to the sliding glass door, which led to Ryu's chamber. He was nervous now, still unsure what he would say to Ryu, but he agreed with the Professor that he alone had to be the person to try to calm down his friend after the terrible moments they had endured together. The glass door opened, and Turbo stepped inside. He positioned himself next to his struggling friend.

"Hey, Ryu...it's me, Turbo," he said quickly but trying to stay calm, as he leaned over Ryu's body. "Look I'm here, man, everything is ok."

When he spoke, Ryu stopped struggling immediately. He looked to his left and his face lit up with relief and joy.

"Turbo! Is it really you? You're alive? You're ok?"

"Yeah, it's me, I'm fine," Turbo said with a smile. He thought to himself in that very moment, *Man, this guy is really something. First thing he does when he wakes up is worry about me? I don't deserve such a friend. Not after I let him down.*

"Oh my god, I thought the worst. I'm so glad you made it, honestly, I am really happy you did," said Ryu. But then he turned his head away from Turbo, looking to his right, and his face fell again. "But, if you're here, then that means...Angela..." He paused, swallowing hard as a single tear trickled from his left eye. "That means...that...she really did die, didn't she?"

Turbo was having difficulty finding the right words to say. He closed his eyes for a second as he gathered the courage to reply.

"Angela didn't make it," he said, softly. "I'm sorry, man, she got away from me. It's my fault." He looked down with shame and

guilt, his eyes watering.

After a beat, Ryu spoke again. “No, it’s not your fault, Turbo. She did what she did in order to save my life. When I first met her, I never cared for my life and honestly didn’t think anyone else would either. But as time passed, I began to understand that all of us have some kind of purpose in this life. As hopeless as it may seem, I was able to understand this through the brief moments I spent with Angela and even you. It’s kinda hard to explain, but I think that Angela sacrificed herself so that I could find my purpose. So, in the end, I don’t want you to blame yourself for her death. If anyone is to blame, it’s me,” Ryu said, in a broken voice. “And I alone have to atone for it.”

“But, Ryu, I...”

“That’s enough already. Please stop, honestly, please let it be,” he said as he turned his head in the opposite direction, which Turbo understood to mean he wanted to change the subject.

“Ok, I understand,” replied Turbo, lowering his eyes again.

After another moment, Ryu sighed and looked around the room, taking it in for the first time.

“I guess it’s safe to say that we’re no longer at the academy?” he asked.

Turbo let out a slight chuckle. “Umm, yep, you are correct. We’re in the main headquarters of the Resistance.”

“Right!” said Ryu as he clenched his fist. “Get me out of this capsule, or whatever it is. I have to meet this Penski guy my dad told me about in his letter.”

Turbo looked at Ryu as he tried to get out of his restraints. He was content that his friend was in good spirits despite the loss of

their friend. He turned towards the glass window, which separated the others from him and Ryu, and motioned for someone to come and assist them.

* * *

“Ryu, my boy,” a voice said over an intercom, and Ryu jumped a little, looking around for the source. “This is Professor Penski. I know you have a lot of questions, but for now, please allow our assistant to see you to the chair we have provided.”

As the voice spoke, a sliding door in the chamber opened, and an automatic wheelchair rolled out, stopping beside Ryu’s capsule.

“This is a chair specifically designed to assist you in getting back onto your feet after a regeneration process has finished,” the voice continued.

Ryu looked around, squinting through the dark glass, anxious for a glimpse of the Professor. He looked to Turbo, who said, “That’s Penski, yeah, you’ll see him in a minute. Let’s get you out of here, okay?”

Ryu nodded back, and the restraints immediately unstrapped themselves from his arms and legs. The table positioned itself automatically and released Ryu onto the chair, which had transformed itself in order to attach to the table and make the transfer effortless.

Once Ryu was safely in the chair, it transformed back and away from the table. It moved towards the glass doors, which were opening. Turbo followed behind. Beyond the glass doors, Ryu spotted the team that called themselves the Resistance. He looked at them as they stared back in awe.

“Welcome to the Resistance, Ryu,” said the Professor, with a warm smile. “We have much to discuss. Let’s move to a more accommodating room though, shall we? I’m sure you’re hungry.”

“I am, thank you,” said Ryu.

The Professor motioned for Ryu and Turbo to follow as he exited the area. As Ryu followed, he marveled at this new place, and at all that had happened to him in the last week. Hiro’s face fell into his head, and anger simmered inside him.

This was his first step to getting back at the man who’d killed his friend. His loved one. He wanted revenge for what the GWO did to him. Nothing would get in his way.

I will make them pay. Every single one of them.

CHAPTER 23

The Professor led them to a room that looked like a typical conference room. He motioned to everyone to take a seat at the giant oval table in the center, which was covered with screens. The Professor demonstrated how the room functioned by standing next to the table, which triggered a process in which a chair appeared below him. It had sprung out from the floor, initially as a pole, and then transformed into a seat for the Professor to sit on. Both the girl and the boy who were with him followed his lead and sat beside the Professor. Turbo went next, standing next to the table and then dropping into the chair as it sprung up below him, catching him effortlessly.

“I could get used to this,” he said with a grin as he put his feet on the table.

Ryu, on the other hand, was wheeled automatically by the chair and placed at Turbo's side.

"Wow, you have your father's spitting image," Professor Penski said as he adjusted his glasses and looked at him, across the table. "Ehem." He cleared his throat. "I don't believe I've formally introduced myself. My name is Jacob Penski, and I am a scientist here with the Resistance. I am the person your father and mother entrusted with the letter you were given by Airi."

"You knew my parents?" asked Ryu immediately, shifting in his chair a little to face the Professor better, though he was a bit sore. "Where are they? Are they here, with you guys? Please tell me."

"Ryu, please, you must try to remain calm," said the Professor gently. "I will answer all your questions, but please try to restrain yourself. You are still healing."

Ryu ground his teeth together in impatience but nodded.

"It is true, I did know your parents well. We were colleagues working as scientists for the government a long time ago. We were researching asteroids and their effects on the Earth. We were on the brink of discovering a new form of energy, one that was pure and had no negative effects on the planet. We were at a point where we had learned how to harness it and were ready to introduce it to the world, but we quickly found out the governments of the Earth had other plans. Disagreements and ongoing escalations increased to a point where the planet was consumed in total warfare. Your father, being the person that he was, entrusted me with the letter and some items concealed in a box that you will be given shortly." The Professor paused and sighed. "But to answer the question you really want to know,

whether your parents are here or alive... They are not, I'm afraid. I am truly sorry, but they have been dead for some time now. General Gohan, whom I'm sure you already know, is the person who killed them."

Ryu had known this was the likeliest reality. He had known, so he hadn't gotten his hopes very high, but still, the anger and fury poured out of him. It was like he was right back in Mr. Alita's living room; the day he'd been given the news his parents weren't coming back.

"But *why*?" he shouted, trying to hold back the tears threatening to swarm his eyes. "WHY WERE MY PARENTS KILLED?"

"Please, Ryu, let me explain," replied the Professor, as he motioned Ryu to calm down with his hands. "As the letter stated, your father and mother were working alongside us. He and your mother had decided that the only way we could destroy the GWO was to infiltrate it from within and attempt a sort of coup. They infiltrated the GWO as spies so that they could report back to us crucial information, which we could use to counter their advances.

"During their espionage, they discovered the GWO's main goal—to repopulate the Earth with a single bloodline, one that would mean the end to everyone else. It was a plan that would end in mass murder for all individuals. Once they relayed this information, they knew they had to act quickly because the GWO was forcing them to create a test subject, a prototype with this new bloodline so that they could test its capabilities. But then shortly after the communication between myself and your parents stopped, their last message was the exact words you read in that letter. They were discovered as spies by the General, and...you

know how the General is...so we understood that to mean they were no longer with us."

Ryu was barely listening because he'd heard most of this before. But he focused on those last few words. He was aware of the General's ruthlessness and knew that there was very little chance that his parents could still be alive. Even so, he felt he had to ask.

"But, you said they stopped communicating, correct? So, that means...they *could* still be alive, right? We don't know for sure that they're dead."

"Ryu, my boy, if that were the case, don't you think you would have heard something by now? Your parents would have found a way to communicate back to us and relay their status, but that hasn't happened in seven years!"

Ryu sighed. He knew the Professor was probably right. If his father had sent that letter, it was because there was nothing else he could do to save themselves and return to their son safely.

"I'm sure you'll have more questions as we go on, and I am happy to answer them," said the Professor. "But I also want to introduce you to the other members of the Resistance. These individuals played a big role in determining your existence as well as planning your escape."

Ryu looked up at the two strangers on the other side of the table, the girl, and the boy. He scratched his head softly. *Surely*, he thought, *there are more than just these guys?*

"I'm sure you remember Airi," said the Professor, gesturing to the girl.

"Professor, he was unconscious on the floor when I jumped

out of the CBE,” said Airi, in frustration. “God, must I remind you of every single detail?”

“Ah yes, you’re correct, well, then I guess you haven’t met,” said the Professor with a chuckle. “Anyways, this is Airi Makita. She is our training officer and head of our droid guard. She has a tendency to be a bit of a hot head, but she means well.”

“PROFESSOR!” shouted Airi, glaring at him.

As the Professor and Airi spat between each other, Ryu looked at her and remembered the voice he’d heard behind the glass of the CBE before it attacked him. He hadn’t seen her face, but he could already tell what the Professor meant when he said she was a bit of a hot head. She was very direct in her speech and spoke bluntly, like a guy trapped in a girl’s body, or like a tomboy. She looked pretty young, with short hair and a fit body. Having finished their argument, Airi crossed her arms and sat in silence.

The Professor smiled at Ryu and Turbo. “Sorry about that, but yes, let’s continue... On my left here, you have our brains of the operation, our neighborhood hacker, and technology expert, Mr. Benjamin Sora.”

Benjamin leaned out of his chair and extended his arm to greet Ryu with a handshake. His eyes were wide with glee, like a fan meeting their role model.

“Mr. Kendo, I am *super* honored to finally meet you, sir!” he shouted excitedly.

Ryu didn’t understand his reaction, exactly, but he leaned forward a bit and grasped Ben’s hand. They shook, and Ben shook back with more excitement.

“You have no idea what this means to me,” said Ben. “I’ve

waited for this moment for so long.”

“Dude, stop it already, you’re making me nauseous,” said an unamused Airi.

“I’m not sure why you’re so overworked, Ben, but I’m honestly no one you should admire,” replied Ryu with a light laugh, as he let go of Ben’s hand.

“Incorrect,” said Ben immediately. “I’m sorry, but I disagree. I’ve been watching you closely since right after Airi discovered you. And I’ve gotta say, you don’t disappoint, man, you’ve got some mad skills!”

“Watching me?” Ryu frowned. “How? When?”

“Well, we have some cool toys. You’ve seen the droids, which are nice and all, but they are a bit boring if you ask me.”

“Watch your MOUTH moron,” snapped Airi.

“Sorry, I’m just stating facts here. I’ve got these small insect-like robots that I can use to spy on people, and they look like the real thing so you’re never aware of their presence.”

“Spy on people?” repeated Ryu.

“Well, yeah, not necessarily for no reason, but mostly for intelligence gathering. Like the time when you and that girl were in her...” started Ben, but the Professor cut him off before he could finish his sentence.

“Um, never mind that.” The Professor cleared his throat. “As you can see, we’re more than capable at handling our own against the GWO. And now that we have you here, we can continue with our plans, just as your father wanted.”

Ryu looked at Turbo and then back to the three people sitting in front of him. He’d always thought the Resistance had more

members, but after hearing the Professor's explanation he scratched his head once again.

"So, let me get this straight, you guys ARE the Resistance?" he asked. "The three of you? Like, in other words, there is no one else?"

"Well not necessarily..." replied the Professor. "We are the MAIN group that sees to the day to day operations, but the Resistance is comprised of everyone who is not part of the GWO, you see. There are countless others out there who need our help and are also in danger of being murdered if the GWO's plans continue unanswered. That is why many have come and gone. We might be few in numbers, but we make up for it with our technology. We owe this continued struggle to those who have fallen, like your father, your mother, and your friend. We cannot forget them and do nothing. So you see, Ryu, we have gone to great lengths to find you and get you here so that we could count on you to help us. I hope you can understand that. My only question for you and my last one is..."

The Professor looked directly at Ryu, with seriousness and fervor. "Will you help us?"

Ryu wanted to respond immediately but held back a bit. He wasn't sure if he could offer any help in his condition. He agreed with the Professor in every way...but still, something didn't feel right.

Angela's final words came back to him, then: *"I want you to live your life for me and those who are yet to pierce your heart. Please, Ryu...you must live on and save..."*

His throat grew thick at the memory. He swallowed hard. *That's right*, he reminded himself. *This isn't about me at all, it's*

about everyone else. I won't let your death be in vain, Angela.

Clenching his hands into fists at his sides, he stood up out of his chair with intensity, neglecting the after-effects of the regeneration. He stood there firm and resolute and looked at the others with determination.

"Then let's get started," said Ryu.

"Hell yeah!" responded Turbo, pumping his fist in the air.

The Professor stood up, too, beaming at Ryu and clapping his hands. Ben looked overjoyed, too, while Airi looked on with a bland face and a meager smirk.

"The next step is to get you fit for a mind-meld session, Ryu," said the Professor, swiftly. "I will explain what that means in a moment. Airi will be your personal trainer, going forward. Come, we have work to do. The fate of humanity is in our hands."

CHAPTER 24

It was day 14, two weeks since both Turbo and Ryu had been rescued from the GWO. For Airi, it was another day of training them to become fierce Resistance soldiers and analyzing them for the mind-meld sessions they would soon undergo. She knew she was the best person for the task, because of her vast combat knowledge and her battle experience. She was also a bit manlier than Benjamin when it came to rearing new blood both physically and mentally. She felt as if she'd been born for this and took pleasure in dealing pain to those who wanted to prove themselves.

Still, thus far she was a bit aggravated by her new training subjects. This was mostly due to the fact that they were both men. Men had disappointed her all her life, in the way so many had treated her as little more than property, or a pleasure tool. They'd underestimated her all her life, too. The Professor had been the

first to see her for the fierce fighter she was.

She was doing this job for him, so she was determined to see it through. But she could only handle so many hours of training these fools. She'd decided she would train Ryu herself, but she'd let her droids oversee Turbo's progression.

"You, the tall lanky-looking one," she said, pointing at Turbo.

"What? Who are you calling lanky?" replied Turbo with an angered look.

"Shut up, I didn't ask you to respond," she replied. "Anyways, you will follow those droids there, that's CB12 and CB14. Combat bots. They will see to your training. They have been programmed by myself. If you fail, they will report to me and you do not want that."

"You're telling me these machines can teach me something?" said Turbo, looking skeptical.

Airi rolled her eyes. "You moron. They know over 300 different styles of hand-to-hand combat, including all aspects of martial arts, and they can wield any weapon known to man. Not only can they teach you everything there is to know about survival, but they can also kill you if you piss them off."

"Ok, ok, whatever," said Turbo as he hunched his shoulders.

Airi motioned to the droids, which they understood as the order to move forward. The droids turned to Turbo and spoke to him in a regular voice, which made Turbo jerk back in surprise.

"Follow us, sir. We will conduct our training in Hollow Room 13," said CB12.

"Huh...? You can talk?" said Turbo in an awkward tone.

"Yes, sir, we can speak just like yourself, this is something we

have been programmed with in order to communicate with humans clearly,” replied CB14.

Airi almost laughed at the look on Turbo’s face as the droids led him away. Then, turning on her heel, she made her way to Hollow Room 10, where she’d sent Ryu to wait for her.

* * *

Ryu was sitting against the wall thumbing his fingers. He was thinking about everything that had come to pass ever since he’d read his father’s letter. Escaping the academy, losing Angela, coming here and learning so much about the realities of this world he lived in, and the likelihood his parents were really not coming back. It was a lot of change in such a short expanse of time, but these past few days of recovering and slowly easing into his new training had helped. The pain was more of an ache now. Ryu felt as if he was pieced back together for the first time, like a new vehicle making its way off of the assembly line.

To keep the memories of his loss at bay, all his focus was pinned on his next steps: training as hard as his body would allow, learning everything about the technology the Resistance possessed and then using it to get back at Hiro and the GWO for all the blood they had spilled. *I will not fail. I will become better than everyone, and I will have my revenge*, he promised himself as he clenched his fist.

“Don’t think about it too much,” said a voice, startling him. He looked up to see Airi standing in the doorway.

“You’ll go crazy trying to process it all,” she said. “Just focus on our training and try to use this as a form of therapy, if you will. It

will go a lot easier if your mind is clear.”

“Ok, I will try,” replied Ryu as he stood up.

“Ok good, so I’ll start by letting you know about the outfit you are wearing and how it works in this environment. You have been fitted with an exosuit that has been made for you. This exosuit works alongside this Hollow room, which enables you to imagine any type of weapon you want to wield and use it during our training.”

“An exosuit?” asked Ryu.

“Yes, that’s what I said, pay attention!” replied Airi with frustration. “Anyways, Benjamin is up there in the control center. He will be creating the environment in which we will train. In this environment, everything will look real, but in reality, it is an image created by the Hollow program. You cannot die here but you CAN be injured, so be aware of that, rookie.”

Ryu glanced down at his suit and looked it over, exploring every aspect of it while Airi continued explaining the session. He was both excited and nervous at the prospect of this training session, especially now that he knew he could get hurt. He knew that Airi probably thought of him as more of a task than an individual since she kept referring to him and Turbo as rookies, but he disagreed with her. *I’m more capable than you realize.* His plan was to prove himself and move beyond this Hollow room and into actual combat as soon as possible, so he could face Hiro once again.

Airi motioned to Benjamin to start the drill, and immediately the giant room shifted from what looked like an empty giant metal frame to an open area somewhere outside, bare and desolate. A grey sky stretched above them.

“Ok, so as I explained earlier,” shouted Airi, standing at a distance from Ryu, “don’t overwhelm yourself, and take it easy. I want to test your self-defense mechanisms first.”

She initialized her suit, which in turn covered her face with something that resembled an aerodynamic helmet. She spread her arms out somewhat, which initialized two pistols, one in each hand. Her waist initialized right after, and a belt with ammo appeared instantly.

Ryu stood in awe of Airi’s transformation. He was amazed at how real everything looked. But now it was his turn to deploy something to confront Airi. He remembered what Airi had told him before—he just had to imagine what he wanted, and his suit would respond to his command. He closed his eyes, thinking that it would probably be easier that way, but he was disrupted by the sound of guns firing.

“There isn’t any time to waste in real combat,” shouted Airi as she launched a barrage of bullets at him.

Ryu wrenched his eyes open and responded just in time to avoid the bullets. He dodged to his left and felt a slight gash on his



right arm. A single bullet had brazed his skin as he moved. He looked up and saw Airi coming straight at him. *Don't hesitate, Ryu. Just move.* Narrowing his eyes, he initialized his suit and his head was covered in a similar fashion as Airi's.

Inside he could see a panel with readings on his heart rate, oxygen levels, and other vitals. Through his helmet visor, he could see Airi was closing in on him and moving with speed.

"C'mon, let me see what you're made of!" she shouted as she shot more bullets at Ryu.

"All right, I guess this is round two!" said Ryu, thinking of their first showdown back in the mountain facility that had ended in his near-death.

Ryu ran towards her, weaving side to side, dodging her forward slicing attack. He dropped to the ground as if he was sliding under a table and initialized a sword in his hand as he swept past by her.

"Ah, interesting, a katana," said Airi as she closed distance between them.

Ryu jumped up with both hands gripping his katana and let out an attack chant as he lunged himself at Airi, who was now within striking distance.

"HIYAAAAAH!" he yelled as he jumped in the air and lifted the katana.

"I can play that game too," replied Airi, who grinned and initialized a katana of her own, and sliced it upward through the air.

CLASH went both katanas as they met each other.

Ryu pushed back and Airi adjusted her stance to retaliate. Ryu's feet began to drag a bit backwards. *What the hell?* He hadn't

expected Airi to be this strong. They continued to strike at each other, attempting to find an opening to inflict damage. Ryu, sensing Airi getting the upper hand, decided to switch tactics. He initialized two giant robotic arms for increased strength, which attached to each arm like hydraulics, still gripping the katana, he continued pushing against Airi.

“I have you now!” Ryu shouted at Airi.

“I—don’t—think—so,” Airi said, but she struggled a bit when she blocked Ryu’s next swing.

Ryu pushed and felt Airi buckle a bit under his strength. *I’m not a rookie. I’ll show you*, he thought, gritting his teeth and pushing even harder.

Airi’s eyes were wide and her teeth clenched, too, as she continued her struggle. Beads of sweat trickled down her face behind her helmet. Any moment now, Ryu would overpower her, and it would be over.

But all of a sudden, Airi’s frightened look shifted to a smirk. She initialized her suit again, and a small metal ball appeared in her hand. An explosive.

With a yell of rage, she shoved Ryu away and dropped it. She moved in a flash, disappearing one moment and reappearing the next in the air behind Ryu. Then she initialized again, calling a giant rotating gun into her hands. She pulled the trigger and bullets began to rain towards Ryu.

This all happened in seconds. Ryu barely even processed what was happening until it was too late.

“Shit,” said Ryu.

BOOM went the explosive, which had started its short timer

the moment Airi dropped it.

A giant cloud of smoke erupted. The bullets continued their path and were swallowed in the smoke. Airi pulled her trigger again and again. The shell casings could be seen hitting the ground as they left the muzzle.

When the smoke began to clear, sparks were flying everywhere, but amazingly, Ryu was still on his feet. He had initialized a shield both behind him to absorb the blast as well as in front of him to shield him from the bullets.

“Very good!” shouted Airi as she continued to unload on Ryu.

Ryu held the initialized shield with both his hands and began to move forward. He was catching on, now. He moved faster with every step he took, repelling the bullets. Airi was still in the air, keeping herself up with a rocket pack. Her opponent was still on the ground and moving in her direction.

“Don’t underestimate me!” shouted Ryu as he held the shield about a yard away from Airi.

His confidence had skyrocketed due to his understanding of the limitations of this exercise. An idea sparked in his head, a way he could manipulate the situation. He initialized his suit and created a whip, which he immediately lashed at Airi with one hand while holding the shield with the other. Airi saw it coming, though, and shuffled with ease and re-adjusted her approach. Without a pause, Ryu initialized again, and a small device attached itself to Airi’s gun.

Beep... beep, beep, beep went the device, clearly an explosive.

Airi initialized and barely pushed herself away from the weapon. The blast shoved her to the ground, where Ryu was

waiting again to counter with another planned move. Ryu deployed an oil slick under Airi's feet as she hit the ground. Airi tried to adjust midway but was unable to—she hit the oil slick and lost her footing.

Ryu initialized again in sequence and deployed a grappling gun, which shot out a giant net. Airi, who was still trying to regain her footing, managed to initialize a response and deployed a defensive measure in the form of a flamethrower. She dropped to her knees and pulled the trigger, which released enough fire to burn the net completely. As the remnants of the net fell to the ground, she glanced down at herself, her eyes widening as she noticed she was covered in oil. As she realized Ryu's plan.

"You—" she started.

But a single piece of burning net made its way to the ground and touched the oil.

SHROOM went the flames as they engulfed Airi.

She was on fire and burning.

"AAAH!" she screamed as the flames began to dissolve her suit.

Swiftly, Ryu initialized again and deployed a giant water gun, which he used to douse the flames. When the gun shut off, she stood there drenched and in a state of shock. It didn't look like her skin had been burned, but Ryu had been too late to save the majority of her suit.

"Umm, are you ok?" asked Ryu, as the water gun disappeared from his hands.

"WHAT THE HELL!" Airi shouted as she looked at herself. She was semi-naked and dropped to her knees, attempting to cover her body from the peering eyes of both Ryu and Benjamin. "YOU SOB,

WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING?"

Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment and anger, and she turned her narrowed eyes in Ryu's direction, just as he stepped forward to hand her a blanket...

"Look, I'm sorry, I didn't know that this would happen," he said as he stepped away, fearing Airi would lash out at him.

Airi grabbed the blanket and wrapped it around her. Once she was fully covered, she glanced at Ryu again, still scowling. "Don't apologize," she said as she pointed her finger at Ryu in a defiant stance. "You outwitted me, and you should savor the moment because this will not happen again."

Ryu couldn't help smiling, a little. He understood her words to be true because of the manner in which she spoke. She didn't strike him as a girl who would waste time with trivial dialogue. She was always serious and to the point.

"So...how did I do?" he asked.

Airi put her hand down and lowered her gaze. It took her several moments to respond, and when she did so, it was reluctantly. "Ok, so yeah, you passed."

"Wow, really?" asked Ryu.

"Yes, and don't make me repeat myself," she snapped.

"Ah, yes, sorry, and thanks, you were pretty awesome yourself," said Ryu,

"How did you know?" asked Airi.

"Huh?"

"How did you know I would react like that? I mean, I felt like you were reading my thoughts, and you were prepared even before I made my next move..."

“Well, heh, I don’t know really, I guess it’s intuition.” Ryu uninitialized his helmet and ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve always been able to perceive stuff, so I’m kinda used to it by now. It’s like second nature to me.”

Airi looked at him intensely for a moment. Then she shook her head. “Well, I’ve never seen someone respond like you did, especially in their first session. You definitely outwitted me and made me pay for my decisions.”

“I guess I did,” said Ryu, grinning back.

“Go ahead and hit the showers. I’ll meet you back at the lounge area, I’m sure the Professor will want to debrief us on your progress.”

“Sure, and thanks again, Airi,” replied Ryu with a wave. He left the Hollow room with a spring in his step.

* * *

Once Ryu was gone, Airi picked herself off the floor, wrapped the blanket tighter around her, and made her way upstairs to the control center where Ben was analyzing the results. She walked in and asked, “What can you tell me about his brain activity?”

“Well, clearly, there is something going on,” Ben said, gesturing to the screens. “If you look here, at the initial part of the session his brain activity was normal in every way. He was a bit below your activity for the first few minutes, which I can understand because he was not yet able to understand the capabilities of the suit. But...if we fast forward a bit, towards the end, where you know, he caught you by surprise...”

“Spare me the geek garble and tell me, what did you see?” she

snapped.

“Yes, of course, well, his brain activity spiked beyond normal human levels right before he overwhelmed your defenses. It’s like you said...it’s like he knew your next move.”

“Interesting...” Airi stared darkly at the screen. “I’m sure the Professor will want to know about this. Upload the data and send it to the Professor at once.”

“Of course, right away,” said Ben.

“I think our rookie is ready, which means we might still have a chance.”

CHAPTER 25

After Ryu showered, he met Professor Penski and the others in the meeting room for the debriefing. The Professor was looking over some information that was displayed on his personal tablet. He was making gestures and grumbling to himself like he was analyzing something and trying to find an explanation.

In the meantime, Ryu leaned over to Turbo and asked, “Hey, so...how’d your training go?”

Turbo, who was looking around the room, didn’t seem to hear him.

“I’m talking to you...TURBO” said Ryu.

“Oh, sorry, what’s up?” said Turbo.

“How—did—your—training—go?” he asked a second time.

“Oh...that, it was a cinch.” Turbo shrugged his shoulders.

“Liar,” replied Ryu, immediately.

“Nope, not lying here... Those droids were no match for me and my quickness,” said Turbo, quite seriously.

Ryu frowned at him, not quite believing him, but Turbo was completely at ease. Ryu had a feeling his friend was gunning for some praise.

“Ahem,” said the Professor, interrupting their conversation. “Turbo, right. Yes, of course, it seems you still have some work to do.”

Ryu smirked at Turbo, who blinked in total surprise. “What do you mean?” he said.

“Your speed was good, your agility was ok, yes... hmm, but you lack creativity,” explained the Professor.

“Creativity!?” shouted Turbo. “What the hell do I need that for?”

“Point in case,” responded the Professor.

“Huh?”

“The point is that you need to work on your battle prowess and awareness. The droids were set to level 2, which is very basic, and you were having difficulties responding to each attack.”

“Whatever, dude, those things are obviously malfunctioning,” replied Turbo, shifting in his seat, his cheeks reddening.

“Turbo, please take this seriously.” The Professor adjusted his glasses. “We do not want you to get confused in thinking this is some kind of game. Even though we recreate a virtual world for our training, it does not mean that you will not face the real world at one point. It’s important that you recognize and learn from your mistakes now so that when the real battles happen, you will not

fail.”

That seemed to get through to Turbo, finally. He nodded tightly and leaned back in his seat, still looking embarrassed and glum. Ryu moved in to comfort his friend by patting him on the back.

“Hey, c’mon now, that isn’t the look of someone who knows how to handle himself,” he said. “I’m sure the data will be a lot of help to the both of us. This is why we are here, remember? To get better. Have faith in yourself, like I have faith in you.”

Turbo looked at Ryu and smiled. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Thanks, man.”

“Your friend’s words of encouragement are important,” said Airi, cutting into the conversation for the first time. “They tend to hit at your heart when nothing else is able to.”

Ryu blinked, a little surprised at her words, and judging by the looks on the Professor and Ben’s faces, they couldn’t believe what they were hearing, either. Airi glanced over to them with a look of warning, like she didn’t want to hear anything about it.

The Professor cleared his throat, composing himself, and motioned to a droid that was standing at the entrance. “Please escort Turbo to his room,” he said.

Turbo stood up and thanked the group for their hospitality and exited the room.

The door closed promptly behind Turbo. The Professor once again focused on his tablet, looking over the data from Ryu’s training. He glanced over it with the same gestures as before. He paused at certain moments, turning to look at Airi and Benjamin, then back to his tablet.

Ryu began to grow a bit impatient; he was getting tired of

looking at their expressions and trying to read what they were thinking. “C’mon already,” he said. “Just tell me how I did.”

The Professor was silent another moment, then looked up. “Yes, I’m sure you are eager to find out what my conclusion is. But I must ask you to listen to what I am about to say first. Some of this information will be new to you and some of it might not.”

“Ok, I’m listening,” replied Ryu.

The Professor signaled to Ben with his finger, and Ben fiddled with something on the table screen. Data popped up a moment later. An image of a cylindrical object glowed brightly in front of Ryu.

“I’ve seen that before,” said Ryu, frowning a little. He’d tried to destroy it, in fact, the same night he almost died, thanks to Hiro.

“Ah, yes...you remember. That is a Syphon, and it is the single most important object in our possession. This Syphon has endless energy, which we use to power all of the technology we have created. It was discovered a long time ago. Back when civilization wasn’t as advanced as now. The Mayans believed it to be a gift from the gods and hid it within their structures. During an expedition in the late 1950s, a group of explorers made their way into some Mayan ruins and discovered the giant fragment that was later revealed to be a meteorite. They analyzed it and studied it until they finally concluded that this meteorite held the answer to all of our problems. It was an unlimited source of energy.

“During this revelation, a group of power-hungry individuals who were driven by greed decided to confiscate the meteorite and destroy it. They knew that this new energy posed a great risk to their plans and would deteriorate their social standing in the world.

Knowing this, the group that had discovered the meteorite decided to break apart the rock and separate it into five individual cylinders. Each cylinder would have the same power as the others. They were successful but also discovered in the process that each cylinder became more fragile and harder to contain. Having split the stone into five pieces, they sent each one to different parts of the world. There they each remained hidden for many years thereafter. Following the wars, your parents and myself were tasked with recovering the Syphons and using them to power our equipment in order to restore the Earth back to its former glory. We were successful in the process and recovered all five of them,” explained the Professor.

“Is this why they were always away?” asked Ryu.

He nodded. “Yes, that is why. We were recovering each Syphon and bringing them back here so that we could use them. But now I must unfortunately explain our current situation.” The Professor motioned Ben to change the image on the screen.

The screen changed to reveal the multiple locations of each Syphon. Ryu looked at the map and was able to count three locations, each marked with a strobing light that blinked every second.

“As you can see, the GWO has been on our tails since the beginning,” said the Professor. “They have managed to destroy two of our Syphons and a third was nearly destroyed when you met Airi in our mountain facility. Had it not been for her quick thinking, we would have lost another Syphon and would have potentially lost the war. This is why I wanted to share this with you beforehand because it is the reason we are all here. We need these Syphons to

power our equipment that is designed to recreate the Earth's atmosphere and remove all pollutants in order to make the world habitable again."

"I get that, but what does this have to do with me?" asked Ryu.

"I understand your confusion, but please, hear me out. Your father also told us of your existence. He wasn't clear in what he was trying to explain at the time, but I was able to gather that he wanted you to continue in his footsteps. I was not sure what he meant when he said you were special, but when I read the results of your training and heard the stories, I must admit, I was convinced."

Ryu chewed on the inside of his cheek as he listened. He began to paint a picture in his mind, remembering his father's letter and the last words written at the bottom: *As protectors of the Earth*.

He knew his dad to be a storyteller, but that wasn't the case here; he clearly wanted Ryu to take the note seriously, word for word. Ryu looked at the Professor and followed up with a question. "Ok, so what do we do now?"

"Well, that's the easy part. We're gonna put you through some more training but this time your gonna learn like Airi and Benjamin have, through mind-melding," replied the Professor with an excited expression.

Ryu nodded. He'd heard a little about this technology already, how it was the best way to get everyone up to speed on all aspects of knowledge and combat awareness in mere moments. Once you mind-melded your persona would change somewhat, not because of the after-effects but more because gathering the knowledge so quickly would affect your personality to a certain degree. The

Professor explained the side effects to Ryu, which he accepted with no qualms.

“Wonderful,” said the Professor, clapping his hands together. “I also wanted to share with you some intel that Ben was able to recover recently. The Intel states that the GWO is planning on destroying another one of the Syphons. We are as of yet unsure of which location they are targeting, but we need to move with purpose and deploy countermeasures at all remaining Syphon locations. We have assets at each location currently, but I am afraid that they are not enough. We need for you and Turbo to train as soon as possible and meet with our assets in order to prepare a contingency plan for whatever the GWO has planned.”

“Understood,” said Ryu, eager for a chance to face the GWO again. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

“Professor, I’m sure they won’t try something as careless as before when we shot down their aircraft,” Airi cut in.

“No, you’re probably correct, I am positive they have learned from their mistakes. I hate to admit this, but the General is conniving and resourceful. We cannot afford to lose another Syphon.”

With those words, the Professor stood up and looked towards Ryu. “Tomorrow, at 08:00, we begin your mind-melding. Clear your mind, be ready, and leave the rest to me,” he said as he moved towards the room’s exit.

Ryu paused for a moment and then stood up and looked at Airi, who was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed and her eyes closed as if she was imagining the chaos that was yet to come.

“You’re up, buddy,” she said with a calming tone. “You sure

you're ready for this?"

Ben turned to look at Ryu, who turned from both of them to walk towards the door.

"Yeah, I'm ready," said Ryu. "And this time we're going all out."

* * *

The next morning, Ryu met the Professor inside the lab that housed the Mind-Meld 3000. The Professor greeted Ryu and then motioned him to take a seat. He handed Ryu some sort of mouthpiece, for Ryu to protect his tongue from getting chopped off by his own teeth. Ryu looked at the Professor and then over to Ben, who was behind a glass wall assisting with the mind-meld. He was feeling nervous, suddenly, and looking for some reassurance.

Ben looked back and threw out a thumbs-up sign, followed by a big smile. The Professor looked over his tablet for some last-minute adjustments. He then made his way over to Ryu and strapped him in.

"All right!" he shouted.

Ryu jolted a bit. He hadn't expected the Professor to yell.

The Professor took a deep and long breath. His eyes were shining with glee. Ryu's heart started pounding as he took in the old man's face. *He's done this before. He's just excited. You'll be fine,* he reassured himself.

"LET'S GET READY TO RUMBLE!" the Professor shouted.

He tapped at his tablet, and Ryu felt a force thrust him back into his seat, and the mind-meld session began.

CHAPTER 26

Back at the GWD, Hiro was once again summoned to the General's quarters. It was surely about the situation that had unfolded just outside the facility a few weeks ago when the traitors escaped. Hiro had known this summons was coming, for nothing escaped the General's knowledge. He had prepared for this. He knew what was in store for him. He was only surprised it had taken so long.

He entered the room and found the General sitting at his desk reading a stack of papers.

"You may sit," he said.

"Yes, sir," replied Hiro.

He took a seat and waited patiently for the General to finish reading the documents in his hand. The moments stretched and sweat began to bead on the back of his neck, in spite of his every

effort to hold it back. *Don't*, he told himself. He'd resolved to face this meeting without any nerves at all, to prove to the General he wasn't like the rest of those nervous fools who shook beneath his gaze. Hiro was *important* to this operation. Necessary. Even if he had managed to allow the one person he was supposed to supervise to escape.

The General could punish him—demote him, even—but he would not falter in his strength. He would carry on and prove himself again and rise back up in the ranks—this time, all the way to the top.

After a few minutes of silence, the General placed the documents on his desk and turned his attention to Hiro.

"What do you have to report, Cadet?" asked the General in a monotone voice.

Hiro leaned forward, straightened his back, and replied, "Sir, there has been an escape attempt by some of the students at the academy."

"An *attempt*?" said the General in a sarcastic tone. "I believe it was a successful one at that... Am I not correct, Cadet?"

"Yes sir, you are correct," said Hiro without emotion.

But inside, the embarrassment of having to report his failure—once again—was burning him. He despised Ryu and could not believe he'd been so close to ending him, only for the scum to escape his grasp. Outside, he did not show any of this. He kept his composure and continued his debrief.

"We suffered some damage to the exterior of the facility, and—" said Hiro, but the General stopped him mid-speech.

"DO NOT BORE ME WITH THESE FRIVOLOUS DETAILS!" he

shouted, snarling.

His eyes grew wide and his glare fixated straight at Hiro. The disappointment seeped from him. He looked like the feared General that everyone had heard about. A soulless individual with an eerie resemblance to the devil himself.

Hiro, despite the General's look of disapproval, kept his cool and remained silent. He was not going to argue with anything the General accused him of because he knew that would only anger him more.

After the brief outburst, the General sat back into his chair and once again focused on the documents on his desk. His composure reverted to his previous, calmer self.

"BUT...," he said in a resounding tone. "Maybe I misjudged you. Could it be... that I did not provide you with the tools necessary to complete these orders?"

Hiro looked at the General, trying to hide his surprise but failing. He'd been certain he'd be demoted from his position as cadet.

"Sir, everything I have been given access to has been of great assistance," he said swiftly. "I am the sole reason for this failure, sir, and nothing else. Please conduct the proper punishment for my misconduct." He stood up and positioned himself at the foot of the General's desk.

The silence stretched for many moments. Sweat beaded on Hiro's forehead and trickled down the sides of his face, as he stood there under the steely gaze of the General.

"A failure?" said the General, finally. "On the contrary...you have given me an enormous amount of information. Information

that I have been seeking for some time. I agree that you should take this opportunity to reflect on your actions, but your failure does not lie in the main purpose of the mission—it lies in not understanding the potential of every outcome.”

His eyes narrowed at Hiro again. “You need to understand one thing Cadet...that in EVERY CRISIS THERE IS ALWAYS OPPORTUNITY! We DO NOT, I repeat, WE DO NOT accept failure. That is not an option. Do not come to me with irrelevant dialogue about minuscule irregularities,” he spat. “I need you to see the bigger picture. I am not the man I am simply because I always followed orders as described, that is boring and frugal. I am the person I am today because as a cadet I was able to see beyond the mere expectations that were expected of me. I saw beyond the scope of a soldier and into the abyss of endless opportunity. Once I realized this, it became clear to me. I could envision our future and the path that I needed to pave, regardless of the sacrifice and the bloodshed that awaited. I became the person I needed to become all in the name of the GWO.”

After the General’s rousing speech, Hiro stood motionless. He knew clearly why the General was the man in charge. His words reached him in the way of a father offering words of advice to a beleaguered son. Even so, Hiro was not going to allow the General to dismiss his own recklessness.

“I understand clearly, sir, and I envy you and your words of wisdom, but I still feel that I should—”

“ENOUGH,” said the General.

He reached for the stack of papers on his desk and threw them towards Hiro. They landed spread out at the edge of the desk. Hiro

bent over to see their contents. The words “TOP SECRET” and “NEW HORIZON” jumped out at him. He moved closer to inspect one of the documents.

The General hunched back into his chair. “These are the tools I have been preparing for you,” he said. “These individuals will replace your dwindling ranks going forward. I want you to study those documents very closely and prepare these new subjects for fieldwork as soon as possible. They are highly skilled and efficient soldiers, but they lack the decision-making skills required for military combat. Once they are ready, I want you to gather intel on the whereabouts of the remaining Syphons and destroy them.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Hiro.

“One last thing...” said the General as he stood up and opened a drawer on the side of his desk. “Here, take this.” He handed Hiro a vial. “Consider this upfront payment.”

Hiro looked down at the General’s hand. This was the same vial the General had shown him before—the one with the serum that held the power to make a man look and feel younger. He had waited patiently for a moment in time when he would be able to savor the same luxuries that only the chosen could lavish in. As Hiro reached to take the vial, he smirked a little and gripped it tightly with ambition. In his mind, this was a sign of his acceptance into the higher echelon of the GWO.

Straightening again, Hiro saluted the General and left his quarters, eagerly on his way to rear his newly acquired subjects.

“STOP,” said a voice, as Hiro stepped out of the elevators. It was the Torch.

Hiro slowed to a halt and smirked at him. “What’s up with you?”

he said.

The Torch eyed him carefully and let out a plume of cigarette smoke. "I expected the General's guards to come out of that elevator dragging you to some unforeseen end of sorts. But instead, I see a Hiro with a resilient and invigorated glare, which honestly frightens me somewhat. What exactly did he say to you?" he asked.

Hiro turned to fully face the Torch, who was leaning against the wall just slightly off to the side of the elevators doors.

"Well, well, well," Hiro said softly. "I didn't expect you to be the jealous type."

"Cut the crap, you know damn well why I'm asking," said the Torch, glaring at him.

"Well, I'll say this... We dodged a bullet just now, but honestly the whole thing is quite clear to me after speaking with the General," Hiro said. That rousing speech was still running through his mind, the words the General had shared with him about how in every crisis there is always opportunity. Always a chance to rise through the ranks, if Hiro stopped thinking small and started seeing the bigger picture. *Regardless of the sacrifice and the bloodshed*, he thought to himself, with a smile. "But nonetheless, we have been given new recruits and these new recruits seem quite capable," he explained to the Torch.

"New recruits?" repeated the Torch.

"Yes." Hiro handed the Torch one of the documents. "This will be our true moment of glory. We will take to the battlefield unopposed and destroy the deserters. No one will be allowed to escape. I will personally make sure of that. Going forward we will be known as the 'Death Squad' and our fame will shower the ears

of multitudes as we lay down the law on those that would oppose the GWO. WE WILL BE VICTORIOUS,” said a triumphant Hiro.

The Torch looked rather more interested after glancing over the documents, though he still held some derision in his eyes when he looked at Hiro again. He was not comfortable playing second to anyone—Hiro was well aware of that—but the Torch also knew he had to continue to do so in order to have any opportunity for moving up in rank himself.

Hiro motioned to the Torch to follow him towards the area in which they would meet the rest of the team. Time was of the essence and they had to make every minute count; no one would be allowed to sleep until they were convincing enough for Hiro to pass them as field ready.

This was to become a trial by fire.

CHAPTER 27

“Ben,” shouted the Professor, immediately after initializing the mind-meld. “Start the timer!”

“Yes, Professor,” replied Ben from the other side of the glass. “5 minutes, starting now.”

Ryu began to move slightly with discomfort as he sat strapped into the chair. His eyes were closed, and his body was trembling after every second. The mind-meld was not painful, but it did make you feel a bit of discomfort, something like a migraine that lasted throughout the whole procedure. The Professor’s eyes were fixated on his tablet, observing Ryu’s vitals and brain activity. The timer had to be set to 5 minutes because anything longer would lead to brain deterioration.

The seconds ticked by. Ryu kept on trembling in his chair.

“Professor, we are approaching the 3-minute mark,” said Ben. “Brain activity is normal.”

The Professor frowned a little, looking closer at the brain wave readings. Something was not quite right. The brains of his mind-meld subjects moved through various phases during the 5 minutes—four phases in total. The first phase was the “Defrag Phase,” in which the mind was prepared for the data upload; the second phase was the “Upload Phase,” when the data was uploaded; the third phase was the “Extraction Phase,” the extraction of the data from the upload and also one of the phases which put a higher strain on the brain which resulted in higher brain activity. The last and final phase was the “Write Phase.” This phase caused the highest amount of strain on the brain and was considered the most dangerous as a result.

“Professor, we are at 4 minutes, and brain activity is...still normal,” said Ben, sounding surprised.

The Professor looked at the readings again. This couldn’t be right. Was the equipment malfunctioning?

“Ben, do you show level 2 for brain activity on your readings?” he asked, to clarify.

“Yes, I show the exact same thing, and we have moved to the ‘Write Phase’ and brain activity is still normal!” he shouted.

The Professor looked at Ryu, fearing something bad was about to happen. He put his tablet down and moved to his side. Ryu had stopped shaking and trembling, he realized. He sat there in perfect stillness and harmony like he was in a deep state of relaxation.

A second later, the computer spoke out in a female voice, “Mind-Meld 100% complete.”

The session was over.

Ben removed his earpiece and ran inside the chamber to verify that everything was all right. He stopped right beside the Professor, who was preparing to remove the equipment from Ryu.

“Professor, do you think he is ok?” he asked, biting his lip.

“I think he is,” said the Professor, just as Ryu opened his eyes. “Ryu, how do you feel?” he asked.

Ryu slowly sat up and touched his head. “Umm, I feel a bit dizzy but relaxed at the same time.”

Both the Professor and Ben looked at each other in awe and confusion. They had done multiple mind-meld sessions and had never witnessed anything like they had today. Before Ryu, everyone had responded the same throughout each phase. Everyone went from low brain activity to extreme brain activity as they reached the 5-minute mark, but somehow Ryu had maintained a normal status throughout the whole ordeal.

“Well, you definitely surprised us again, my boy,” said the Professor as he smiled and scratched his head.

“What do you mean?” asked Ryu, twisting his mouth.

“Let’s just say we might need to do some extra tweaking for your sake,” replied the Professor as he looked towards Ben. “Anyways, let’s get you to your feet. I want to see how you respond to the effects of the data.”

Ben stepped forward to help Ryu out of his chair. Then he slowly released his grip, allowing Ryu to stand unassisted. Ryu looked at himself and then moved each arm and leg as requested by the Professor.

“Hmm, everything looks good, nothing moving irregularly,”

said the Professor as he made his way around Ryu, observing him and tapping his chin. "Do you know what type of data we stored in your brain?" he asked.

"Yeah, I can feel it," said Ryu as he moved his arms in a slashing motion as if he was holding a sword. "I know how to handle a sword effectively," he replied.

"Correct." The Professor smiled. "We uploaded a training program that consists of every form of swordsmanship known to man. But we added a bit of an increase specifically to the Japanese style, based on your affinity to the katana."

"Yes, I can now recollect the form and posture of the samurai," said Ryu as he crouched and formed the posture befitting a samurai soldier.

"Wow, Ryu, you did awesome, man," said an excited Ben.

Ryu straightened and acknowledged Ben with a nod and a smile.

"It's all thanks to you guys and this awesome machine," he said as he looked towards the equipment. His eyes were shining with confidence. "Can we do some more?" he asked, moving to position himself once again in the mind-meld chair.

The Professor hadn't expected this. "OH! Wait, Ryu... Do you not feel exhausted at all?" He touched Ryu's arm, gently.

"Umm, no, not in the slightest," replied Ryu. "Why? Is there a problem, Professor?"

The Professor hesitated. He'd been certain that Ryu would at least show signs of fatigue, as had happened in every case after every mind-meld. An idea came to him, and he smiled at Ryu. "I just want to check one thing." To Ben, he said, "I want you to conduct

a strain test on Ryu immediately. I'll strap him back in."

"You got it," said Ben as he hurried back into the control area.

Ben jumped into his seat and put on his headset. He started pressing the screen and moving between the different programs he had at his disposal. "That's the one I'm looking for," he said as he clicked on the screen.

He motioned to the Professor with a thumbs-up. "We are good to go, Professor!"

The Professor nodded to Ryu, and Ryu positioned himself again inside the Mind-Meld 3000.

"Ryu, we're going to conduct a quick stress test to see if we can ascertain the limits of your brain activity. This shouldn't take long. Please just sit and relax as you did earlier," he instructed. "All right, Ben, fire it up!" he shouted.

Ben clicked on his screen again and started the program.

"Stress level 10, brain activity normal," he said over the intercom, his hand sliding over the controls.

"Stress level 20, brain activity normal."

The Professor was following closely on his tablet, ensuring that the readings were correct as Ben increased each level.

"Stress level 30, brain activity normal..." said Ben as he continued increasing the stress level.

Ben started chewing on his lower lip. "Stress level 50, brain activity NORMAL!" he shouted. "Professor, do you want me to continue?" he asked, somewhat reluctant.

"Yes, continue," said the Professor.

"Stress level 70, brain activity above normal level..."

"Continue," said the Professor.

“Stress level 80, brain activity high.”

“Increase it to one more level,” ordered the Professor.

Ryu was beginning to shake as before; his body was slightly trembling, and he was clearly experiencing some discomfort.

Ben’s eyes were wide. “But Professor, are you sure?”

“Yes,” replied the Professor, sternly. “One more.”

“Stress level 90, brain activity extreme,” replied Ben.

“All right STOP, stop it now!” shouted the Professor, waving his hand.

Ben swiftly shut down the stress test. He looked at the results, and his eyes widened even further in amazement at what he was seeing. The Professor was looking at the results as well and moved over to Ryu, who was covered in sweat and removing his headpiece.

“Ouch,” said Ryu, wincing. “That felt a bit different this time.”

The Professor looked over to Ben with a blank expression on his face. He could not find the words to explain what he had just witnessed. He knew the limitations of the human brain better than anyone else, but this was something he had never seen before. Ryu’s stress test had resulted in a reading that meant he was able to use almost 100% of his brain—which was impossible. Definitely not normal. The Professor had never heard of any human able to use their brain to its fullest potential.

Ryu was different. Special. Of this, he was certain. The Professor’s curiosity was tweaked immensely, and he wanted to observe more. He looked over to Ryu with a giant grin. “So, what else do you want to learn, my boy?”

Ryu was breathing heavily, but he grinned back.

“Let’s do HAND TO HAND COMBAT,” he shouted.

CHAPTER 28

After an exhausting and long night of mind-meld after mind-meld, Ryu was tired beyond belief. He had managed to learn every form of martial arts from Judo to Kung-Fu, as well as how to pilot any vehicle known to man. They would have continued but Ben and the Professor fell asleep on a few occasions, which prompted the computer—which was known as STAR (Self Taught Artificial Reasoning)—to end the sessions. The AI program had been designed by Ben to manage the entire system and was fully capable of understanding everything that was necessary to assist with the day-to-day activities of the Resistance.

Afterwards, Ryu retired to his room and slept for almost an entire day. Meanwhile, Ben and the Professor met with Airi and went over the data. They were in the middle of discussing the incredible results when Turbo came into the room, looking rather

tired himself, as he'd also conducted a few mind-meld sessions of his own.

"I want to see how Ryu is doing," he said. "Can you tell me where his room is?"

"Well, it's not hard to find, it's the room down the hallway from yours, I think the 4th room on the right," said the Professor.

"That's *my* room!" shouted Airi.

"Oh, yes, correct," the Professor apologized hastily. "Umm, well then it's probably the..." He trailed off, clearly not knowing the answer.

Airi rolled her eyes and cut in, with annoyance, "It's the second room down the hall on the left."

"Ok, well, thanks," said Turbo, looking rather scared of her, like he wanted to keep his distance. "I'll make sure to see how he is doing."

"Wait," said Ben, standing up. He moved towards a box that was on the floor and picked it up. "I almost forgot, we were supposed to give this to Ryu. It's from his father," he said as he handed Turbo the box.

Turbo took it and shook it slightly. The loose contents inside shifted around.

"What's inside?" he asked, curiously.

"No clue." Ben shrugged his shoulders. "We haven't opened it. Don't you know it's disrespectful to open someone else's belongings?" he asked, teasing.

"You're right," said Turbo as he scratched his head. "I'll make sure he gets this. Anyways, see you guys later." He turned and sped off.

As soon as he was gone, Airi looked at the Professor with narrowed eyes. "I'm assuming his mind-meld sessions have nothing to do with common sense?" she asked in a condescending tone.

Ben looked over at her and smiled. "Be nice now, Airi," he replied.

* * *

Turbo found his way to Ryu's room, as per Airi's instructions, and politely knocked on the door.

"Come in!" shouted Ryu.

Turbo pushed the door opened and moved inside to hand the box to Ryu, but he'd barely taken a step when he felt a kick to the back of his legs, which swept him off his feet. He let out a cry and moved his hand without thinking to use the box as a cushion to soften his fall.

BOOM

"HEY!" shouted Turbo. "WHAT THE HELL, MAN?"

He was on the ground with the box smashed under his back. There was something hard inside jabbing into his ribs, causing him some pain, which made him regret even coming to Ryu's room.

"That was Kung-Fu!" shouted an excited Ryu, who sprang out of nowhere like a ninja in hiding.

"I don't give a damn!" shouted Turbo as he removed the box from under him. "Look, you managed to crush your belongings. That's what you get for being an idiot."

Ryu frowned, but then his eyes widened in recognition. "Is that the stuff from my father?"

"How the hell should I know, they just asked me to bring it to you?" replied Turbo, still scowling at him.

Ryu grabbed the box, swiftly opened it, and poured its contents onto the floor. He looked over the items that were inside as Turbo sat up.

"Ok, so looks like a pen, a weird looking wristband, some clothes..." Ryu said as he rattled out each item.

He paused for a second and moved his hand to pick up one of the items. It was a choker necklace, but it didn't look like a normal necklace. It had some weird markings on it.

"Wow, check this out," he said as he showed the choker to Turbo.

"What's that? Your mom's jewelry?" replied Turbo, unamused.

"No, c'mon man, look at it. This doesn't look like jewelry, it has some weird writing on it and it's definitely not any language I can understand." Ryu turned the necklace over in his hand. He held it out to Turbo, who took it for a second. It felt slightly heavy, made out of some type of metal.

"Why don't you try wearing it?" asked Turbo, with a smirk on his face, as he handed it back to Ryu.

Ryu shrugged his shoulders. "I'll try it on," he said, standing up. He grabbed the choker at each end and moved to place it over his neck.

Just as the metal touched his skin, he lurched backward and let out an ear-splitting scream.

"AAAAGGHHHHH!" he yelled as the choker took hold of his neck and clamped itself on. He fell to his knees, twitching like he'd been poisoned. "AAAAAGHHH!"

The markings on the choker began to light up. Turbo stood there watching this unfold, completely frozen, with no clue what to do.

“GET—IT—OFF—ME!” he shouted, his words half-muffled by his panting. It took Turbo a second to understand.

He jumped up immediately and moved to assist Ryu in removing the choker.

“IT’S DIGGING ITSELF INTO MY SKIN, AAAAAGHHH!”

Turbo reached to grab the choker, but an unknown force smacked him away when his fingertips were inches from the metal. It shoved him across the room, slamming him into the wall. He gasped in shock and pain.

Ryu was still struggling to wrench off the choker; his eyes were wide open and turning red. The blood vessels on his face were protruding from the pressure of the necklace trying to squeeze the air out of him. It dug itself into his skin with multiple needles that looked like they were extracting his blood. During this process, the symbols continued to glow brighter—but then a minute later, the symbols dimmed out at once.

Ryu fell to the ground, no longer screaming but gasping for breath, looking half-dead. Turbo picked himself off the floor and rushed over to verify his friend was still alive.

“RYU, RYU!” he shouted as he picked him up slightly by his shoulders. “RYU, ARE YOU OK?”

Just then, the door swung open and the Professor and the others stumbled inside. “STAR alerted us to the screaming,” the Professor said. “What happened?” He crouched by Turbo’s side.

“This thing on his neck, it reacted somehow to Ryu when he

put it on,” Turbo explained. His voice was shaking.

The Professor adjusted his glasses and peered closer at the item that Turbo was pointing to. “Those markings...” he said softly. “They look familiar. Strange.”

“Why was he screaming?” asked Ben.

“It was choking him, or something,” said Turbo. “That necklace, it has some kind of power.” He pointed to the welt on the wall where he’d been thrown. “See there, it threw me against the wall when I tried to help Ryu take it off.”

“WHAT?” shouted Ben, clearly impressed.

Airi looked over at the area Turbo was pointing to and moved to observe it closely. Her fingers ran over the indents on the wall. “It seems it held back when it tossed Turbo,” she said, darkly. “I can tell it used force, but it seems that it was defensive in nature.”

“How do you know?” asked Turbo.

“Well, it’s not rocket science.” She crossed her arms in frustration. “If it wanted to kill you, I’m sure it would have knocked you straight through this wall.”

The Professor moved a bit closer to Ryu and the choker, cautiously, clearly afraid he might trigger a reaction. “I want to record these markings so that I can analyze them,” he said, holding out his wrist device and using it to scan the markings, converting them to an image that he uploaded immediately to STAR’s database.

He then spoke into his wristwatch. “STAR,” he said.

“Yes, Professor?” replied STAR.

“I need you to analyze the markings I just uploaded and get me any information that you can find,” he said.

“Yes, Professor.”

“Do you know what they are?” asked Turbo.

“Possibly,” was all the Professor said. “Ryu,” he said, slapping Ryu lightly on his cheek. “Wake up. Are you all right?”

Ryu jerked to life, throwing a hand up to his neck. “NO—WHAT—STOP!” he shouted.

Then he blinked as he noticed everyone staring down at him.

“What happened?” he asked.

The Professor stood up, adjusted his glasses, and pointed at the choker around Ryu’s neck.

“It seems that thing has some kind of connection to you,” he replied.

“WHAAAAT?” shouted Ryu as he felt the item on his neck. “THIS DAMN THING IS REAL?”

He stood up and ran into the bathroom to look himself in the mirror. “What the hell is this thing?” he asked, touching it.

“We don’t know just yet,” said the Professor.

“You’re okay now, man, but it was awful...” Turbo walked over to Ryu and began to explain what happened after Ryu put it on since his friend couldn’t seem to remember. “You looked like you were about to die,” he finished, shaking his head.

“It hurt like hell, that’s all I remember. How do I get this damn thing off?” asked Ryu, tugging at the edge of the choker with his fingers.

“I don’t know, but I am not touching that thing again,” said a reluctant Turbo.

* * *

The Professor and the others looked on as Turbo and Ryu were trying to figure out a way to remove the choker. The Professor was opening his mouth to speak to Airi and Ben when a voice disrupted him.

“Professor,” said STAR.

“Yes?” replied the Professor, raising his wrist.

“I have finished analyzing the markings you uploaded. I scanned every language and writing known to man and I was unable to ascertain their origin,” she replied.

The Professor sighed in disappointment. “Ah, well that’s of no use.”

“However,” replied STAR, “I was able to scan the item in question and I have discovered its purpose.”

“What did you find, STAR?” asked Ben immediately.

“This item consists of a material that is only found on space rock. It has technology that I believe can only be triggered by the wearer, which is why it clamps itself in place. I have also concluded that it was used formerly as a tool in battle.”

“Wow, that’s quite a bit to take in,” said the Professor.

CHAPTER 29

Ryu overheard some of the conversation with STAR and immediately gave up trying to remove the choker and stepped back into the room.

“Did she say this thing was some kind of weapon?” he asked.

“Well, it seems it could potentially be just that,” said the Professor as he walked over to glance at the neckpiece a second time. “She said that *only* the wearer can trigger a response, which means you, as the wearer, have to say or do something?”

“Huh?” said Ryu, somewhat confused.

“Let’s start by trying to say something, like maybe, bazooka or machine gun,” advised the Professor.

Ryu paused, considering the situation. What he didn’t understand, most of all was why this weapon thing was among his father’s belongings. *What was my father doing with this thing in his*

possession? he wondered. *And what is the meaning of the markings on it?*

“Ryu, pay attention,” said the Professor. “Try to say something. We need to see how this thing works so we can try to understand how to remove it.”

“Ok, sure, let me see, ok, what about...” Ryu considered for a brief moment. “COLT 45.”

Everyone was silent. They were waiting with anticipation for any sign or trigger from the neckpiece. But nothing happened. Ryu continued to call out other items, hoping to trigger a response.

Ryu decided to give it another try. “BAZOOKA,” he shouted.

Then, “JETPACK.”

He frowned. “Umm... MEDIEVAL WHIP.”

Still, nothing happened. He was growing impatient and also frustrated after every attempt. He just wanted to get the damn thing off him.

“Hmm, I guess it’s harder than we expected,” said Ben.

“Yeah, this whole thing is some messed up mystery,” muttered Turbo.

“Why don’t you try again?” said Airi.

“Huh?” replied Turbo. “But he’s already tried multiple weapons and nothing.”

“That’s my point,” replied Airi, jabbing a finger in the direction of the choker. “This thing is more like something out of a science fiction movie, so I don’t think it’s gonna respond like a normal computer would to a voice command. Why don’t you try to concentrate instead and clear your mind? Then try to imagine what it is you want.”

Ryu recalled her giving him the same advice back when she was describing the Hollow room and the function of the exosuit. He remembered that it all had become a reality once he cleared his mind and focused on what he wanted.

He looked at Airi and nodded. "Ok, I'll give it a shot," he said.

Closing his eyes, he exhaled and attempted to clear his thoughts. He wanted to envision the moment back in the Hollow room and try to replicate the same scenario in his mind.

"Whoa, something's happening!" said Turbo.

As Ryu continued his concentration, the symbols on the choker were beginning to light up like they'd done before. "Look!" said Turbo to the others, excitedly.

The professor lifted his wristwatch and began to record the events that were unfolding. As he clicked his device, a transformation happened in a split second. One second, Ryu was standing there in his normal, everyday clothes; the next, he was completely covered in the same exosuit he'd worn inside the Hollow room.

"What the hell?" said Ben. "That's impossible."

Ryu opened his eyes and looked down at himself. "Wow, this thing is awesome," he said, grinning, amazed that his plan had worked.

"But that exosuit is only capable of initializing itself inside of a Hollow room," said Ben, shaking his head. "How is he doing this?"

Ryu glanced over at Airi, who wore an unreadable expression on her face. "Let me try something else," he said.

Lifting his arms, he thought of the same katana that he'd initialized while inside the Hollow room. The choker responded

immediately, and a katana appeared in Ryu's hands.

"Wow, this thing even feels real," he said as he swung it around.

The professor wanted to test its reliability and grabbed the first thing he could find from the ground which he used as a prop to throw at Ryu, so he could slash it with his Katana.

"Here, try to slice this," the Professor said. He grabbed something off the ground—one of Ryu's shoes—and threw it at him.

SLASH went the katana as it split Ryu's shoe in half.

The Professor beamed. "As I thought, this item of yours, it has the ability to initialize anything your mind can imagine. Just like being inside the Hollow room."

"You mean as I thought," corrected Airi, scowling, clearly annoyed she wasn't getting her due credit.

Ryu, on the other hand, was fixated on the item he had just sliced in half. His shoe...

"Why did you throw my shoe?" he shouted at the Professor.

"Um, I'm sorry, but I was caught in the moment, you see—in the name of science, I had to move quickly," he replied, somewhat troubled.

Ryu grabbed what was left of his shoe and frowned at it. Turbo moved to comfort him, and so did Ben. The Professor re-focused his attention on perusing through the recorded footage, trying once again to understand the capabilities of the neckpiece.

"Airi," he said.

"Yes, Professor?" she said dryly.

"We need further testing of this new technology. I want to see how it can perform in an open environment. Please see to that tomorrow," he said.

Airi reluctantly nodded back at the Professor and looked over to Ryu, who was trying to use the neckpiece to initialize his shoe back in one piece, but it wasn't working.

"Give it up already," said Airi. "That thing can only initialize something that you think of. Not something that's already real."

Ryu looked at her and then back at his shoe. He sighed. "You're right, I was just honestly trying to see what else I could do."

"Don't worry about that, we will continue tomorrow at 07:00," she replied. "THE REST OF YOU, GET YOUR ASSES BACK TO WORK," she shouted as she exited Ryu's room.

The professor followed behind as well as Ben and Turbo. They'd all had their fair share of excitement for one day and they knew there was much more work to be done.

All of them were hyper-aware of the GWO's presence, and the likely impending attacks on the remaining Syphons. Both Ryu and Turbo had many more mind-meld sessions awaiting them before they would be ready for battle.

The professor also wanted to analyze the choker a bit further with the data he had gathered. He was convinced that the markings held an important significance, which he might be able to replicate to give them more of an advantage in the war to come.

* * *

That night, Ryu had trouble falling asleep due to his high levels of adrenaline. He was too high strung to sleep so he opted to work on his concentration a bit further so that he could impress Airi the next day. During the late hours of the night, he continued working with

the choker, perfecting his newfound tech. He managed to create verbal macros in order to help him visualize each item he wanted to initialize.

When morning came, he was still so invested in his work that he was ten minutes late for his meeting with Airi. Which was not much of a surprise to him, but not a great impression to make nonetheless.

"You're LATE," Airi said, tapping her feet impatiently as he stumbled into the room.

"Yeah, sorry, I was up all night," he replied, panting.

"Whatever, let's get this over with," she said as she positioned herself in an attack stance. "You need to focus on your attacks and try to overwhelm anything I throw at you. I don't want you to hold back."

"What?" said Ryu.

"You heard me, don't hold back. I need to see how your mind-meld training has changed your agility and response. But don't get me wrong, I won't be holding back either, and that little stunt of yours won't work again."

"Ok, let's do this." Ryu assumed his stance. "INITIALIZE!" he shouted.

A black suit formed over his body. It was somewhat similar to the exosuit, but with a few modifications. It was sleeker, for one thing, and the material looked as if it was made of some type of carbon fiber. The outfit emphasized his muscles, and it had strong aerodynamics.

A smile touched the edge of his mouth. He motioned to Airi with his finger that he was ready.

Airi was wearing her regular outfit, which was dark green with light green accents. Her belt was orange and carried four clips of ammo. She had decided on two reinforcers, which were pistols designed to expel bullets made of energy. She raised her pistols and began shooting at Ryu, this time moving with greater speed than in their last training session.

Ryu noticed her moving faster and analyzed her attack in his mind. "BLADE OF JUSTICE!" he shouted.



He immediately initialized a glowing sword that had similar attributes to his previous katana, but this one was infused with energy. He moved forward and sliced at every bullet Airi was shooting at him one by one. He was able to maintain the same speed that the bullets were traveling at. Airi continued her barrage, but as she closed the distance between herself and Ryu, she stopped four feet away and jumped just in time to avoid Ryu's forward sword slash. She continued unloading on Ryu as she somersaulted above him.

“INITIALIZE REDEEMERS!” shouted Ryu.

Two slightly larger pistols appeared in his hands. They were also infused with energy, which formed as lines down the edge of each barrel. He leaned to his left and moved his arms in the opposite direction. He began to shoot at Airi, who had landed at his backside.

Airi moved to dodge the oncoming bullets by lowering herself in a split second, her back almost touching the ground. She shuffled her weight onto her thighs as she continued to respond with more and more bullets. Reaching, for her belt, she threw a device at Ryu, which began to beep faster with every second. Ryu knew precisely what the sound meant—it was a mine—and jumped backward.

As he stepped back, his foot hit another hard, round object on the ground.

BOOM

Something exploded under Ryu, erupting in a giant cloud of smoke and dust. Another mine Airi must’ve dropped right before she somersaulted over him. Airi paused and let off her pistols.

“RYU!” she shouted.

Ryu sped past her, unscathed, catching her by surprise. He was grinning. His new suit had specific fibers that had shielded him from the blast. He began to attack her with his recently acquired abilities in hand-to-hand combat. Airi moved to block his punches and kicks, just barely in time to avoid any direct hits. Ryu was moving with speed, and he was gaining the advantage.

She shoved off for a split second and dropped a smoke screen, but Ryu just jumped around it. He felt Airi move and looked in her direction. She was in mid-air tapping on her wristwatch, which Ryu

knew was triggering an event. He lunged himself at her again.

“TWIN BLADES OF LIGHT!” he shouted.

His choker initialized two identical blades, which he lashed at Airi as he moved forward. Airi reached onto the side of her thigh, grabbed a military grade knife, and blocked his attack. She pushed off again and fell towards the ground behind him, into an awaiting CBE that had its cockpit door swung open just in time to catch Airi inside.

“Huh?” said a puzzled Ryu. *Where did that come from?* “So, we’re playing for keeps, I see.”

“I told you this would be different,” Airi replied as she initialized the CBE and began her attack.

“Seems like I get to take my revenge on this thing after all,” he replied as he lunged forward.

Ryu jumped in a flash to avoid the CBE, which had swung its giant arm in an attempt to knock Ryu over. He landed on top of the CBE and tapped his gloved knuckles on the cockpit window.

“I’m up here,” he said jokingly.

Airi moved the CBE arms to catch Ryu, but he was too quick. He jumped off and initialized a glowing lasso that he used to wrap around the legs of the CBE. He ran with speed around the CBE, wrapping its legs closer together until it buckled and fell to its side. With barely a pause for a breath, Ryu ran forward and initialized his famous sword once again.

“BLADE OF JUSTICE!” he shouted, lunging to slash at the CBE.

Only, right away, he sensed something was wrong and stopped a split second from slashing at the CBE. He turned around just in time to avoid a droid that had lunged itself at Ryu attempting to

use its hands as blades.

As he shifted to attack, he took one glance around as a precautionary measure, and almost froze up in shock. He was surrounded by an army of droids, closing in from all directions. *She was planning this all along*, he thought with a gnash of his teeth. He had to think quickly.

He slashed at every droid with his blade as it lunged itself at him. He targeted their heads because he remembered how Hiro had shown him their weaknesses back in the mountain facility. Ryu was moving as fast as he could, but more and more droids kept coming. As he continued defending himself, he spared a glance at the pile of droids he was leaving behind and noticed they were re-attaching themselves and moving in again to attack one after the other.

"GIMME A BREAK," he said out loud.

"Yeah, you probably thought my droids would be easily defeated like before," said Airi, with a smirk in her voice. "Well, you were wrong. I learn from my mistakes and I adapt, that's why I am going to win this time."

She's smart, can't deny that, thought Ryu, as he continued to disable each droid only to see them re-attach and commence attacking once again. This was a good move on Airi's part. Still, he wasn't going to admit defeat, not yet. He was determined. As he continued slashing away in defiance, he briefly looked over in Airi's direction.

"I'm glad you are on my side, but I don't think this will end in your favor either," he said as he struggled a bit.

Gathering his breath, Ryu shouted, "TALONS OF FLIGHT,

INITIALIZE!”

A giant glowing circle engulfed Ryu’s body and began to spin. As the circle of glowing light spun, it broke off into smaller pieces that looked like daggers of energy. Ryu lifted his hand and pointed in the direction of the droids. The daggers moved in unison and slashed at every droid in sight. They dissolved the droids’ metal with every slash, stopping their transformation. Destroying Airi’s army for good this time.

She stepped out of her CBE, just then. She walked over to Ryu, stepping over the bodies of her droids, in a fierce way that made Ryu somewhat uncomfortable. Was she going to enact some revenge on him for his cocky remarks? Did she have some other trick up her sleeve, even now?

As she arrived right in front of Ryu, she paused for a moment while looking down. Ryu shifted slightly forward to see her expression and then uninitialized his weapon after confirming her non-provocative approach. Airi then lifted her head and also her hand, signifying a handshake.

“Ryu,” she said, “it’s an honor to fight by your side. I hereby acknowledge you as my brethren and comrade in arms.” She held out her hand, waiting for a response.

There was such toughness on her face, and in her eyes, Ryu could glimpse some of the pain of her past, the friends she had lost in battle against the GWO. This was an important moment for her, he could tell. She was extending her arm to acknowledge that Ryu’s abilities were important and necessary to her cause—maybe even the missing key in their struggle. She was a skilled fighter, he knew, one of the best he’d ever witnessed, but even she knew she could

not win this fight for the Resistance alone.

They were outnumbered. They'd long been one step behind the GWO. They'd faced failure after failure that had chipped away at the Resistance's resilience to fight with purpose. But Ryu could see hope in Airi's eyes now; she was convinced once again that they might still have a chance. *Because of me*, thought Ryu, his heartbeat racing a little at the thought of what lay ahead.

It was an honor, to know she had such faith in him. It was a heavy burden to carry. But he was willing.

Ryu lifted his hand and shook Airi's with determination.

"Your friendship is enough for me, Airi," he said. "To tell you the truth, this all still seems surreal to me. I would never have imagined any of this a few months back. How we started at the academy and the horrors we were able to survive..." *Some of us*, he thought, thinking of Angela and pressing his lips together. "But during that whole time, you guys were the ones that were pushing back day after day, sacrificing for the greater good. Fighting and training those who you knew were probably being sent to die. But you continued despite the horrors that plagued your mind." He looked away and into the sky above them, which was adorned with stars shining brightly.

He turned back to face Airi. "Let me ease some of that guilt for you. I, Ryu, pledge to defend and protect those who cannot fend for themselves. I pledge to everyone my life and my abilities so that we may see this through to the end," he finished, his jaw tense with determination.

Airi stood firm and looked back at him, and clenched her fist in his, fiercely.

“For everyone,” she said. “We will do this for everyone.”

CHAPTER 30

Day after day, week after week, Ryu and Turbo continued honing their skills for a future moment in time when they might have to deal with the GWO once again. Both Ryu and Turbo had begun to get comfortable in their new surroundings and with their new comrades of the Resistance. They were learning fast, which gave the Professor and the others hope with each day that passed. Ryu, having grown accustomed to the choker that was attached to him, eventually lost interest in deciphering its markings and accepted it as another part of him. He practiced every day, using his acquired knowledge from mind-melding to develop new techniques, which he tested relentlessly until perfection.

Turbo was also training hard and trying his best to keep up with Ryu. He had successfully achieved his fourteenth mind-meld session, and the Professor, with Ben's help, had been able to craft

him four metallic braces, which they attached to Turbo's legs and arms. These metallic braces were triggered by a device attached to Turbo's wrist. Upon activating them, they covered both his arms and legs as they expanded, allowing Turbo to increase his strength from a normal human to that of ten individuals. With these braces, he also gained the ability to block most projectiles, such as bullets, and run at faster speeds. He was often seen strutting around the place with his head held high, like a real superhero.

With these new recruits, the new tech, and Ryu's enhanced abilities, the Professor felt it was time to begin moving their plans forward and pick up where Ryu's father had left off.

* * *

Ryu was in his room when he heard the Professor's voice come on over the facility's intercom system:

"This is the Professor. At 16:00 hours we will meet in Lab Room 1. I have some information I need to share with everyone. Over and out."

Ryu had just finished taking a shower after another busy day of training and daily chores. It was exactly three months and two weeks to the day since they had been rescued from the GWO. These days, he and Turbo had assigned duties just like the rest of the Resistance crew. Ryu had been given the duty of recruiting new blood to the cause, working alongside Airi. Something that had yet to actually happen because the Professor first wanted to be 100% certain that Ryu and Turbo showed no signs of brain sickness from the mind-melding. Everyone knew that able bodies would be needed soon for a multitude of tasks, whether it be for battle or for

daily operations of all Resistance facilities. They had to fill their ranks if the Resistance wanted to get serious about posing a threat to the GWO, it would require a vast amount of resources, which meant more manpower as well as more tech. Luckily for them, their remaining Syphons were still adequate enough to power and allow their progression uninterrupted.

After the Professor's announcement, Ryu left his room and headed for the topside of the facility. He had asked the Professor the previous day for permission to allow him to visit a makeshift grave marker, which he had created to honor his fallen friend Angela, and his father and mother. He couldn't stay out there long, of course. Staying topside for longer than a few minutes could get him caught by GWO's spy satellites, and give away the location of their headquarters, which would result in the worst-case scenario for the Resistance.

The breeze of the cool morning air caressed his skin as he opened the hatch and peered his head out. Once he was sure the sky and surrounding area was clear, he climbed out and walked slowly over to the grave markers. As he went, he began to recall pleasant memories from his childhood. He thought again about the green pastures that used to run endlessly through the fields a long time ago. The smell of the flowers that bloomed in the spring, and the howl of the winds through the trees. It was pure bliss, to stand out here in the breeze and imagine the world the way it was before. But as he knelt down before the grave markers, he knew his time was short, so he focused on what he'd come out here to do.

Hey Dad, he said in his mind as he closed his eyes. *I wish I could see you and Mom again. I really miss you guys. I wanted to tell you*

both that I think I kinda know now what you meant when you told me I was special a long time ago. I just hope that I am worthy of this gift I have and that I can use it to help everyone and make you proud.

When he finished his dialogue, he opened his eyes and stood up again. With a deep breath, he looked over to Angela's marker. "I haven't forgotten my promise, Angela," he said out loud, smiling.

As he climbed down the hatch that led back underground, into the facility, he suddenly felt a huge pain in his head, similar to the pain he'd felt when the Professor ran a stress test for his brain limitations.

"AAAGH," said Ryu, stumbling in his step a little, holding his head.

His eyes squeezed shut and a familiar image engulfed his mind. A giant dark cloud hovered above the earth. He tried focusing on this image; he had dreamt it before. As he focused, the dark cloud, which was moving swiftly with the wind, began to sharpen. He continued his focus and concentrated on the massive dark object. A loud, strange buzzing sound was coming from the giant cloud as it moved. And then he noticed them. Tiny microscopic robots that looked like mechanical locusts. They were moving tightly packed together as they devoured buildings, trees, vehicles, and anything in their path.

"AAAGH, what the HELL IS HAPPENING TO ME?" said Ryu as he reached for the wall of the hatch that led to the surface, in order to keep his body from falling down the long opening.

The image stopped seconds later, and his migraine was gone almost instantly. Ryu opened his eyes and stood for a moment,

breathing hard, trying to collect himself and make sense of what he'd seen. That dark cloud...what did it mean? Was it some kind of weapon? Something that was coming, or something that had already happened? He didn't know—maybe it was nothing real at all, just a dumb trick of his mind—but he felt he should probably tell the Professor at some point if the image continued to cause him discomfort. Even though he had a strong sense of foreboding, he felt that there were more important things to focus on at the moment.

Ryu made his way inside the facility and into Lab Room 1, where the others were already waiting. The Professor welcomed him in and began relaying the purpose of the meeting.

"I first want to congratulate Ryu and Turbo for successfully reaching level 14 of their mind-meld sessions," he said as he stood and clapped in place.

Ben also joined in, but Airi just sat in her chair with a blank expression. Both Ryu and Turbo nodded and smiled at each of their patrons. "And with no brain sickness, might I add," the Professor added.

"Ahem, all right, so on to the important stuff," the Professor continued in a more serious tone, returning to his seat. "As you all well know, we have intel stating that the GWO is planning on striking at one of our remaining Syphon facilities. We *now* know for a *fact* that they are planning a move within the next 48 hours, but we're still not sure where. Our Syphon locations are marked on the screens in front of you."

Ryu looked down at the table, at the tiny blinking dots that lit up on the map.

“The locations are hidden within villages that are spread around Japan. This has been done to conceal the Syphons and not draw attention to their whereabouts. The locations are Nikko, Hakone, and Enoshima. We will conduct hourly patrols of each of these locations going forward. I have assigned teams of two for each location. Ryu and Ben will position themselves at Nikko, Airi, and Turbo at Hakone, and I along with CB12 and CB14 will monitor from our facility in Enoshima,” said the Professor.

“But Professor, are you sure it’s wise for us to split up our resources?” asked Airi, frowning. “I know we don’t have much of a choice, but I just want to make sure we’ve fully thought this through. How are those of us in the safe cities going to reach the targeted city fast enough to help when the attack happens?”

“I understand your concern,” said the Professor. “Do you remember the old underground railcar tunnels that lead to each of the cities?”

Airi’s eyes lit up in understanding. “Yes, the abandoned tunnels, of course!”

“Well, we have cleared them with the help of your droids, and they have been brought up to full functional order. We can use them to respond from any location within minutes. We have outfitted the railcars with new technology, which allows them to travel at a very high velocity. They have cargo bays that will also allow us to carry equipment back and forth while still under the cover of the surface,” said the Professor as he looked up with pride of his accomplishments.

“Wow, Professor, you really are something,” said Turbo, whose eyes were wide with excitement.

“Yes, well, let me continue. Everyone will depart in 04:00 hours to their assigned territories. Ben has also taken the liberty of providing us with some new toys, which I am really eager to try out. Each of you have been presented with a small kit.” As he spoke those words, a small bag appeared in front of each of them, bearing their respective names on it.

“Inside this bag, you’ll find a miniature headpiece implant that will allow constant uninterrupted communication between the group. You’ll also find a bracelet with a panel on it. This bracelet is exceptionally important. It has been encoded with your personal DNA and will not work unless the DNA match is confirmed upon wearing it. With this device, you will be able to identify yourself as lost in case you find yourself separated from the group. The bracelet will generate a random 6-digit code, which we will then use to verify your identity,” said the Professor with more excitement. “Pretty cool huh?”

Ryu picked up his bag and verified its contents. He was pleased to hear how precise the Professor was when it came to planning for any possible situation. His blood pressure began to spike as he thought about what potentially lay ahead. He only had to wait but a few more hours. Protecting the Syphons was important, of course, but honestly, nothing was as important to him as finally meeting his arch-nemesis for the last time. The last time, because in his mind, he was beyond prepared to face any outcome... With all of his training and his new abilities, there was no doubt in his mind that Hiro’s time was about to come up.

And Ryu would have his revenge, at last. No matter what it would cost him.

“So, let me see, did I mention everything, hmm...” said the Professor as he adjusted his glasses. “Ah yes, one last thing. Airi... Ben has also modified the CBE units.”

“WHAT?” said Airi immediately, her eyes flashing in shock.

“Slow down, it’s nothing bad...” he said quickly. “Ben, please explain.”

“Yes, Professor.” Ben cleared his throat. “Well, we felt as if they were missing something and we came up with a way to give the CBEs the ability to fly. We added thrusters and lowered the weight somewhat in order to allow them to sustain a pilot while in flight.”

Airi was up out of her seat in an instant, moving towards Ben and grabbing him by his shirt. She lifted him up with ease and mouthed back at him, delivering both voice and saliva as she spoke defiantly. “YOU LOWERED THE WEIGHT?” she shouted.

“Y-yes, but it’s nothing drastic—” stuttered Ben.

“WHY, YOU PIECE OF—”

“Please, it’s all for the sake of everyone’s well-being,” replied Ben, as he closed his eyes like he expected her to punch him. “*Your* well-being, too,” he added.

Airi kept holding onto him like that for another moment, with her arm raised like she might very well hit him for messing with her precious CBEs. Then, slowly, she dropped her guard and lowered Ben back into his chair. She glanced at Ryu, and he knew she was remembering what had happened in their training scenario when Ryu caught her CBE’s unique flaw: that it was not able to adjust once its legs were rendered useless. So, by giving the CBE units flight status, Ben had created another method of escape, a better

chance at survival for any pilots.

Airi stepped back and sat down again quite calmly as if nothing had happened. She waved her hand to the Professor, giving him the go-ahead to continue.

“Ahem, all right.” The Professor clapped his hands together. “So now that everyone is in accordance, head to your posts. And prepare to commence Operation Night Watch.”

CHAPTER 31

“All right, Ben,” said an excited, determined Ryu, as he stood outside of the new and improved light rail. “I guess it’s you and me, buddy. Time to suit up.”

“Yes sir,” replied Ben with a huge smile on his face.

They both ran to their awaiting CBE units, which were located inside the cargo bay of the light railcar. They jumped in one by one, which immediately triggered the cockpit door of each CBE to close.

“Ok, checking all systems,” said Ryu as he tapped on the unit’s screen.

“Everything clear here.” Ben who gave a thumbs-up.

“Professor, Team Alpha is ready,” said Ryu over the headset.

There was a crackle, and then Airi’s voice came in. “Team Bravo ready,” she said.

“Ok, all systems are green. STAR, start our countdown,” said the Professor.

“Commencing rail transport in 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1,” said STAR.

“Hold on to your seats, boys and girls!” shouted Turbo, over the comms.

Ryu quickly checked his straps to ensure they were snapped in correctly.

SHROOM went the sound of each of the light railcars as they sped off.

They were moving at 300 mph and gaining speed every second. Ryu felt the G-force immediately and nestled himself patiently for the remainder of the trip. As he observed the bright flashes caused by the lights at an extreme velocity, he envisioned the last fight he’d had with Hiro when Hiro could have finished Ryu for good, but Ryu’s attempt to turn him against the GWO had made him falter a bit. Almost like he’d gotten through to him, a little.

Do I still want to... NO, thought Ryu, fiercely. *He doesn’t deserve that, not anymore.*

* * *

After exactly ten minutes, they arrived at their respective locations, and they each checked in confirming their positions via the headset units. Ryu and Ben, still inside their CBEs, disconnected them from their charging docks and made their way out of the light rail to begin unloading some supplies. Afterward, they moved to verify the location of the Syphon, which was at the core of the

Nikko facility. It was similar in design to the two other Resistance facilities Ryu had seen, sort of like a spider. There was a central area in the middle that housed the Syphon, which connected to six long hallways that led to other rooms. The Resistance had made this adjustment a while ago, which helped in increasing the safety of the Syphon since the droids that were assigned as security had to traverse the main area in order to get to the other rooms in the facility.

“So, the people in this town, are they able to fend for themselves?” asked Ryu through the comms of his CBE as he carried some of the equipment down the hallway from the delivery area of the facility that led to the center.

“Well, they are actually very resourceful,” replied Ben, as he fiddled with his CBE’s weapon’s system. “Despite being required to work for the GWO every four months at their facilities, they also work hard when they are at home. They work with the Resistance in a kinda secret alliance. We assist them by sharing our technology and they, in turn, use the tools to cultivate the land and grow crops on their own. They also help us by concealing the location of the remaining Syphons.”

“But doesn’t that put them in harm’s way if the GWO finds out that they are assisting the Resistance?” asked Ryu.

“Of course it does, but I’m sure despite the dangers and the possibility of being discovered, they feel like we do—that the world deserves a better future and if we’re not willing to sacrifice ourselves for the better of the whole, then we’re better off dead,” he said.

“I guess I understand,” said Ryu. “I felt the same way when I

was inside the GWO. There were times where a swift death seemed a whole lot better than the atrocities we were faced with.” He felt a phantom pain, then, from the scars still on his back, left behind from the lashings Angela had been forced to give him.

“Yeah, and that’s why we do what we do,” replied Ben with a smile.

Ryu and Ben arrived at the core and were able to report on the condition of the Syphon.

“Professor, we have confirmed the Syphon is working and fully functional—” started Ben.

But he was cut off by the sudden sound of a blast that shook the whole facility. Sirens began to wail.

“What was that?” shouted Ryu, spinning around and looking up at the ceiling, in the direction of the open sky he knew was above them.

“That was an explosion, it was top side,” said Ben.

The facility was engulfed with strobing lights, and as Ryu and Ben stepped closer to the Syphon again, they heard the distant *BOOM!* of multiple explosions following in sequence.

“Professor, WE ARE UNDER ATTACK!” shouted Ben into the headset.

The facility shook again, and this time Ryu’s CBE was rattled a bit and Ryu had to adjust in order to continue upright.

“That was a strong blast,” he said to Ben.

And they were underground; the explosions were happening above them. In the city. Ryu’s face paled as he remembered what Ben had told him about the civilians living up there.

“What about the people?” asked Ryu swiftly. “Do they have

somewhere to hide?”

“No!” Ben shook his head. His eyes were wide and frantic. “They only have their homes, and those buildings can’t withstand such an attack—”

Ryu was moving before Ben finished his sentence, setting his CBE on a course to get to the surface as fast as he could.

“Ryu, wait!” shouted Ben.

But Ryu didn’t stop. He could see it already, everything that was surely happening above the facility—the countless number of people dead and scattered on the ground. He had to get up there *now* before it was too late. Suddenly, he remembered something.

“This thing can fly now!” he said to himself. “And what better moment to test it out than now.” His hands moved swiftly to the controls to initiate flight.

SWOOSH went the thrusters as they propelled Ryu and the unit forward faster than before.

Ryu laughed aloud. “This is what I’m talking about!”

There was a crackle in his headset. “Ryu, this is the Professor, can you read me?”

“Yes Professor, this is Ryu.”

“The GWO is after your Syphon—they are attacking from the surface and are attempting to make their way into the facility.”

“Yeah, we kinda figured that as soon as we started hearing explosions.”

“You need to stop them at all costs,” said the Professor. “Airi and Turbo are on their way as well. Do whatever you can to hold them off.”

“Yes sir, you can count on me,” replied Ryu as he continued up

the shaft that led to the surface.

“Ben, come in,” Ryu heard the Professor say.

“Yes, Professor, I’m here,” replied Ben, somewhere behind him still in the core.

“I have dispatched a shuttle to your location to carry the Syphon safely away from the facility. You need to take the Syphon with your CBE unit to the surface and follow the coordinates on your receiver for pickup,” the Professor said.

“Yes, I’m on my way,” said Ben.

* * *

Topside, Ryu landed his CBE on the ground and assessed the area around him. Smoke billowed from the streets as the buildings buckled and then collapsed from the flames. The city was in complete chaos. Everyone was running frantically, trying to find some kind of shelter to survive the bombardment. A loud scream erupted close by, and Ryu turned quickly and saw a female civilian sobbing as she stood outside of what was left of her home. The structure had been reduced to pieces. She screamed louder, calling out a name that Ryu understood to belong to a loved one who must've been killed by the explosion.

Just then a loud *whir* made him look up. An aircraft with the GWO emblem was approaching, making another pass, dropping even more bombs. Ryu enabled his thrusters and lifted his CBE off the ground again and moved towards the center of the city. He wanted to get the attention of the civilians so that he could help them find shelter underground.

"EVERYONE, PLEASE, YOU NEED TO GO THIS WAY," he shouted via his unit's loudspeaker, pointing to the opening that led to the underground area.

He continued calling out to the people as they ran in fear through the crumbling streets. They were scattered and either couldn't hear his directions or were too terrified to listen. Ryu immediately felt another blast to his left, about 30 yards away. "That was a bit too close," he said as he locked his CBE in place to brace himself from the explosion. He lifted his CBE's arm to block the rush of debris that shook his unit as it sped past him, and then he looked over to the giant cloud of smoke. As it cleared, he saw

tens—if not hundreds—of bodies of the civilians who were caught in the blast radius.

His eyes opened wide and his heart pounded faster with every second. There was so much blood...so many bodies burning...so many people lying there stiff and still, like Angela had looked in his arms the last time he ever saw her.

“This can’t be happening,” he said to himself. “These people, they are innocent... Why, why, *why?*” he said as he began to enrage

Suddenly, he sensed something familiar. A presence that turned his fear to even more anger. His senses were telling him to turn around, but he waited for a second because he knew exactly who this person was.

“I see you are still alive, number 101,” a sardonic voice said loudly, from a few yards behind Ryu. “You must be a cat since it seems like you have a multiple amount of lives and just refuse to die.”

Ryu turned around slowly to confirm his suspicion. He wanted to lay his eyes on the one person who’d brought so much pain to him and his friends. The person who was to blame for Angela’s death.

And sure enough, there stood Hiro among the flaming debris, smirking at him.

“You BASTARD!” shouted Ryu. “You kill these people like they’re expendable, and you still have the audacity to plague me with your arrogance!”

“Oh no, you have me all wrong,” said Hiro in a calm fashion. “I came here for one thing and that’s to destroy your precious Syphon. The people, well, they’re in my way, you see, so I need to remove

them before I am able to proceed.”

“YOU’RE MAD, YOU SOB!” Spit flew from Ryu’s mouth as he yelled at him.

Hiro shrugged his shoulders. “Call me whatever you like. It doesn’t matter anymore. Your ninth life ends here.” He pointed at Ryu as he raised his wrist to prepare his EMP.

Ryu was so enraged he was shaking. He wanted to face Hiro one on one and kill him with his bare hands, as Hiro had always had him believe was the most honorable way to kill someone. So he unstrapped himself from the CBE, stood up, and climbed outside. “Don’t tell me you, who always spoke about the integrity of man to man combat, the General’s apprentice, is going to resort to his technology? What happened to your so-called combat skills?” he said as his feet touched the same ground Hiro stood upon.

“I’m going to make you pay for everything you have done,” said Ryu with a snarl as he began to step forward slowly towards Hiro. He took a step after every word, gripping his wrist and raging with anger.

“For my father. For my mother. For Angela. For these people.”

“My, my, my, are we a bit tense,” replied Hiro as he lowered his wrist and crouched a bit, preparing to go on the offensive.

“Initialize!” shouted Ryu, and his exosuit covered his body. “It all ends here, *tonight*. Only one of us will leave here alive, Hiro!”

Ryu started his sprint towards his enemy.

“How many times have I told you not to use names?” shouted Hiro as he lunged himself forward.

“BLADE OF JUSTICE!” shouted Ryu.

His sword initialized immediately, and Hiro met him with a smaller blade.



CLASH

Ryu pushed against Hiro's strength with determination, his eyes fully opened and brimming with anger. Hiro grinned back as he wrestled with Ryu, striking his blade against his, blocking every blow.

"You've gotten stronger, I see," said Hiro as he adjusted his stance to deflect Ryu's push forward.

Ryu continued striking at Hiro, moving faster with every slash. Hiro's blocking began to slow down—he clearly hadn't been expecting Ryu's speed. After his next block, Hiro reached for his pistol, lifted it in the same motion, and shot at Ryu's face. Ryu had calculated the move and shoved off him at the same time. He landed in a crouching position and then immediately sped up to meet Hiro again, using super speed, right before he was able to shoot off another bullet.

“Oh no you don’t,” said Ryu as he lunged and made contact with Hiro’s face.

Hiro was knocked back slightly, stunned. Ryu kept coming at him and did not allow him time to survey his face. Ryu continued with kicks and punches, all in sequence moving at greater speed with every attack.

“I’m not the same Ryu you shoved around and mocked before,” said Ryu as he punched and kicked at Hiro. “I am a different Ryu. I am the Ryu that can defeat YOU!” He connected again with a kick to Hiro’s gut.

Hiro bent slightly, gasping for air. He let off for a second, giving Ryu time to connect again with two punches and an uppercut to his face. Hiro’s entire body was knocked backward with the uppercut. He landed on his back and barely managed to hold himself upright with his arms. He spat out blood into the dirt and looked over to Ryu, who was walking slowly towards him.

“Wow, this is more like it!” Hiro laughed, his face changing to the look of a madman. “Yes, *C’m on*, get *closer, closer*, I want more!”

Ryu continued to close in.

“I’m going to finish you off in your own fashion, WITH MY BARE HANDS,” he shouted as he lunged again.

Hiro lifted his wrist, still grinning, and clicked on his wrist device’s screen. Ryu caught himself mid-way and adjusted his approach just in time to dodge a slash that came from his side. He looked to his left and noticed an individual who was in a white and blue suit. He jumped back again and turned his attention to the stranger.

“Who are you?” asked Ryu, keeping his distance.

Hiro stood up and wiped the blood from his mouth.

"This is one of my new friends," he said arrogantly as he positioned himself at the new soldier's side. "I didn't want to introduce him this early on, but since I have other tasks I need to attend to, I had no other choice," he said with a smirk.

Ryu looked at the soldier and immediately felt that he should attempt to sway this person to put down their weapon and refuse Hiro's orders. His beef wasn't with anyone but Hiro.

"You don't have to fi—" he said, but it was too late. The soldier was already coming at him.

Ryu managed to dodge the attack, weaving backwards. Then again, he didn't have time to persuade this stranger of anything—he needed to get rid of him, so he could return to destroying Hiro. So Ryu narrowed his eyes and launched himself at the soldier.

But something made him pause at the last moment. A gunshot rang out from a distance, and a bullet hit his opponent straight in the head.

SPLAT went the bullet. The soldier fell to the ground.

"Don't worry Ryu, I've got your back!" said a voice in Ryu's headset. Airi!

Ryu looked up and tried to make out the direction of the sound. He was able to calculate the distance and looked over to a ridge that was slightly higher than the area where Ryu was standing. He lifted his hand and gave Airi a thumbs-up.

"THIS ISN'T OVER!" shouted Hiro. Ryu looked back at him just in time to see him touching his device again.

Without warning, Ryu was surrounded by six more individuals who were suited exactly like the previous soldier. He prepared

himself.

“Dammit,” he heard Airi say over comms and glanced in her direction to see drones bearing down on her position on the ridge. She’d be preoccupied with them for a bit. Ryu would have to deal with these soldiers alone.

“REDEEMERS INITIALIZE!” he shouted.

His pistols initialized, and he jumped into the air. He targeted each of his opponents in succession within seconds and began to fire.

The soldiers dodged every shot, adjusting their positions effortlessly, which caught Ryu by surprise. Their movements were almost inhuman.

What the hell? He’d never faced any soldier before who was fast enough to avoid bullets. “How are they able to...” he wondered aloud as he landed back on the ground.

He was once again surrounded and was about to initialize again when he heard a voice behind him.

“I’m here,” said Turbo as he ran into the fight, moving so fast he was just a blur.

He moved around each of the soldiers and knocked them back with punches. His bracers, which were modified to allow him to run at extreme speeds, were making their debut. He continued to move around each individual, lunging every second as to put them on the defensive.

“Keep them busy,” Ryu said. “I’ll take care of Hiro.”

“Gotcha,” said Turbo.

Ryu turned his attention back to Hiro, who looked awestruck by Turbo’s speed.

"We're not finished yet," he said as he moved to face him again.

"Clearly not," said Hiro, stepping forward to meet him.

Just as Ryu was about to connect, Hiro moved slightly to his right and ducked under Ryu's swinging punch. Ryu looked down at him and noticed a sinister grin on his face. Hiro jumped away from Ryu, and Ryu looked down at his suit, which was covered in multiple blinking lights. Hiro had attached multiple explosives to his suit the moment he swung under his arm. And they were armed and beeping.

"Bye-bye," said Hiro, with a wave of his hand.

BOOOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

Each explosive went off one after another. Ryu was engulfed in flames and smoke.

* * *

Turbo paused in his fight with the soldiers as soon as he heard the explosions. Ryu was nowhere to be seen, lost somewhere in all that smoke.

"Ryu!" he shouted. "RYU!"

His friend didn't respond.

Suddenly, a giant burst of flames flew in Turbo's direction, forcing him to duck. It was a flamethrower.

The Torch had decided to join in the fight.

"Did you miss me?" he shouted as he continued spraying flames at Turbo.

Turbo, caught off guard and still worried for Ryu, lifted his arms in an attempt to stop the flames with his shielding abilities. "RYU!" he shouted again.

* * *

"Find the Syphon and destroy it," Hiro ordered his soldiers, who ran off at once. He was turning his back to assist the Torch when he suddenly felt the urge to look back one last time. He saw Ryu walking slowly out from the pile of flames that had engulfed him. *Unbelievable* he said to himself.

"You think you're going to get off that easy?" said Ryu

Hiro spun back around in alarm. "WHAT? How?" He stared at Ryu like he was seeing a ghost. Then his eyes narrowed in anger.

"You just can't seem to kill me, can you?" said Ryu with a smile, goading him.

He glanced over at the Torch, who was overwhelming his friend.

"TALONS OF LIGHT, INITIALIZE," Ryu shouted.

His body was engulfed once again in a radiating aura. A circle of light surrounded him and spun like a tornado. The circle broke and revealed multiple daggers of energy. Ryu smiled deeper at the look of shock on Hiro's face.

Then Ryu ordered the talons to attack by pointing in the Torch's direction. The talons sped off, moving at the speed of light towards their target. The Torch glanced over his shoulder and fell to the ground in a panic. He dropped the flamethrower, which allowed Turbo to regain his momentum.

"Turbo, go help the people get to safety, I am going to end this now," said Ryu.

"No, I'm not going to leave you!" said Turbo.

"Turbo, GO, *please*! We have to save them!" Ryu shouted back.

Turbo looked at him like he wanted to keep arguing, but he could read in Ryu's eyes that he wasn't going to change his mind. So he pressed his lips together and nodded.

"I will meet up with you shortly," said Ryu as he turned back to Hiro.

"Hiro, call off the attack," he shouted as he froze his talons in mid-air, just shy of killing Hiro and the Torch. "NOW, or I will kill you!"

But Hiro just stood there staring at him. He no longer looked in shock or anger; he looked deep in concentration, studying Ryu with curiosity.

"DID YOU HEAR ME? CALL OFF THE ATTACK!" Ryu shouted again.

That seemed to finally snap Hiro out of his dream state.

"It all makes sense now," Hiro muttered. "It all makes sense now." His eyes grew wide and fully opened as if thoughts plagued his mind. Ryu looked at him and prepared himself. He knew Hiro was as conniving as the General. A master of deceit and trickery.

"What are you talking about?" said Ryu with a frustrated expression.

"Why the General always told me to watch your every move..." said Hiro slowly.

"I know who you are."

Ryu looked at him and froze in his steps. "You know who I am?"

What the hell does that mean?"

Hiro was just trying to slow him down by confusing him, wasn't he? He was just being the same old pompous idiot he'd always been. Except, it was like he believed it, whatever he was talking about... Like he really did know something about Ryu. "It always bothered me, you know, having to play second to someone as insignificant as yourself, number 1-0-1," said Hiro softly, through his teeth. "Why would the General assign you a number before me?" He let out a short laugh, more like a breath. "Of course, it makes sense now... Your abilities, which you never had before, and your moves, all of which you've managed to hone in such a short time... No one is capable of such change. No one. Unless... you are not human."

Ryu was so fixated on Hiro's response that he failed to hear his name called out multiple times over the headset.

"Ryu!" shouted Airi. "Ryu, can you hear me? RYUUUUUUU!"

Ryu touched his headset while still keeping his eyes on both Hiro and the Torch. "Yes?" he replied.

"Ryu, get out of there!" Airi said with fear in her voice.

"What? Why?" he replied as he looked around.

"The Syphon—it's become unstable! Ben was attacked—they overwhelmed him."

"But how?" he replied.

"There's no time—you need to get out *now*. IT'S GOING TO EXPLODE!" she yelled.

Hiro was still standing there with that strange, infuriating look of recognition in his eyes that Ryu didn't quite yet understand, *not human*, but there wasn't time to stay and find out why. Ryu turned

and sprinted off in the direction his senses were directing him towards. He moved as fast as he could.

As he ran he felt a cold feeling in his soul. *If that thing explodes it's going to kill everyone. I have to get to it in time—I have to, I have to save everyone. I made that promise to Angela and I have to keep it.*

He looked at his visor, hoping to see the coordinates that were transmitted by the Professor. Ryu spotted a small blip that was on the far side of the city. He increased his speed, knowing he had to cut through the middle of the city in order to make it there faster. He dodged through crumbling buildings that were in his way. He ran through burning homes and jumped over craters left by the bombs.

He arrived at the area, which was vacated, and looked around frantically in all directions. Time was running out.

“Ben!” he shouted “BEN!”

Nothing.

He spotted a bright aura coming from his left. Beyond a small structure. He ran towards it. There, he saw Ben's CBE and the Syphon radiating uncontrollably on the ground in front of the unit. An individual, one of Hiro's accomplices was also lying on the ground, lifeless. This was surely where Ben had been confronted on his way to the shuttle.

Ryu only needed seconds to understand the only option that was available to him in that very moment. He was aware of the blast radius that the Syphon had and the power it held, which equaled that of a miniature nuke, which the Professor had shared with them. He looked over to the CBE unit, and then back at the

Syphon.

His legs moved before he had even decided to take a step, as if his heart was controlling his mind and not the other way around. He felt extremely at ease for a split second as his mind opened to multiple flashbacks of all of the people who had pierced his heart, just as Angela had said to him. His mind raced with memories of his friends, his teasing of Turbo, the sly remarks from the Professor, Airi's crude outbursts, Ben's nerdy smile, and finally Angela's soft lips. All moments that had helped him find peace and comfort in this messed up world. *So it comes to this*, he thought to himself with a faint smirk. *Well, can't say it was all bad.*

"Ryu, come in!" came Turbo's voice over the headset, like he could somehow sense what Ryu was planning to do. "RYU, RYU!" His voice was full of emotion as he shouted over and over to Ryu for a response.

This was the moment Ryu had been born for. This was the moment when he would finally be able to meet his parents and the friend he'd lost again, and he would do it all for love.

He ran towards the CBE and jumped inside. He closed the cockpit, which initiated the unit, and moved to grab the Syphon. As he grabbed it he looked up in time to see Hiro and the GWO flying off in their aircraft. The bastards had realized what was happening and were fleeing too, though this was all their fault.

Ryu initiated his thrusters and shot off into the sky. He knew he had to gain altitude quickly in order to save his friends and everyone still alive in the city from the blast. He turned on his headset to answer Turbo, who was still shouting his name.

"Turbo," he said.



"RYU, RYU," replied Turbo. "ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

"Take care, my friend," Ryu said as he held back his emotion.

"NO, RYU!" Turbo began sobbing; Ryu could hear it in his voice.

"YOU CAN'T, PLEASE... DON'T DO IT!"

"Take care of him, Professor," said Ryu, who knew the old man would be listening, too. "Goodbye."

"RYUUUUU, NOOOOOOOOO—!" shouted Airi.

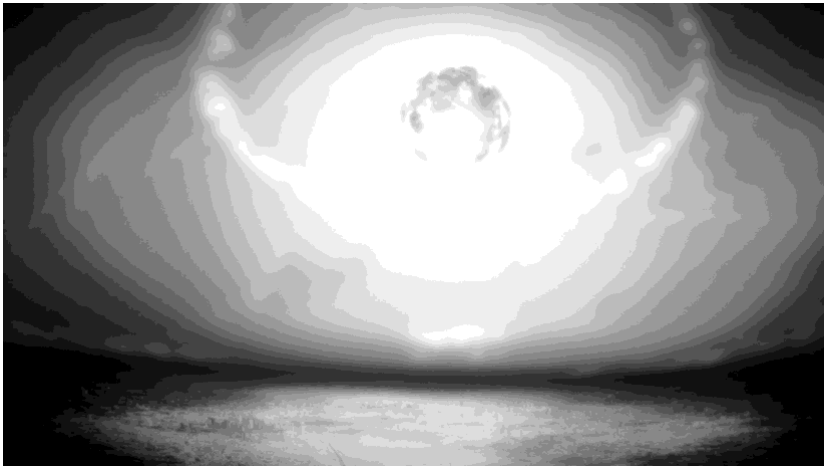
Ryu removed his headset, cutting off her voice. He wanted to clear his mind and attempt to make his last action into something pleasurable instead of painful.

He leaned back and looked straight into the star-filled sky as his CBE ascended into the night, leaving a trail of smoke in its wake. A tear trickled down his cheek, and his heart was pounding, though he was trying not to be afraid. This was his choice; this was his

death the way he wanted it, not the way Hiro or the GWO or anyone had intended for it to happen. And that was enough.

The CBE began to rattle as it climbed higher into the atmosphere. Ryu kept his eyes open in order catch the last glimpse of life as it faded from his body. He pushed the CBE to full throttle.

“For everyone,” he murmured, as the sky lit up before his eyes and engulfed him. His last expression was a smile.



* * *

The explosion was so immense that it caused an electromagnetic pulse that shut down the entire underground facility. Hiro’s aircraft was caught within the edge of the blast and was blinded momentarily by the light, which caused the Nighthawk to readjust in mid-air. Turbo ran topside as fast as he could, with Ben and Airi following behind him. They had retreated back inside the facility at the last minute, hoping that would be enough to shield themselves from the explosion. Inside they had watched the events unfold from the main terminal.

They arrived just in time to see the blast of their friend’s

sacrifice fade out and reveal a star-filled sky once again. Turbo dropped to his knees and looked at the ground, still sobbing, his soul feeling like it had been torn apart. Ben and Airi were at his side, looking into the night sky, also shedding tears with emotion.

"He will live on in our thoughts," she said, putting a hand on Turbo's shoulder as she wiped her tears with her other hand. "His sacrifice was not in vain," she said

Ben looked over to Airi and wiped his tears. He nodded at her and looked down at Turbo. After a few moments, he spoke, softly.

"Turbo, I don't feel like I'm worthy enough to assume that I know what Ryu did was right, but I agree with Airi. Ryu did what he felt he had to do. He saved everyone here, look up and open your eyes." he said as the chatter of people began to rise up around them.

Turbo lifted his head and looked for a brief moment. He spotted through one eye as he looked over his shoulder a multitude of people who were coming towards them, out of the rubble of their broken homes. Men, women, and children, hundreds of them, all alive because Ryu had saved them. Turbo wiped his tears and slowly got to his feet. The people gathered around them and one by one began to thank them.

"Thank you, kind sir," said a boy who grabbed at Turbo's leg.

"Thank you, you all saved us, we are in your debt," another lady said, smiling at them with soot-stained cheeks and tears of gratitude in her eyes.

More and more came forward, one after another. Airi looked at her friends then at everyone and smiled back. Turbo who had come to terms understanding that life even without his friend could

still be meaningful couldn't help smiling, too.

"This is why we do what we do," Airi said softly. "Ryu understood it from the beginning. He was a hero for us all."

The group stayed behind for a while, helping the citizens with removing debris and putting out the fires.

The Professor, who had witnessed the whole thing from his assigned facility, was looking at his tablet with deep concentration. He paused for a moment and looked up with a giant grin on his face.

"I knew I had seen those markings before, I knew it."

**TO BE
CONTINUED...**