

SECOND SKIN

by Gabe McFadden

Second Skin

“To the next two years!” the clink of our glasses mixed with the sounds of laughter and music all around us. I set down my empty glass with a thunk and looked at the blinking notification in front of me.

“Ready guys?” said Trent. “On the count of three! One! Two!...”

Everything around me melted away as I tapped the message on my phone.

Recruit 63943B,

Thank you for reporting for duty. The time has come for you to help usher in a glorious era of peace, prosperity, and happiness for generations to come—

Whitney scoffed next to me, “They make it sound like we had a choice. I’ll bet we won’t find the words ‘mandatory service’ anywhere in this letter.”

The group shushed her and kept reading their letters.

We are at a turning point. With the energy and power of youth, we will finally put an end to this fight. The Country eagerly awaits and appreciates your service.

You’ll be reporting to Unit Xeno44, Mech Development and Testing. Please find enclosed—

I breathed a sigh of relief. Development. Testing. Thank goodness. I’d only heard stories of people actually getting called to fight but the possibility had still kept me up for the last few nights.

Whitney nudged my arm, “What you get? You look relieved.”

“Dev,” I said. “You?”

“Same!” she said. “Infrastructure Robotics Development, what’s yours?”

“You guys both got Robotics?” Trent leaned over trying to see our messages. “Nerd alert. I’m not really surprised though. Isn’t that what you expected?”

“It’s just a relief,” I said. “What’s yours?”

“You worry too much, I told you it would be fine,” Trent held up his screen. “Drone Pilot. See, no one actually gets hurt anymore.”

“Didn’t Maggie get drones last year?” asked Whitney. “I know that one weird kid with the spiky hair got something Robotics. I think most people get Drone Pilot.”

“Josh? I think his name was Josh.” Trent supplied. He turned to me, “Did you both get Infrastructure Robotics positions? That’s crazy.”

“No, I got Mechs,” I said.

“Dude, that’s sick,” said Trent. “My brother’s friend got Mechs but he was just a mechanic. Development is awesome.”

“I guess,” I shrugged. “It’s not like we really have a choice.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Whitney said. “Trent, go get us another round?”

He rolled his eyes, “I’m putting it on your tab. Meet you guys on the roof?”

Whitney and I headed up the stairs.

“I’m kind of excited,” she said. “Is that weird?”

“Not really,” I said. “I guess because for so long we’ve wondered and now it’s gonna happen. It’s kind of weird more than anything. I hope it’s not horrible.”

Whitney clapped me on the shoulder, “If everyone else survives it, we will too.”

We stood in silence and looked over the city. A flash of light above us caught my eye and I looked up at the Dome.

“It’s weird,” I looked over and Whitney was also looking up. “I feel like I don’t even notice them. But it’s gonna be our life for the next two years.”

I stared at the swarms of drones fighting above us, “Yeah, you were there when my grandma came to visit, right?”

“Yeah,” Whitney started laughing, “I know I shouldn’t laugh but—”

“You’d be freaking out too if your earliest memories were literally hiding underground,” I paused and stared laughing too. “But forcing an entire dinner party to bring their plates down into the basement is kind of funny.”

“Ugh it was so awkward,” said Whitney. “But I really don’t blame her,” she trailed off, distracted by another flash of light.

“She says she remembers the stars,” I said. “It was one of the last things she said to me before she died. She said, ‘Don’t worry, I finally get to see the stars again.’”

“Geez Debbie Downer over here,” Trent came up behind us balancing three drinks. “I leave you guys for like five minutes and you get all emotional.”

I pointed up at the swarm, “That’s gonna be you.”

“Seriously,” he said. “All my video game days will finally pay off.”

“Ace Pilot Trent Faulkner,” said Whitney.

“It has a nice ring to it,” I said.

“Well they are pretty much all AI controlled now. So who knows how much ‘piloting’ I’ll actually get to do. Not nearly as cool as the Mech rigs though,” Trent took a drink. “I remember I tried one at that arcade.”

“I don’t think that was completely accurate,” I laughed.

“You mean you aren’t gonna be blasting giant spiders and big chested alien women?”

"I hate to let you down, but I don't think either of us will ever get to meet a big chested alien woman," I said.

"And to think they say this is the Age of Technology," Whitney sighed.

"Yeah, what the hell are we spending all of our money on," Trent said.

Simultaneously, Whitney and I pointed at the Dome above us and laughed.

We sat and watched the flashes of light above us. "Do you guys think it's ever gonna stop?" I asked.

"Debbie Downer is back," said Trent. "Real talk though, honestly? No.. What's gonna change?"

"They hit our Dome and we hit theirs," said Whitney. "We keep building drones and Mechs and they do too."

"So much is happening, nothing is," I said. We looked at the sky in silence. "I guess it's just two years."

"That's the spirit!"

"Good morning soldiers!" a bookish looking woman walked brusquely into the room and stopped at the front of it facing us. "Welcome to Xeno44, one of the most prestigious units in the force. I'm Dr. Caldwell. Please, sit."

The chairs squeaked as we all sat down. Dr. Caldwell cleared her throat, "I say prestigious not to buoy you up or bring you down, it's simply a fact.

"Contrary to popular belief, the draft system isn't *completely* random. As you probably guessed, we work with Mechanized Electric Combat Humanoids, commonly referred to as Mechs.

You will be aiding in the testing and development—” she was cut off by a cheer from one of the recruits.

“Yes, quite. While I appreciate the enthusiasm, you must remember. We are not here to play around in giant robot suits. We are at war. All of you here are too young to remember how this all started but though everything seems stable, the world is in turmoil and the balance of power could shift at any moment.

“You all were selected for this group due to both your unique skill set and your genetics. This is not saying that one of you is the ‘chosen one’ or some nonsense like that. Quite frankly, you were chosen because your body is the optimal size to fit inside the Mech paired with the fact that based on testing, we believe that all of you in this room have the cognitive skills necessary to help polish and improve our current AI fighting system.”

I looked around the room and though I hadn’t initially noticed it, we all really were pretty much the same size. It was about equally male and female with a variety of races but we were all tall, lanky, and leaning towards being on the athletic side. Obviously some of us looked more fit than others, but for the most part we all had the same build. I hadn’t anticipated really spending that much time inside a Mech though. I guess that’s where the “testing” part came in.

“The top soldiers from this program are often given high level Military and Government positions upon completion of your two years. Though your service now is mandatory, it has the potential to lead you to a very prestigious and important career,” she looked around, sizing us up. “Now, it’s time to get your Ports and we can begin training,” Dr. Caldwell stepped to the side and gestured to tiny old man who had just walked in.

“My turn?” he said. “Perfect timing guess!” he gave a wheezy chuckle and turned to the group. “I’m Dr. Hepstead. I’ll be installing your Ports today. It’s mandatory, every soldier has one, and it doesn’t hurt. Please follow me to the Med Bay.

We stood and walked in awkward silence down the hall. Once at the Med Bay, they split us up by gender. The guys went to the left and I followed the rest of the girls down the hall on the right. There, a female nurse instructed us to take off our shirts and wait patiently.

The two girls behind me started chatting. Feeling too cold and awkward to join in, I tried to not look like I was listening in. They were talking about their boyfriends back home and how they wondered if they would still want them when they came back.

"I think you just have to hope it works out," one said. "Like, you can't force it. If it works out, it works out. But you can't expect him to wait *two years* for you to get back. A lot happens. What did you do when he left?"

"We weren't dating yet," said the other one. "He said he would wait."

"He probably just wanted to make sure you'd sleep with him one last time," the first girl said matter-of-factly.

"Stop!" she sounded annoyed. "I trust him."

"Famous last words."

I bit back a smile as I neared the front of the the line. There were ten or so sets of opaque glass doors. A pair of nurses were directing the line into them as they emptied out.

Finally, it was my turn and one of the nurses waved me through. The door opened and closed with a hiss. I found myself in a tiny white room.

"*Decontaminating,*" a robotic voice filled the small space as a cloud of smoke descended from the ceiling. Once the smoke cleared, a little robotic arm with a tube on the end started slowly coming out of the wall.

"*Please place hair strands in tube.*"

“Like all of it?” I asked the room. No answer. I grabbed my ponytail and stuck the end in the tube. I jumped when a flash of light blinded me. I checked the end of my ponytail. The last inch was gone. “I guess there goes my split ends” I said as I looked around the tiny space.

A panel on the wall slid open revealing a piece of glass with two handprints on it. *“Please place hands on glass.”* Hoping I wouldn’t get a flash of light and lose my hands I slowly placed my hands on the glass. There was a buzzing sound as they were scanned and then—

“Ow!” I pulled my hands away. And looked at the glass. A little syringe had poked my finger and grabbed a few drops of blood.

“Place your feet on the lit steps and hold all hair well away from the back of your neck,” I looked down and saw a glowing set of footprints. I stood on them and pulled my hair out of the way, exposing the back of my neck.

“Look down,” A glowing red target appeared near my feet with the words *Please look here, do not move.* I stared at the target and tried not to flinch as a pair of cold metal arms came to rest on my shoulders. I jumped when another set grabbed the sides of my head, rooting me in place.

“Please do not move.”

“I can’t now,” I said to the room. “Ah!” something that felt like an ice cube pressed against the back of my neck. It wasn’t painful, just disconcerting.

“Please do not move. Three, Two, One.”

There was a puff of air at my neck and the arms released me and retraced.

“Please exit the unit.”

I touched the back of my neck as I walked out of the little room. Right at the base of my hairline there was a little circular bump under my skin. I heard a burst of laughter and looked behind me, the two girls behind me in line were also exiting their units and one of them was making fun of the other.

"You only put in half of your hair?" she looked back and forth between each half of her friends hair. "Well, it's not *that* bad."

"Oh no! Is there a mirror anywhere?" she was frantically stroking her hair, one side was significantly shorter than the other.

"Maybe we should all ask the machine for bangs next time, right?" I said as the they waked by.

Either they didn't hear me or I offended them because they didn't respond.

"Yikes," I said to myself. "Awkward."

I sighed and started to walk back to the room we started in when someone came up next to me, "I thought it was funny," she said. "I just stuck in one of these and it seemed to be good enough. She showed me a skinny braid that abruptly ended a few inches above the rest. "I'm Ava," she held out her hand.

"Aubrey," I said, shaking her hand.

"You ready for the next two years?" she said. "It's still kind of surreal for me."

"Yeah, it's all been a blur so far," I said. "I don't think it's sunk in yet."

"It's weird because no one really talks about it, it just kind of happens and everyone seems to move on with their lives," said Ava.

"I mean we all have to do it and it looks like it'll just be us in front of computers mostly," I said. "Not too different than a regular friday night for me."

"Seriously," said Ava with a grin. "I'll probably end up hanging out with more people than usual."

We laughed as we approached the room. Once inside we found two seats near the back and looked around. About half of the group was back from getting their Ports.

"See anyone you like?" I asked.

“What? It’s been like three hours,” Ava snorted. “Are you really that ready? I mean no judgement or anything.”

I shook my head with a smile, “No, no, not at all. My mom is just convinced I’ll bring home a husband.”

“Really? Mine’s scared I’ll come back pregnant”

“Ugh, gross,” I rubbed the back of my neck. “I’ve already had one foreign object put in me today and that’s more than enough.”

Ava gave me a look then burst out laughing right as Dr. Caldwell walked back into the room.

“It’s good to see everyone is getting along,” she said with a tight smile. She tapped the board and a map appeared. “You’re done for today, women are in Bunkhouse 10 and men are in Bunkhouse 11, see you all at oh eight hundred hours tomorrow morning.”

We all made our way down to the bunkhouses. It was a row of identical looking buildings that once we got inside, revealed rows and rows of identical bunkbeds and at the end, a little common area that connected our bunkhouse to the one the men were sleeping in. It was kind of like going to college except some of the classes were combat based and all of the professors were either doctors, ranking generals, or both. It was strange. Most of the girls inside, like me, had done two years of actual University, came here for their mandatory two years, and then would return to school after to finish their degree.

Most of us weren’t used to dorm living. Even during my first two years University I was lucky enough to have a tiny, old apartment a few blocks away from campus with some friends from back home. Ava and I found a bunk and set our bags down.

“Can I have bottom?” she asked. “I’m not a morning person and I don’t want to deal with ladders first thing in the morning.

“Sure,” I said. “It’s like Girl Scout Camp in here. I feel like we’re about to head down to the lake to make bracelets or something.”

Ava snorted, “I mean it’s kind of like that except we will be heading down to the lab to help make giant killing machines.”

“Ah, the glory of battle,” I said as I flopped down on Ava’s bed next to her.

“Want me to braid your hair?” Ava asked. “Or maybe we can get all the girls to play Truth or Dare.”

We laughed and looked around at the other girls all getting settled in. It was kind of a surreal moment. Fortunately, we all looked more or less like we would hang out in the same cliché high school clique. But it was still weird to think that all of us in here, along with all of the people in the bunkhouses surrounding this one, were part of a war. A generations-long, world war that really, I never thought about until I got my letter.

“Whatcha thinking about?” Ava asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Nothing, just looking around,” I said. “This is weird when you really think about it.”

“What do you mean? Like the bunk beds?”

“No, like the fact that we are all here to help fight a war,” I laid down on the bed again.

“We’re just a bunch of college kids.”

“No, we’re the ‘bright minds leading our country forward into a better tomorrow,’ silly” Ava mimicked the voice of the overzealous general who gave our ‘Welcome to the Compound’ speech.

“But actually, yeah, it is kind of weird. I try not to think about it. It’s basically an extra two years of college. And it’s mandatory so whatever, right?”

“Nothing like a calm acceptance of the things we can’t change to motivate you.”

“The best way to learn how a Mech can works is to just get your hands dirty and jump right on in!” Our instructor stood in front of a line of Mechs and looked us all up and down. There was a pause, then, “Well? Hop to it! Did you guys hear me or not?” His voice echoed though the large warehouse.

There was another beat before everyone realized exactly what was being asked. They, like me, had all assumed our job would be more “behind the scenes.” We all walked uncertainly towards a mech.

They all looked more or less the same—stark gray and surprisingly fluid. They were beautiful, imposing, and *powerful*. I’d never seen one up close before. It was smaller than I thought it would be. They were humanoid in that they were bipedal with two arms and a vaguely human shape, but were sleek, smooth, and solid in a way humans never could be.

I remember reading about the first generations of the Mechs and they were much more “form over function,” but as the war progressed and technology grew and advanced, the machines got more streamlined. I remember my grandmother showing me a picture of one of the old gasoline cars that was vintage even when she was young. She had a picture of it framed on her wall with her great grandfather standing proudly next to it—the Jaguar E Type. She said it was the most beautiful machine ever made and that the new Mechs like the ones in front of me reminded her of it.

Ava and I stood next to each other in front of a Mech, we made eye contact and she shrugged. When in Rome I guess.

“You guys are the least excited bunch of recruits I’ve ever had!” the instructor shouted. “The last group was chomping at the bit to get inside! Come on! Jump in! Take it for a spin! How can you learn to improve something you don’t understand?”

I looked over and Ava was climbing into her Mech with a wicked grin on her face and I had to admit, I was starting to get excited too. Regardless of how surprised I was at the chance to pilot one, it’s a giant robot power suit. Who wouldn’t be at least a little bit excited?

I climbed up the back and peered into the open hatch, it was tiny.

“Is your hatch as tight of a squeeze as mine?” Ava was slowly lowering herself inside.

“That’s what she said!” I said back as I started to slide in too. “But yeah. I know they said we’re the ideal body type of whatever but we’ll really have to lay off the carbs if we’re gonna be doing this a lot.”

With an unladylike “ughpmh” and a lot of squirming, I managed to slide myself into the suit. As soon as my feet hit the bottom, my body jolted with an electric shock and all the lights came on inside. My visor lit up, Ava’s face came up in corner my display.

“Hey! Can you see me?” she asked.

“Yeah!” I said back. “How did you get the comms working so fast?”

“I just asked the suit to connect to you and it did,” she said. “I’m shocked it worked.”

“They’ve thought of everything,” I said. “Can you move at all? I feel like I’m floating in the middle of a jelly doughnut.”

Ava laughed, “Me too! I have a little bit of wiggle room but the suit isn’t responding. I think we have to do something to boot it up.”

Just then, our instructor’s voice filled my head, “Hello recruits! You’re all finally inside and ready for your first trial run. Now remember—once they are on, they will feel like a natural extension of your body. You cannot forget that you in a are 5 ton metal box. While the very deadly

weapons have been disabled, you can still do significant damage to yourselves, me, and this facility with the training ones. Mechs! Online! Run Training Procalls!"

A series of beeps and whirring of my mech suit coming to life was the last thing I remembered before I blacked out.

"...eight, nine, ten!" A distant voice slowly got louder and louder. I felt like I was coming out of a long tunnel. The voice started up again, it was my instructor. "You all should have full control of your senses again. Be careful, don't make any big sudden movements. Remember, you're in a giant suit.

I took a moment to take in my surroundings. I was higher up than I normally was but other than that, I didn't feel like I was in a Mech suit. My vision had a bunch of gauges and data on the sides like the AR Sets we wore at Museums and stuff, but other than that I just felt tall.

I took a few experimental steps and saw in my peripheral a few other Mechs doing the same. It was a weird feeling. I felt like the Mech Suit was just my body but it was also a different body than I was used to. It was a weird sensation—like I had body swapped a linebacker or something.

After a few minutes of everyone aimlessly walking around and getting used to their new "bodies," the instructor had us pair up. Ava and I tried a game of patty cake while we waited but stopped almost right away because it made the machines enter combat mode and a giant weapons select screen overlaid across our vision.

"Do you think we'll get to choose?" Ava asked. "This is kind of really cool."

"I don't know," I flicked my eyes down the list, pretty much everything was greyed out besides the basic hand-to-hand type stuff. "I think I'll be pretty useless with all of them."

Our instructors voice popped into my head again, "Your brains are more powerful than any computer we've had the ability to build. As you probably know, these machines can connect to the module the scientists stuck inside you. They draw on the raw processing power in your brain and help you make the best decisions in battle.

"But, the flow of information goes both ways. We've found that human reactions and human logic are more effective and less predictable to our enemies in battle than any complete AI we've built. In layman's terms: in this suit, your brain thinks the mech suit is your body. Like your own body, your brain knows it's limitations and abilities. You will solve problems as you normally would, but your actions will be supplemented subconsciously by the abilities that these Mech Suits have. To me, wearing the suit always felt like having super powers.

"Now, we're not going to do this every day, but it will help you get a feel for they type of stuff you'll be helping create in the future. Find one of the giant white circles throughout the warehouse and get ready to spar with your partner. Neither of you can do any *real* damage, but rest assured, you will probably wake up sore tomorrow."

I saw Ava's Mech turn towards mine at the same time I turned towards hers. Ava made something that I assumed was a shrug and started walking to one of the far corners of the warehouse.

"Let's go to the far one over there," she said and a little red marker dot appeared across my vision. Suddenly there was a burst of light as the boosters on the back of Ava's suit turned on. "Race you there?" And she took off running much faster than I thought the suit could go.

Not wanting to be left behind I took off too. I felt the rumble of my boosters turning on behind me as well. Still unable to catch up due to Ava's head start, I tried to get a little creative.

I took a huge leap and felt the turbo boosters under my feet also turn on. I shot over Ava and braced myself. I landed surprisingly smoothly and slowed to a jog as I arrived at the circle.

“Victory!” I said as I took a mock bow to an imaginary adoring crowd.

“How did you know we could do rocket jumps? That was so cool!” Ava said.

“I didn’t!” I laughed. “I just got desperate and they turned on when I jumped.”

“I’m kind of excited to see what these suits can do,” Ava took a boxing pose and rocked from foot to foot.

“Do you think it will hurt?” I asked. “Like, aren’t we connected to these suits with our *brains?*”

Instead of answering, Ava gave me a swift punch in the arm.

“Ow!” I said, taking a few steps back. I raised my fists too, “What the heck, Ava.”

“Well?” she asked. “Did it hurt? There really wasn’t any other way to find out.”

All I had felt was a little bit of vibrating and the little model of my Mech Suit’s arm in the corner of my vision blinked a soft red for a moment.

“No,” I said truthfully. “But it was still rude.”

“Then, put ‘em up!” said Ava as she took a fighting stance again. “Let’s do this! It’ll be fun.”

I took a few steps back and a fighting stance too. Right as I thought how nice a weapon would be, the menu pulled up across my vision again. I selected the traditional sword and shield because all of the really cool looking guns were un-selectable. As soon as I chose it, an oval shield folded itself out of my arm and a long grey sword-looking pole shot out of my hand.

“What?!” yelled Ava across the comms. “No fair! I want one!”

As she said it, two swords appeared in her hands.

“Shields are for weenies,” she said. “You ready?”

“Yea—” I didn’t even have time to finish before Ava lunged at me.

Much to my surprise, my arm made it up in time to block the blow. Thinking I had to counter attack, I was surprised again when my suit spun around behind Ava and took a swing. Just as

quickly, she flipped around and blocked my swing with one of her swords while swinging at my unprotected side with the other.

I jumped back, and my vision got brighter as the boosters that I didn't know were on my chest lit up and shot me backwards.

Ava jumped into the air and I saw the boosters on her shoulders activate and propel her downwards towards me. I lifted my shield and braced for impact.

"I really shouldn't have told you about the rocket jump," I said over the comms. Her feet slammed into my shield and my shoulder vibrated and lit up red. I threw her Mech off to the side and prepared to charge her again.

Ava laughed, "How are we so good at this? It's like a video game!"

We stood and faced each other for a second.

"I think it's the combination of the programming of the suit and our brain?" I said. "Isn't that how it works?"

"I guess so?" Ava said. "So basically whoever is smarter will win?"

I charged at Ava while she was finishing her sentence. Catching her off guard, I slammed into her with my shield and pushed her out of the ring.

"Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner," our instructors voice came over the comms. I hadn't realized he was watching. "Don't lose focus girls. You guys will be ranked in the future so these fights do matter. You're both focusing too much on theatrics. Your generation has watched too many movies. Real battles are tight, fast, and reactionary. Keep up the good work though."

Ava and I sparred for the next little bit, we were pretty evenly matched. It really was like a movie or video game. When I think of myself fighting, I feel like I know how to do it. Whenever I've watched a fight scene I think I know when I would have ducked or dodged or whatever. These suits

just seemed to tap into that. Sometimes I was too slow or my timing was off but for the most part, it was a pretty smooth system.

“All right recruits,” our instructor came over the comms again. “You don’t feel it yet, but you’ve been pushing your fragile little human bodies pretty hard inside these suits. Let’s call it a day. You’ll all be cursing my name in the morning,” The last thing I heard before my vision flashed black was his laughter.

The transition out of the suit felt faster. My vision flashed black then suddenly I was completely aware of my own body inside the suit. Above me, the hatch opened up with a hiss.

I pulled my arms out of the Mech and reached up towards the bar to pull myself out. My muscles screamed in protest as I struggled to lift myself out. I felt like I had just been weightlifting for hours.

I sat on the edge of my suit and caught my breath and stretched out my sore arms. I looked over at Ava’s mech and saw just her hands reaching and waving feebly out of the top of her hatch.

“Help me, Aubrey!” She yelled to me. “I’m too weak!”

I laughed as I lowered myself down from my mech and climbed up hers. I grabbed her hands and together, we barely managed to lift her out.

“How did you make it out of your suit?” said Ava. “My arms feel like Jell-O.”

“I guess I’m just in better shape than you,” I flexed my arms as Ava playfully punched me in the shoulder.

We woke up the next morning just as sore as we were promised. I had never been so glad to have a lecture scheduled. I really couldn’t imagine getting into a Mech suit again.

“Good morning Soldiers!” the woman from our first day, Dr. Caldwell, walked briskly into the classroom. “I take it based on how most of you are sitting, you had the opportunity to pilot a Mech suit yesterday.” She chuckled lightly at the groan that followed. “Fear not, most of the piloting can be done remotely which is a perfect segue into what we are going to talk about today.

“Most of you probably realized that the existing Mech Suits are excellent at turning intention into action regardless of if it is something you would actually be able to physically do. We’ve worked hard to create the perfect balance—a human brain unhindered by the constraints of a biological body.

“However, this is not enough to win a war. In the early days, we tried using AI completely. Unfortunately, AI can’t match a human’s ability to think outside the box plus they were vulnerable to hacking and other bugs. We then developed the early versions of the technology you used yesterday—the Mechs that seamlessly melded human consciousness with a more capable, robotic body. This was effective, but quite honestly we didn’t have enough bodies to fill the needed number of Mech Suits.

If you’re from one of the main cities, you’ll remember that this war has kind of become a numbers game. Every day, thousands of Drones, Mechs, Aquads and other machines go to battle against our adversaries. We get their robots and they get ours. Though the robotic casualty count is high, we’re kind of at a stalemate. Both sides keep producing more and more robots but neither can get the upper hand.

“That’s where you all come in. We’ve recently introduced Project Hive Mind. One human mind connected to a small fleet of Mechs. With enough training, the one mind can control all of the Mech’s independently to create a very effective combat squad.

“You were led to believe that your job would primarily be helping develop the AI necessary to make our Mechs run effectively. That is not entirely untrue. You are accustomed to being given a

set amount of abilities and constraints and using them to solve a problem using renderings, computer tests, or mathematical equations. The Mech suits are just a more direct and hands on way of doing it.

“Now I know this is a huge load of information to take in right away but welcome to the real world. This is war, this is real life, and this is the world we live in. Ready to give it a try?”

Ava looked at me, “Well, damn.”

“Well damn indeed.”

“So what did you think about today?” I asked as I helped her re-braid her long, dark hair.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “I guess it was pretty fun? Kind of scary but not what I expected.”

“I still feel weird about being in the suits,” I said. “I really didn’t expect it at all.”

“Yeah, same here,” Ava finished a braid and started on another. “I guess it beats being behind a computer all day.”

“I don’t know. I kind of like computer work,” I flopped back on her bed. “It feels weird to let them into my brain like that.”

“Whatever,” Ava waved away my concern. “Privacy is dead anyways. They are always tracking everything we do. Do you have something to hide? Are you an enemy spy?”

“You’ve caught me,” I rolled my eyes. “Will you help me seduce a general to get top secret information?”

“You didn’t even have to ask,” Ava laughed and fell back next to me on the bed.

We laid in silence for a while.

“Do you think we’ll actually go into battle?” I asked.

“I don’t know, maybe?” Ava said. “Everyone I know has always come home so even if we went we’d probably just be behind the scenes.”

“It’s kind of scary to think about,” I turned on my side to face her. “What if we die?”

“Aubrey,” Ava turned to face me. “No one ever dies. It’s a war of robots. What if we end up being one of the top soldiers and are offered a job after our two years? Would you stay? War seems to be a pretty lucrative career.”

Ava tucked her legs underneath her as she adjusted herself so I could reach more of her hair to braid. “My dad works in Recycling and he never wants the war to end. It keeps him in business. Our whole world economy is based off of this war. Private Companies build robots, the bad guys blow them up, then guys like my dad send Scrubbers to get the scraps and we start it all over again. It’s a machine. Just enjoy being a little cog with me.”

The next few weeks passed pretty quickly. We spent most of our time training in the Mechs learning their capabilities and limitations. After a few weeks of solo work, we were moved to what they called Hive Training.

We walked into the warehouse on our first day of it to see three times as many mechs as usual and a new instructor waiting for us.

“Good morning recruits!” He yelled as we fell into place in line and saluted. He looked more excited than any of us.

“Today, you start Hive Training. Anyone can learn how to pilot a Mech, but this technology is what will help us find the strongest minds of the group. Trim the fat if you will,” he paced up and

down the line, giving us each a stern look. “There is strength in numbers, yet error often occurs with miscommunication, misunderstanding, and simple human folly. Hive technology helps us close that gap.

“You will each learn to control a small squadron of Mechs. One mind, multiple bodies. A strong mind can have each suit act independently of each other to create a perfectly calibrated and balanced team. You’ll have multiple eyes, limbs, mobility, and firepower. The strength of a team with the focus of one mind.

“Our best soldiers can control five or six at a time. Today, we’ll start with just one additional. Gear up!”

We all walked towards our suits and slid in. Our instructor’s voice buzzed in our ears.

“Now I’m going to connect you with the Mech standing immediately to your right, careful not to swing around too much, it will take time for you to get used to both Mechs.”

There was a weird buzzing feeling down my spine and my vision flickered then I suddenly just felt bigger. It was like a dam breaking and suddenly my mind just had more space to fill. It wasn’t a stretch or anything, I just had more.

“Really focus in on your body,” the instructor said. “Take mental stock of all your limbs and senses and try to separate the two Mechs from each other.”

I took a breath and focused. I could feel that I now had two separate entities but I couldn’t focus on just one or the other. It felt like I just had one body but twice. I couldn’t separate the two. I lifted my right arm and felt both arms raise in unison. I looked around and saw that the other recruits were experiencing something similar. Each Mech pair was moving in perfect sync.

“The easiest way to start is to focus on keeping one Mech stationary while the other moves. Make one Mech act independently of the other first, then you can try to make them do different things at the same time” the instructor started to type on his tablet computer.

“We’re going to start with a simple game of catch. You’re gonna face one of your fellow recruits and try to throw a ball back and forth. When you catch it, try to only have one of your two connected Mechs reach for the ball,” there was a buzz and a door along wall lifted open. A bunch of giant balls rolled out. They looked like super oversized yoga balls with a glowing light in the middle. I assumed they were some simple form of drone because they were able to change direction and roll perfectly towards us.

The ball bumped against my foot and Ava buzzed in my ear as she turned her Mechs to face mine, “I’m ready when you are!” In unison both of her Mechs took a catching stance. It was strange seeing both move in such perfect harmony.

I leaned down and picked up the ball, but I noticed a weird disconnect as I grabbed the ball with one Mech and then didn’t feel the resistance of the ball between my arms with the other one. It was like having one ear plugged or the feeling in your stomach when you are expecting one more stair.

I looked around and noticed that everyone else’s Mechs were also moving in perfect sync. I straightened up and tossed the ball to Ava. Both of her Mechs reached up as she caught the ball perfectly.

“This feels weird,” she said. “My brother’s friend described Phantom Limb syndrome to me once and I feel like this is what he was describing.”

“Except we actually have the other body,” I said. I caught the ball as Ava tossed it back.

“Recruits!” the instructor’s voice startled in my ear. “You have to focus! You wouldn’t move your left and right arms in unison all the time. You have to separate the two Mechs while still thinking of them as part of a whole. You don’t have two sets of arms, you now have four independent ones. This takes extreme effort. Stop just playing catch!”

I took a breath and tried to take mental stock of all my limbs. I could feel that I had four arms, but I couldn't separate my two right arms from each other. I knew they were independent of each other, but whenever I tried to move just one, I felt the other follow it too.

"Aubrey!" Ava's voice and subsequent laughter came into my ear as the ball bounced off my head and rolled away. "What are you doing? You're just standing there wiggling your arms."

"I'm trying to separate my two Mechs!" I laughed. "Geez. I think you did that on purpose."

Ava's snort was her only reply. I bent down to grab the ball as it rolled back to me.

"Hold on," said Ava. "I think I'm getting somewhere." Her Mech suits were shuddering erratically. I saw the arms of just the right one twitch followed by the left one. "Okay, I'm ready!"

I tossed her the ball and both of her Mechs reached up to catch it.

"Nope," I said. "I saw you doing something earlier though."

"Ugh," Ava's Mechs crossed their arms in a pout. "I feel like I almost have it."

We played catch and ran other drills for another few hours. The Instructor had us try different variations of passing the ball back and forth, some taking less thought than others. We were rolling the ball back and forth when something finally happened for Ava.

As she bent down to pick up the ball at her feet, one of her Mechs stopped half way while the other finished the movement and they both stood up together.

"Hey!" I said. "You did something!"

"Did it work?!" Ava said, she sounded out of breath. "It felt like it did but I couldn't tell for sure. Hold on—"

Her voice cut out.

"Ava?" I asked. "What happened?" I started to walk toward her mech but she motioned that she was fine then pointed to where her ears would be on the Mech. I waited a few more seconds before she started talking to me again.

“Sorry!” Ava said. “It was the instructor. He was telling me that once you figure out how to start to see the Mech suits as parts of the whole, it gets easier and easier every time. Apparently the hardest part is doing it the first time.”

“I still can’t figure out how you do it,” I said. “I can feel that they are different, I just feel like I’m trying to break my brain in half or something.”

“I think I just got lucky,” said Ava. “Let’s keep practicing I guess?”

We kept playing catch, Ava didn’t make much more progress beyond occasionally doing what she did the first time. It was weird to watch—I could tell that the halted Mech was always the tiniest brain impulse away from moving.

As I shimmied out of my Mech once training was over for the day, I felt a huge headache blossoming in the back of my head. I could tell Ava was feeling something similar by how she rolled her neck as she walked over to me.

“My brain hurts,” I said.

“Me too,” Ava massaged her temples. “I think it’s just more strain than it’s used to. I guess this is why lights out is so early. I’m ready for bed.”

We walked towards the door in silence. As we passed the instructor and gave him a salute he met Ava’s eyes and complimented her performance.

“Good work today recruit,” he said gruffly. “You picked it up faster than anyone else.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Ava said as we saluted again and walked out.

“He-ey! I think he likes you!” I sang as I poked her in the ribs.

“Shut up,” Ava swatted my hands away. “Don’t be jealous of my mental fortitude.”

“Seriously, I can’t figure out how you did it,” I said. “You were one of the only people who made any progress today. If you can do three before I can do two, we’ll pretend one of yours is mine so I don’t look like a doofus.”

“Deal,” said Ava as she rolled her eyes.

Over the next few weeks, we continued to run more and more drills learning how to operate the Mechs with a Hive mind. Despite my initial worries, it finally clicked and I began the slow process of learning how to use two bodies simultaneously, but in sync. Ava was a natural at it.

As we progressed, she always seemed to be about a Mech ahead of the rest of the class, when I finally mastered two, she had already pretty much gotten the handle of three. I hit my cap at four, while Ava on a good day could do five.

Watching her train and spar with four at a time was much more graceful than when I tried, but three on three we were pretty evenly matched. I found out that Ava also had a dance background which I think factored into some of how her brain subconsciously thought to move.

Strangely, the weirdest part about learning how to control three Mechs at once was leaving them. After a few hours in the suits, I became used to a 360 degree view and multiple arms and legs to accomplish tasks. Leaving the suits made me feel small and a little bit worried that something was happening behind me. I was becoming so used to having all so much more sensory information than my two measly human eyes provided.

One of the highlights of training were the sparring tournaments they occasionally organized. During the past tournaments, I always made it within the top quarter, but I would always get eliminated before I could face Ava, the undisputed champion.

It was amazing watching her fight. She tore through the competition mercilessly and had a wicked competitive streak. It was almost harder because she was so nice about it too. Ava never

gloated, never rubbed it in, and almost managed to make you forget you were just utterly destroyed by her.

After everyone mastered 3 Mechs at a time, the instructor set up a 3 Mech vs 3 Mech competition. Ava quickly made her way up the ranks. She was fighting more aggressively and tighter than when she was just sparring with me, she was serious about becoming the top soldier.

I managed to scrape my way to the semifinals after a few close calls but I was happy that I finally would have the opportunity to go at it with Ava for real. She had a nasty competitive streak and I was excited to take her on with us both being serious. During training, we never really went all out—no one was watching so there wasn't really a reason to tire ourselves out that much.

"Don't you dare hold back on me," I said. "When I win, I want to really win."

Ava's laugh crackled over the intercom, "Deal. Let's really see who's the better fighter."

I walked my suits to the edge of the circle in the middle of the room where we would spar. The other recruits, our instructor, and a few other members military leadership were in bleachers along the walls, I was happy to hear a few people cheering for me. I selected my weapons—my combination of choice was the sword and shield for all three but I had been practicing with two suits sword and shield, and one suit with just a long, two handed sword. It was difficult to think about two different weapons tactics at once, but I felt confident I could handle it. Plus, Ava hasn't sparred me like this before—I was hoping for an advantage.

"Mixing it up on me?" asked Ava.. "I'm totally not gonna go easy on you just because you're my best friend here."

"You sure you don't want to say you will so you'll have an excuse when I win?" I asked. "You've gotten comfy up on your throne."

Ava laughed, "It's hard to take this seriously."

I put on my best "intimidating villain" voice, "Prepare to die!"

I could hear Ava smile as she mimicked the same voice, “Are you ready to *rumble?*”

“Recruits!” our instructor’s voice buzzed in my ear, “You know we can all hear you, right?”

“Oh my gosh,” I said as I started laughing. I could hear Ava laughing too.

“Mics off, are you two ready to start?” our instructor sounded amused.

We took our stances, Ava’s three Mechs extended their double swords and struck the iconic Charlie’s Angels pose. I snorted as I tried to keep my focus.

The buzzer rang and Ava’s Mechs sprang into action. She activated the rocket jump on one while the other two barreled towards me. My only option was to scatter my three Mechs. It was a really good strategy and I mentally kicked myself for not doing it first. It is easier to control all three Mechs when you can keep them near each other. At least for me, it was easier on my brain when I could patch together a seamless view out of all three Mechs instead of three random views from different angles.

I tried to circle around the back of the two that rushed me but Ava had her Mech pivot in midair so it landed facing two of mine. Metal scraped metal as both of mine attacked her single Mech. One landed a solid blow on her shoulder..

As her Mech stumbled back a few steps, I was able to take a more defensive stance. My three Mechs stood back to back ready to face any incoming threat. I knew that Ava’s strategy in the past was to focus on one Mech at a time. Once she could whittle her opponent down to two Mechs versus her three, she had the match in the bag.

There was a lull while we squared off against each other. I decided to break the stillness and go in for an attack. I activated the rocket jump on all three of my Mechs to try to get behind her and push her out of the circle. Right at the apex of my jump, I saw Ava’s Mech shoot towards one of mine. Surprised, part of my vision pinwheeled as her Mech smashed into the legs of mine making it cartwheel in midair. My other two Mechs landed fine and engaged Ava’s in combat—we were fairly

evenly matched in that respect so neither of us really made any progress. My third Mech landed hard on it's back and Ava was there to grab it by the leg and fling it out of the ring.

Right before my Mech flew out of the ring, I was able to kick its legs around and activate my rocket jump again making it fly back into the middle of the circle. I landed hard but at least I wasn't down a Mech.

As Ava ran to try to throw me out again, I was able to use my sword to knock her legs out from under her. I was shocked to see her boosters turn on before she even hit the ground. I felt my Mech's body leave the ground as she grabbed me and started pushing me out of the ring. When I finally got my feet back under me I tried to push back, but she had momentum on her side and I felt my Mech power down as it left the ring. I was left with only two bodies.

Suddenly, both of the other Mechs I was fighting with jumped backwards out of my reach, my sword clanged as I swung at a now empty space and hit the ground. I swore under my breath to myself as I realized I had fallen right into her trap.

Her Mechs ran towards mine at full speed. I braced myself to jump over them at the last second but then Ava did something that surprised me. One of her Mechs right hand shot out and without missing a beat the Mech next to it jumped into the air. She grabbed the ankle of her Mech and swung it like a club at both of mine. I felt myself fly sideways as I desperately tried to get back on my feet. I felt the loss of another Mech before I slid to a stop right by the edge of the circle.

One on three. I knew I was toast but I was determined not go down without a fight. I gripped my sword and took a wild chance. I ran full tilt towards her three Mechs but when I was about halfway to her, I threw my shield like a frisbee as hard as I could. It spun in the air in front of me and clipped the shoulder of one of her Mechs throwing it off balance. The other two Mechs leaped out of the way.

While she was catching her balance, I drove my shoulder into her side and shoved her Mech the rest of the way out of the ring. I saw it's lights dim as it powered down before whipping around to see her other two Mechs coming at me. I tried to jump over them but she anticipated my move. She used one of her Mechs to fling the other into the air like a cheerleader then used its rocket jump while it was facing downwards to slam me to the ground. As soon as I hit the ground, her Mech was there to grab my arm and throw me boldly outside the ring.

There was a buzz and some whoops and cheers and I felt all three Mechs come back on.

"Good job recruits," said our instructor. "A little bit reckless, but I appreciate the unorthodox fighting style. Ava, congratulations, you win again. You're moving on to the finals tomorrow."

I cheered along with the rest of the crowd as Ava's voice chimed in my ear.

"I told you I wouldn't go easy on you," she said.

"Good game, chum!" I said back in my best transatlantic accent with a laugh. "If you get special treatment as the top soldier I expect some of the goods. You wouldn't be where you were without people like me making you look better."

I saw her Mech flip it's imaginary hair and strike a pose, "I always look good."

The next day, Ava squared off against one of our fellow trainees, James, in the finals. He was quiet and didn't talk much but had surprised everyone with his rapid advancement through the tournament.

It was a very intense fight, Ava actually looked like she was struggling a bit. He managed to get her down to two Mechs before she got the upper hand and ultimately won the fight.

She was trying to mix things up by using the Lace as her primary weapon. In a desperate moment she rocket jumped directly into him at pretty close range. In real battle it would have been successful, but in a training tournament it was scary.

There was a earsplitting crunch as her lanced passed straight through his Mech and exploded out the back in a shower of sparks.

Our instructor brushed it off like it was nothing—he snapped his fingers and a swarm of drones picked up the Mech and whisked it out the doors.

“He’ll be fine!” the instructor assured us. “This happens all the time. The Med Bay will patch him right up. Ava, congratulations! You’re the winner again!”

Without any acknowledgement of her win, the lights on Ava’s mech dimmed and she climbed out. I could see even from a distance that she was really shaken up about what had just happened.

That night we sat on her bed chatting when James walked back in from the Med Bay. Ava had been stressing the whole evening about it. He had a bandage on his side and a scrape on his arm, but other than that looked happy and healthy.

“James!” Ava ran up and gave him a hug. “You’re here! I’m so so so sorry! I really didn’t mean to. Are you okay?”

James winced as he pivoted his hurt side away from her hug, “I’m fine Ava. They zapped me with some lasers and gave me a some painkillers. No big deal.” He shrugged like it was nothing.

“I was just so worried,” Ava was looking at James as if she was making sure he was actually there. “I heard your scream over the intercom and it sounded like you were in a lot of pain. I thought I really, really had hurt you.”

“I honestly don’t really even remember it,” James assured her. “They said I blacked out pretty quickly—I think it’s a safety mechanism built into the Mechs since our brains are linked with them.”

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” Ava looked relieved. She came back to the bed and sat down heavily.

“You okay?” I asked. “I told you he would be fine. I don’t know why you beat yourself up so much.”

“It just sounded really serious when it happened,” Ava laid back on the bed covering her face with her hands. “Ugh, I need to get some fresh air. This is such a relief. Want to go for a walk or something?”

We pulled on our shoes and walked outside, not really picking a direction. After a little bit of silence Ava slowed down.

“It’s just,” Ava stopped, trying to find her words. “Today it finally got real for me,” she turned to me, worried.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“This!” she gestured wildly around us. “All of this. I’ve never really thought about it, but what we are doing is *real!* People can and do get hurt.”

Our walking had led us to the training facility. I looked up at the huge building looming in front of us.

"I mean there's not much we can do about it," I said. "We're basically the best fighters out of the group and we have giant robot suits. Well, you're *actually* the best fighter," I bumped her shoulder, trying to lighten the mood.

"You're not far behind me," Ava smiled. We both jumped when we heard the grinding of metal on metal nearby. "What was that?" Ava asked.

"I don't know," I said as we walked around the corner of the building towards the noise.

We peeked around the edge and saw a team of drones working on a Mech suit surrounded by other Mechs waiting for repair.

"Wait," Ava grabbed my arm. "That's James' Mech from earlier."

"Really?" I asked. "Are you sure?" I tried to see in the semi darkness what Ava recognized.

"Yeah, look," She pointed. "There is a hole right where my lance went through." We both winced at another loud screech of metal on metal.

"I think it's stuck closed," I said. "You must have really done a number on it."

"It can't be stuck closed," said Ava. "They wouldn't have been able to get James out if it was stuck closed."

We watched in silence as the drones worked on prying open the front of the Mech. Finally, with an earsplitting groan, the front panel was peeled up. I felt the breath whoosh out of my body and my heart fall out of my chest as I saw what was underneath the panel. Ava gasped and I felt her iron grip on my arm.

In the center of the Mech, James' lifeless body slumped forward, his uniform stained dark with blood.

I pulled Ava's stiff body back around the corner and we both sunk to the ground. I could hear Ava taking stilted breaths as we both tried to process what we had just seen.

“Did I do that?” Ava asked quietly. “I—but we—” Ava buried her face in her hands. I chanced another glance around the corner. The Drones were lifting the body out of the Mech. It was definitely James and he was definitely dead.

I sat back next to Ava, “It has to be a mistake,” I said. “I just saw him. We both just saw him. You touched him.”

“I heard him die though,” Ava said quietly. She looked up at me with hollow eyes. “I knew I heard the lance go through him when it happened. I had hoped I was wrong, especially when everyone kept saying everything was going to be okay. I saw him. I know we just saw him..” Ava trailed off. “I heard him scream and then die.”

I didn’t know what to say. “So what do we do now?” I asked.

Ava was quiet for a bit, “Tomorrow, after training we have to go try to investigate the Med Bay. Something is going on there. I just—I just have to know.”

We stood and walked back towards the bunkhouse. I looked over at Ava and saw the wheels starting to spin, her face set in a mask of grim determination.

That next morning, we were called back to the training area for a meeting with our instructor a little earlier than usual. We lined up in our usual spots but I noticed right away that the Mechs weren’t lined up like they normally were. Our instructor was waiting for us with a smile and standing next to him was the General. It was rare to see him out and about since he oversaw the whole training camp.

“Congratulations recruits! You’ve finished your basic training,” our instructor paused while we all absorbed that information. “You’ll be sent to the reserve to finish out the rest of your time enlisted and then you’ll be free to go home to your families. It was an honor training you.”

He gave us a salute and gestured for the General to begin speaking. I looked over at Ava and saw that she looked just as surprised as everyone else, the only thing that betrayed a lack of excitement was her fists clenched at her sides. I noticed her knuckles whiten as she tried to control her reaction to the news.

“I know most of you were expecting training to last for a bit longer than it did,” the General paced back and forth. “However, you have all mastered controlling at least three Mechs. It is time for you to join your brothers and sisters in arms at the front lines and prepare to fight for your country. We are confident that you will use your Mechs to help us spread our message of Peace, Liberty, and Freedom to all peoples.” He saluted, “I’ll see you all when you return.”

We saluted back and our instructor started speaking again.

“You’ll take the rest of today to gather your belongings and prepare for departure early tomorrow morning. Enjoy your last night here on base. The reserve where you will be sent to has shiner Mechs, but the food is worse. Dismissed!” He let out a hearty laugh and walked away.

Back at the Barracks, we all gathered our few belongings and prepared to head out. Spirits were high and I think everyone was excited for a change of scenery.

“Are you concerned at all?” I asked the girl who shared the bunk next to ours.

“Not really,” she said. “I mean it will be just like training, except we’ll finally have sharp swords and real guns. It might be exciting.”

I nodded in agreement, but inside I was a little bit uneasy. I knew that tonight was our last chance to find out if something weird was going on. She was doing a good job of hiding it, but I could

tell Ava was stressed. Her easy smile laid back attitude would slip when she thought no one was paying attention.

I stood next to her as we folded our clothes. "Are you ready for tonight?" I asked.

"As I'll ever be," she said quietly back. "I'm glad you saw it too. I wouldn't have believed my eyes if I had seen it alone," she paused. "I know what I heard too," she seemed to be saying it more to convince herself than me.

"We'll get to the bottom of this," I said and put a hand on her shoulder. She nodded and put her hand on mine.

"I hope so."

"Aubrey?" Ava's whisper cut through the darkness. "Are you ready?"

I climbed down from my bunk as quietly as I could and grabbed my shoes. We tiptoed out of the bunk house and sat on the steps outside to slide into our boots.

"So to the Med Bay?" I asked.

"I guess so?" Ava said. "It's the only lead we have. Maybe we should stop by where we saw the Mech yesterday." I nodded and we set off together into the night.

"Do you know which one it is?" I asked as we rounded the corner to where we saw the Mech last night.

"I think so," Ava looked around at the piles of Mechs. "I don't think I'll ever forget."

She walked towards one end of the lot, "We saw it happen right here—look!" Ava pointed at a Mech missing it's front panel. "It's this one, I know it."

We walked closer and I gasped, "Is that—?"

Ava grabbed my arm, "Blood." She paused, "I knew it. I knew it. I—"

I pulled Ava into a hug, "It wasn't your fault. It isn't your fault."

We stood like that for a little bit while Ava regained her composure. When she finally leaned out of my hug, I could see that she was ready for answers.

"Looks like we have to go to the Med Bay," she said and started walking briskly towards the building.

"Ava! Wait!" I hurried after her. "And then what? You'll just barge in demanding answers?"

"Yes!" she seemed beyond reasoning. "I don't know if I killed my friend or not. I have to know the truth."

She stopped outside the double doors leading into the Med Bay.

"Should we just knock?" I asked.

"They know we're here," Ava pointed to a camera on the side of the building, then spun to point at another one behind us. "They are all around, they're always watching."

My heart started to pound as I realized what she was insinuating, "So you think they know that we—?"

"Yep," Ava marched to the door. "And we want answers!" she looked up at the camera and started waving her arms.

Suddenly, the doors to the Med Bay whooshed open. I was shocked.

"Wow, I really didn't think that would work," even Ava looked surprised.

"Hello girls," It was Dr. Hepstead, the man who oversaw everything when we first arrived for training and got our Ports. "If you two would like to come with me? I'm sure you have a lot of questions." He turned and began walking away.

Ava looked at me, bewildered. She shrugged and together we followed Dr. Hepstead away from the training facility.

Dr. Hepstead began talking as he walked towards a set of elevators at the end of a long hallway, "You two have seen some things that I'm sure seem very confusing. Some things you were not meant to see," he chastised. He waved his ID card at a scanner by the elevator and it opened with a ding.

"Now, I understand that you've a but curious as to what goes on here," the Doctor started as I felt the elevator shoot downwards.

"Ava was one of the brightest prospects of this year's recruits. She's potentially part of a very special program here. You too are very bright," he nodded at me, "But Ava's track record is unmatched.

"This war is far more complex than the general public thinks. It's a much more aggressive battle than we've led everyone to believe. Trust me, in the old days the horrors of war were front and center in everyone's mind. It was a dark, dark time," the doors dinged open and he led us down another sterile hallway that ended at a large set of double doors.

"Fortunately, modern science has made an easier and more effective way for us to win this war," he placed his hand on the scanner and leaned forward as a little beam scanned his eye. There was a beep and the door slid open with a hiss.

He led us into the biggest room I'd ever been in. I looked at Ava—she seemed tense and just as surprised as me. Lining the walls were giant capsules made of glowing green glass. I saw murky shadows in the ones at eye level, but the walls were too far away to see any major details.

"Welcome to the Green Room," the Doctor stopped in front of a computer terminal and typed in a code. After a few beeps, he hit a glowing button with a flourish and two flying drones rose out of the terminal next to us and buzzed away into the darkness.

“The sad reality of war is that people die. Almost everyone we send out dies. The neural controlled Hive Minds don’t work at a distance and we haven’t found anything else that is even close to the stability and security neural controlling has offered. The human mind is almost impossible hack once it thinks the Mech is its body. This is why we need exemplary soldiers like you two.”

“What do you mean almost everyone dies?” I asked, hating how my voice shook. I cleared my throat, “I don’t really know anyone that didn’t come back.”

“And therein lies our greatest achievement,” he tapped the back of his neck. “People tend to forget that the flow of information goes both ways. Once you’ve been connected to the network, we have a complete digital scan of your entire brain.” He hit a button and a model of a brain and lines of data appeared on the terminal. “We know everything about who you are, how you’ll act—”

“You can read our minds?” I cut in.

“Not really,” he said. “We can see most everything and even alter a few specific memories, if we know what to look for, but it’s generally too aggressive of a process to wipe anything too aggressively.. A complete rewiring been done successfully in the past, but it’s very invasive. We simply swap out a block of memories from a specific time and replace them with something more...” he paused to think, “...tame. PTSD is a thing of the past.”

I felt the back of my neck while suppressing a shudder, horrified at the thought of scientists poking around inside my head, “That’s horrible.”

“No, it keeps order,” the Doctor smiled as the two drones came back with one of the green capsules held between them. “Ah! The final piece of the puzzle. Now, this is how we solve the little issue of most pilots not making it,” he tapped on the glass. I saw that the murky shape inside was actually a body curled up in the fetal position.

I suddenly realized what he was showing us, “You can upload memories into a new body?”

“Ding, ding, ding,” the Doctor motioned for me to come closer to the capsule. “Recruits will wake up in the infirmary with a fuzzy memory of a successful battle and the pride of serving a successful two years.”

“Why do you need us then?” I asked. “Can’t you use the same soldiers over and over?”

“Unfortunately not,” the Doctor shook his head sadly. “The trauma of death weakens the mind. The human psyche is powerful, but delicate. The memories and personalities start to decay with multiple transfers after traumatic events. The soldiers tend to go mad, consumed with bloodlust or other instabilities. A healthy mind can be transferred over and over, but a mind whose body has been ripped violently from it due to the nature of war?” He sighed sadly, “Some damage cannot be fully erased.”

Ava finally spoke up, “You’re all monsters,” she said quietly.

I looked at the body inside the capsule. I gasped and stumbled back as I realized what I was looking at, “That’s...That’s me?”

The Doctor nodded as Ava grabbed my arm, shaking, “Grown from the DNA harvested when you were given your Port implant. Our top soldiers, like your good friend Ava here are given the opportunity of a lifetime. Well many lifetimes actually,” he hit another button and the drones took my capsule back into the depths of the building.

“Immortality,” he smiled. “We’ve been assembling the top talent for generations and soon, we’ll turn the tide of this war. Die once for your country and live forever. To keep your mind healthy you’ll only have to be on the front lines once. Ava, as our top pilot, would you like to join us?”

I looked at Ava and saw her thinking.

She stood up straighter and held the Doctor’s eye contact, “I would be honored to fight and die along my comrades. Thank you for your offer, sir, but I think my destiny will take me elsewhere. I’m not cut out for a life of War.”

The Doctor gave us a small frown, "I'm sorry to hear that but I respect your decision." He turned to me, "Aubrey, a spot has just opened up in our elite program. The current number two has already been exposed to the horrors of death," his gaze slid quickly to Ava and back to me. "Are you interested perhaps?"

"No thank you sir," I held his gaze for as long as I could. "I can't in good conscience be a part of this."

"That's a shame," the Doctor shook his head lightly. He gestured back towards the elevator, "I'll walk you over but you can see yourselves back to your beds."

We fell into step behind him and waited as he called the elevator.

"Oh, also," the Doctor turned towards us again. "Ava, you'll have your memories modified as usual. All of our top recruits are given that option and I won't punish you for exercising your right to choose." He turned to me, "However I can't help but feel you're partially responsible for making me lose one of the best soldiers I've seen in years," the Doctor's eyes flashed with distaste. "I sincerely hope that nothing goes wrong with your memory installation. I would hate for you to remember how it feels to die. I assure you, it isn't pleasant," he chuckled lightly.

The elevator arrived with a ding, "Good luck, recruits. It's a tough battlefield out there. Get some sleep—you ship out tomorrow."

The Doctor gave us a salute as the doors closed and we whooshed back up to the surface.

I woke up with a start, gasping for breath. I heard the screaming before I realized it was me. As my vision came into focus I saw Ava's concerned face looking at me from the bed next to mine.

“Geez, good morning! You’re finally awake, how do you feel? No one else woke up screaming,” Ava fluffed the pillow she was leaning on.

“Fine I think?” I tried to remember how I had gotten to where I was but it was all fuzzy. I remembered training and getting ready to ship out, but anything after that was still coming into focus.

“I’m just excited to get out of here,” Ava stretched and looked at me, concerned. “You don’t look right. Why are you so sweaty? Are you okay? Should I call the nurse?”

“No, no, I’m fine,” I stared at my hands trying to grasp at something hovering at the edge of my memory. “Just foggy I guess.”

The holoscreen next to my bed beeped with some readouts and I felt the tug of a memory starting to surface. Ava’s cold hand clutching my arm, the drip of her tear on my shoulder. Sliding into the Mech suit, fear.

Suddenly the fuzziness was gone—everything came rushing back crystal clear. I clutched my head as the memories flooded in. I heard Ava voice swimming in the back of my mind but the memories assaulting me were all I could focus on.

I tried ignore my head spinning as I remembered the cold of the suit against my back and the feeling of foreboding as we went into battle. I had flashbacks of explosions and the sounds of my friends screaming over the intercom in my ear.

I felt my body break out into a cold sweat. Goosebumps pricked up and down my arms and around the bandage at the back of my neck.

I remembered Ava’s scream ringing in my ears as I saw her Mech fall, impaled from behind. My heart dropping out of my chest while realizing just as quickly I didn’t even have time to grieve.

I remembered frantically trying to link my Hive with her remaining two robots. My head throbbed at the memory of the strain from trying to maintain control of five Mechs at once.

I remembered the giant claw ripping the front off of my mech suit and trying to stop the giant sword that came rushing towards me with my bare hands.

My stomach churned as re-felt the dull thunk of the sword plunging through my chest. I remember looking down and wondering why I didn't feel anything. Seeing my own blood coat my arms as I grasped hopelessly at the blade.

And then I remembered the pain. The overwhelming pain as my vision slowly faded to black. The weight of half of my suit on top of me slowly fading as I lost the feeling in my legs.

Then my arms.

I remember the relief I felt as the pain finally started to ebb away.

Then, nothing.

After what felt like forever I was able to focus enough to remember that I was sitting in a hospital bed.

"...Aubrey? Are you finally back?" Ava's voice floated around in my head. I sat up and heard Ava continue to talk to me, "What happened? You just got lost in your head or something. You couldn't answer me or anything."

I looked up and saw a concerned nurse tapping on the holoscreen next to my bed and Ava sitting up looking worried.

"Where were you just now? We're good to go home. We made it! You're fine! A few simple surveillance runs and now we can get on with our lives. I felt fuzzy when I woke up too but nothing like this," Ava smiled at me. "Don't worry! We're still gonna be best friends even if we aren't training together. Is that what you're worried about?"

I felt my chest constrict as I looked at Ava, "You don't... you don't remember *anything*?"