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## *CHAPTER ONE*

"I'm telling you," Akami said, patience wearing thin, "This should work." She stood in front of a chalkboard, chalk dust covering her hands, the board full of chemistry and metallurgy equations.

"Akami, that's ridiculous," a bespectacled classmate said with a sigh. "I can't believe you had us sit here for an hour while you scratched all that out."

"A freshman could have told you that wouldn't work," another student said and closed a dusty metallurgy book with a thump and a puff of dust. "Honestly... spherical strength? What's gotten into you?"

Akami stood, speechless, not sure how to counter the utter disbelief of her classmates.

"I hope you have something better than that planned out for the midterm paper," the first student said and scraped his chair back. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said to the second student.

"Wait, Ryan, listen to me." Akami tried again.

Ryan shook his head and stood up too. "It's a good pipe dream, Akami, but it won't work."

"But what about the equations?"

"The equations look nice, but I haven't spent the time to work out why they won't carry." Ryan shrugged. "Spend your time on something else, Akami, if you know what's good for you." He stood up, shot one last sympathetic look at Akami and walked out.

Akami sat for almost half an hour, staring at the chalkboard, certain that she was right, wondering if she was crazy. It seemed like such a good idea in her head and stayed that way all the way up until she put it on the board in front of her peers.

Ryan, at least, should know better.

With a last sigh Akami started cleaning up the conference room. She had her next class in-- she glanced at her watch. Damn. Ten minutes. And a midterm at that.

...

Midterms. Akami Higatchi sat in the patently uncomfortable student chair and tried not to grind her teeth as her notebook of invalidated equations wobbled for the tenth time. The subject they were studying ground on her nerves. Exobiology, like she gave a shit. The Thriven were long ago driven into remission. Even her dad wasn't old enough to have taken part in the last war.

The pedantic old fart teaching the class insisted that there were other uses for exobiology than learning how to kill a Thriven faster, but none of Akami's classmates could figure out what, and none of them really cared. Akami had figured the class easy bonus credits, but it was turning out to be more of a pain than she had planned.

The door banged open and Professor Bath walked in backwards, dragging a dolly cart stacked with a collection of some sort of giant bug corpses. Akami vaguely recognized them as being drones or something. She felt her irritation grow into anger as Bath bumped into the room, knocking against the desks in the front row.

Akami leaned toward the guy sitting across from her and whispered, "Where did they get these things? Have they been sitting in a freezer somewhere for twenty years and exhumed for this class?"

The guy shrugged, he was as lost as she was.

Apparently the midterm would be cataloging the innards of a frozen bug. Akami swore to herself and gritted her teeth, looking down at her new blouse. Probably would be covered in slime by the end of the hour no matter how careful she was.

Sure enough, the Professor started walking around the room, dumping the foot-long bugs on tables while making a positively riveting speech about the desperate need to understand the Thriven.

Akami caught a word here and there, but mostly she was just mad. Nothing seemed to be going right today. Bath dropped her bug practically in her lap and got slime on her notebook. Akami's eye twitched a couple times before she got a grip on her anger. It wouldn't do any good to blow up at Bath. He was so senile and doddering he probably wouldn't even notice it.

She steadied the bug and tried not to wrinkle her nose. This one was definitely going bad, no doubt about it. She prodded it around on her desk for a bit, trying to figure out where it would be best to start cutting without getting her hands dirty. It was impossible to perform a decent dissection of the bug while sitting at a student desk, but this fact seemed to be totally lost on Bath.

Having finished passing out the drones, Professor Bath stood up at the chalkboard and started making a list of the organs they were to locate and set aside. Akami watched the list grow with equally growing trepidation. There wasn't room on a desk to put a decent display of all those parts. Akami sighed. At least the class was graded on a curve. Nobody here was going to get more than ten percent on this damn test, so she could shoot for a safe B.

Akami located a suitable chink in the drone's exoskeleton and selected a thin scalpel from the tray. Hopefully the thinner blade would make a smaller hole and release the pressure inside the bug slower.

She slipped the blade into the chink. The bug, having sat on a shelf for the last two days defrosting, had built up pressure inside the exoskeleton as the tissue closest to the surface rotted. Akami, piercing the shell with a small blade, made an equally small release hole.

Super-soakers work under the same principle.

Akami froze, one eye squinted shut against the spray that hit her face. The front of her blouse was soaked in the foul-smelling juice. Her stomach lurched. Nobody would blame her if she threw up at this point, but her own pride, shattered though it was, wouldn't allow her to compound the insult by adding her lunch to the list of Bath's organs.

She was already infuriated with the class, fuming at Bath, angry with the damn bugs. This class was only bonus credits, nothing to do with her major. And speaking of her major, her paper was bound to be laughed at by her professor if her classmates were to be any judge. This last abuse of her person was the final straw. She let rip a scream of rage and ... snapped.

The bug exploded, along with the table on the student desk. Shredded bits of her notebook filled the air. The students immediately next to her picked themselves off the floor shakily, wiped bug juice out of their eyes and stared at her. Someone screamed; a ditzy blonde hit the floor in a dead faint.

Akami sat amid the wreckage, stunned.

*What the...*

People were running out of the room in mass hysteria and for a brief moment in Professor Bath's Exobiology 301 panic reigned.

The room emptied surprisingly fast, seeing as how fifty, well, forty-eight, not counting the blonde and Akami, students had exited through a single door a mere four feet wide, all less than rational, a few partially blind with rancid ichor and at least two having stomach problems of their own.

Finally Professor Bath and Akami were alone in the room, ignoring the blonde passed out in the middle of the isle. Akami was surprised to see that Bath wasn't doddering at all for the moment.

"Uh..." Akami tried.

"Took you long enough. Akami, isn't it?" Bath had a rather sharp, calculating look on his face, in contrast with the foggy look she was used to.

"..." Akami was having difficulty coming up to advanced primate mode, much less basic speech.

Bath sighed. "Akami, we need to talk."

Akami didn't move. She stared about, noted how the desk part of her chair had broken into splinters, was mildly astonished to see how ichor had left stencils on the walls of the other students and let her attention wander back to Professor Bath. "What happened?"

Bath sighed again. "Never mind. I suppose an apology is in order, Akami." He walked up the isle, stepped over the blonde, took Akami's arm and led her to the back of the room where he sat her in a chair before pulling around a chair of his own. This far back, the bug entrails were only sporadically scattered on the furniture.

"You see, Akami, the war isn't over. I've been saying this for a long time in this class, but most of your generation doesn't believe it." There was a brief interlude as the blonde kicked to life, looked around her, screamed and passed out again. Akami used the interruption to pick a frilly piece of intestine out of her hair.

"In the last years of the war with the Thriven," He stopped. "Akami, you have to pay attention." Akami forced her eyes to focus on Bath. "Good. Now, this wasn't broadly published, but the war was won by only a few men, not the millions that it was started with."

Akami looked at him, confused, but didn't say anything.

"You know about the telepresence rigs, you've done reports on them in high school, I'm sure." Akami didn't know what this had to do with the drone exploding, but nodded guardedly, humoring the old man.

"Well, yeah, I know about them. Who doesn't? They don't work. The whole thing was a military scam of giant proportions." Akami decided to simply field his questions one at a time and to hell with congruency.

"Sure it was." Bath answered easily, "And what do you know about the end of the war?"

Akami started quoting the textbook, at least the choice bits, until Bath interrupted her.

"Yes, yes. In a final blaze of glory, humanity beat the Thriven back into the obscurity of the furthest stars of their origin." Bath waved his hands as if brushing off cobwebs. "Propaganda. What really happened?"

"We won." Akami shrugged and used the sleeve of her ruined blouse to wipe some of the juice from her face.

"Ah. Indeed we did. Extreme Cliff notes version, yes. We won. How?"

Akami shrugged again. "I don't know and I could care less, really." She made a bid for honesty. "I'm only in this class for the easy credits, I don't care about the Thriven, where they came from, what they eat, how long they live, which of their heart-chain is the primary pump and which are the secondaries."

Bath smiled. "Neither do I."

Akami stared at him in astonishment.

"Actually, I made half that garbage up. This class only has one real purpose." He poked Akami on the nose. "To find people like you."

Akami blinked, irrationally irritated about the class being pointless, but didn't say anything.

"I don't even hold a 302 class because nobody makes it through 301. I give out a B average to those who at least tried and fill the 302 sign up sheets with phantom names so nobody can even try to get into it." Bath tilted his head back and stared up at the ceiling.

Akami shook her head. "Then what's the purpose of all this?" She waved her hand at the room filled with the half dissected corpses of the drones.

"To find people like you, like I said. But actually to piss people off." Bath smiled. He was enjoying this evidently.

"Well, that definitely worked." Akami crossed her arms, the tendrils of anger still clinging to her.

"Actually, dissecting rotten corpses on student desks was a stroke of brilliance, I must say." Bath grinned evilly. "I've never had anyone snap so fast. I'll have to make it part of the regular procedure now."

"Let me get this straight," Akami said crossly, "The entire purpose of Exobiology 301 is to drive someone up the wall until—" She waved at the room. "Boom."

"Ah, yes, except the boom." Bath looked uncomfortable for the first time. "Usually it's something small, like a pencil breaks or paper crunches by itself. Nothing that's really noticeable unless you're watching for it. Which is my real job."

"Then, why boom?" Akami couldn't put what happened into any more educated-sounding syllables. "Boom" just seemed to describe it perfectly.

"Well, I'm not sure. And honestly, I doubt anyone else does either. You're something new, Akami. Here," Bath handed her a card with an address written on it. "I'll have to cancel this class anyway. Your... demonstration isn't going to make this class very popular, this year at least."

"What's this?" Akami peered at it, recognizing the street as one that ran outside the town a ways.

"The new location of Exobiology 301. Actually, its 302. Congratulations. You've passed the class with flying colors."

Akami pocketed the card, shaking her head. This was too weird.

"Look, Akami, I'm sure you're full of questions. Come to the location on that card when you want answers and are ready for them. I'll be there." Bath stood up, picked his way over the blonde still lying in the middle of the isle, stepped gingerly over a messy drone corpse and left the room, leaving ichor footprints as he went.

...

Akami left the classroom and got smashed. She went down to a bar she liked, planted herself on a cheap wooden stool and told the barkeep she wanted to get hammered.

She woke up sometime the next morning with a killer headache in a pool of chilled chuck on the floor of her apartment's bathroom. She peeled herself off the floor and stared at the mirror over the sink. Her reflection stared back at her, crusted with bits of half-digested peanuts.

Disgusted with herself, Akami turned on the hot tap and waited until the water steamed the mirror then washed her face with the scalding water. It didn't help her headache, so she spun the tap off and resorted to a shower.

Akami fiddled with the knobs until the water wasn't scalding or freezing but somewhere in between, then stepped back and peeled her blouse off. The greenish ichor covering the front of it brought the memories of yesterday crashing home. With a shiver of disgust, she tossed the ruined blouse in the trash before stripping the rest of the way.

Finished, she stepped into the shower and stood under the nozzle, letting the water run over her body while she desperately tried to forget about yesterday. The future was frightening and she found her attention sliding back as she tried to figure out why "Boom".

She was Japanese, born in America. Going through school in America was a privilege her parents didn't let her forget about. Through her own perseverance and her parent's constant pushing, she graduated from high school with enough scholarly recognition to get into the college of her choice. Berkeley drew her like a moth and she spent three years getting a degree in Metallurgy for lack of anything better to do. This was the end of the third year of college, and she found herself wondering if it was her last. What her parents would say didn't bear thinking on. She wanted to live to twenty-three at least, but it seemed twenty-two was as far as she was going to get. Dad was a samurai aficionado, owned a full set of real swords and knew how to use them.

Exobiology 301 had seemed like a good idea at the time, like all ideas before they are tested. She had gone to college with a vague goal of doing something interesting with her life, but the way the last week had gone, she'd end up designing spoons or something.

The shower was starting to run cold as the water heater fell behind the demand being put on it, so she hurried her shower the rest of the way. She stepped out of the shower, gingerly avoiding the edges of the pool of vomit on the floor and took her time drying off.

Warmed by the soft towel and her headache muted to a dull roar, Akami slipped into a robe and exited stage left. Her apartment was a tiny thing, specially designed to pack as many poor college students into as small a space as possible.

The bedroom was the size of a bed plus a foot around the edges, the living room doubled as a kitchen and if you set up a computer on the counter it worked as a study as well. A ten-gallon fish tank bubbled merrily in a corner, using precious room and housing an irritated looking goldfish the size of a softball. Buck ate bread crumbs at about a quarter-loaf a day and Akami could only afford Wonderbread at the moment, so Buck was on a bit of a starvation diet, which he didn't like.

Other than that, the living room/kitchen/study was occupied by a giant overstuffed bean chair that was illuminated by a reading light with a broken switch, which Akami had jury rigged into operation with a bent bobby pin at the cost of minor electrocution.

Akami collapsed into said bean chair and leaned her head back, wishing she hadn't gotten blasted the night before.

Every muscle in her body was sore. She complained about it mentally for a bit then quit after she remembered waking up on the bathroom floor. It was her own damn fault for getting drunk off her ass. That brought back to mind *why* she had been inspired to get so drunk and promptly wished for a solid shot of high proof vodka.

*What had happened yesterday?* She reviewed it in her head, but came up dry. Still didn't make sense. Last time she checked, people didn't have a marked ability to make things explode just by being really angry. And Professor Bath's one-sided chat with her was essentially useless from start to finish. None of *that* made a scrap of sense.

He had given her a card, though. Akami fought free of the engulfing bean chair and ventured back into the bathroom. She rescued her jeans from the toilet seat and fished around in the pockets until she recovered the card Bath had given her. The address still didn't ring much of a bell, so she went back to the living room/kitchen/study and fired up her computer. While it was booting, she shredded a couple slices of Wonderbread and tossed them in the tank, which Buck ate with wild abandon. She never ceased to be amazed that anything could feed solely on Wonderbread and live.

The computer had finished booting so Akami went back and propped the card in the keyboard above the number keys and opened the web browser. A few

minutes of searching brought up a satellite scan of the area indicated on the card. It looked like one of those warehouses that sit in an overgrown lot like a diseased boil, gathering dust wholesale and generally wasting real estate.

Well, it was Saturday and the only class she had today was Exobiology 301, now canceled. Time to go for a ride.

...

Two hours and a bus-exchange later, Akami was pedaling down a road heading east out of Pinole for the street given on Bath's card. Like all college students, Akami had the requisite middling quality mountain bike, faded paint and rusty chain hallmarking its age and level of abuse. Akami rode her bike for most of an hour, more or less ignoring the traffic.

A few gentle uphill slopes found her pedaling into a breeze off the ocean, sixty-three degrees as always, which cooled the sweat on her brow and blew the stench of the city out of her hair along with the last clinging tendrils of her hangover. To the left were giant lots, fenced in with barbed wire held in the air by crudely hewn oak branches interspersed at rare intervals with actual fence posts, populated with gnarled oak trees and apathetic cattle.

A broad bend hid the dilapidated warehouse from view until she wasn't more than a half mile away. She decided to bike past it and scope it out before making herself known there. Who knew what kind of creeps could have made such an out-of-the-way place their home. Once she was directly across from it, however, Professor Bath himself stepped out of the door and waved at her.

Feeling sheepish, Akami crossed the street after waiting for a corral on wheels to roll by at a stunningly slow pace. Her legs were protesting after the long ride so she decided to walk it up to the warehouse. It gave her more time to look around anyway.

"Akami, I'm so glad you decided to come today! I was afraid you were going to wait for a week or something." Bath was obviously more exuberant than usual.

Akami decided not to tell him that she almost did exactly that and to give the old man a break. "Alright, Professor. I'm here. I better get some damn good answers."

Bath's smile faltered for a moment then he grew serious. "Ok, Akami. If it's answers you want, it's answers you'll get." He turned around and walked into the warehouse, leaving Akami behind.

Akami was getting irritated. This old professor kept getting the better of her. Once again, the ball was back in her court. Akami leaned her bike against the wall of the warehouse and followed Bath inside.

Inside, rusted farm equipment littered the edges near the walls, but for the vast majority, the warehouse was empty. Bath was walking towards the center, where a low metal platform stood, growing rust in copious amounts.

Akami hurried to catch up with the old professor, and fell in step with him. "Ok, so far, no answers. I could just turn around right now and leave you with your farming tools and your secrets." She was getting a little ticked off.

Bath said without looking at her, "You know what the world was told about the end of the war. There's something that hasn't been told, at least not on a broad scale distribution level. The best secrets are those that aren't kept, don't you agree?"

They had reached the platform, which wasn't much more than a couple of metal sheets welded together with an iron pipe railing going around the edge. Incongruously, a bright and shiny panel was bolted to the railing at one point, with a heavy coil of wires running into the ground.

"What the hell is this?" Akami asked.

"Biometrics," Bath grunted, as he heaved himself over the railing. "palm plate, iris scanner, et cetera. Come on. You won't believe me until we go inside, anyway."

"The hell I am. Biometrics for what?"

"To make sure you're Akami and I'm Professor Bath, is what. Now, are you coming or not?"

Akami frowned at him, then followed him over the railing, albeit a lot more gracefully.

"Oh good," Bath said. "Just put your hand on the panel there and look at the little blue light."

"Wait. Wait. Wait." Akami held up a hand. "We aren't going to get beamed up to another planet are we?" Akami was joking.

"No, we're just going down. Will you put your hand on the panel already?"

Bath didn't seem to get the joke.

"No. What didn't the military tell the rest of the world?" Akami glared at the professor. Something was wrong here.

Bath sighed. "Look, Akami, the Thriven were millions strong. They overwhelmed us at every confrontation on every battlefield we fought them on."

"I know that! But we won the war anyway. Is that what you're getting at? Some kind of super weapon?"

"Basically. Well, not a super weapon really. People like you." Bath put his hand on the panel and it lit up as it scanned his hand then beeped in recognition. "You have to do the same. It won't go down for just one person."

"That doesn't answer the question, Professor. How could I kill a Thriven warrior, let alone a million of them?" Akami was getting tired of this back and forth game.

"You'll see, I just can't tell you up here." He pointed at the ceiling and tapped an ear.

"You're shitting me."

"No, I'm quite serious. There are some things we'd rather certain people just didn't find out about."

Akami shook her head. "I hope you're just a crazy old fart, Professor. I really do." She put her hand on the panel next to Bath's and it scanned hers. She half expected it to reject her palm, but it too beeped in recognition. In a way, that creeped her out more than anything else.

There was a solid *chunk*, then, unexpectedly, the floor dropped out from under her, and Akami screamed.

She choked it off as soon as it came out, but it was too late. Bath looked at her with a grin and Akami felt her face flush. The floor didn't really drop out from under so much as just started going down really fast. This sort of cheesy underground secret government facility was usually reserved for lame movies. She half-expected to see alien biopsies being performed through leaded-glass windows as she plummeted downward, but the only recognizable features were rock, rock and more rock.

The platform bottomed out about three seconds later and ground to a halt in a rock tunnel far enough underground that the air was chilly and damp.

"How far down?" Akami asked, out of curiosity.

"About a hundred yards. I haven't actually measured it myself."

"This isn't much of a secret government facility," Akami commented, looking around at the close-quartered cavern they were in. "In fact, it looks like a hole in the ground."

"Well, it is a hole in the ground," Bath explained patiently, "but the government doesn't know about it. We've had limited funding. This is just the foyer, as it were, so we couldn't afford to make it look like a movie set. Sorry."

"What, is this some sort of secret civilian outpost to protect humanity?" Akami scoffed.

Bath didn't answer. Instead, he walked across the cavern, a distance of maybe ten feet, and did something to the wall. A segment fell inwards then slid to the side, revealing a tunnel paved with metal floor plates and sterile white walls, lit with government-issue fluorescent diffusers.

"Can't be civilian, look at that hallway. I've never seen anything so government-funded in my life." Akami was babbling, and she knew it, but couldn't seem to stop.

"Come on, Akami, let's go meet the crew." Bath turned, and without waiting for her, walked down the hallway.

Akami, getting a little nervous, followed without waiting. Behind her, the platform shot back upward at the same startling speed, leaving behind a faint curtain of suspended rust.

Suddenly, the magnitude of what she was seeing hit her. Bath's silence after her last question hung in her mind like a lead curtain, hinting at impossible meanings and was laden with devastating innuendo. *A civilian defense project saving humanity, unknown and unfunded by the government, located in an underground facility outside Berkeley, California.* Akami's rational mind shied away from that highly improbably description. *What else could this be?* Bath's earlier questions, in the classroom, came back to mind. *Could this be a telepresence lab? Is it possible they got it working?*

She hurried through the concealed door and hardly heard it closing behind her. *And what does all this have to do with me?*

The hallway itself wasn't very long, and terminated in a massive underground... hanger, is all Akami could think of to describe it. The central room was massive, practically half a mile long and as wide as a football field. And it was full of... stuff. Akami didn't know what to call most of what she was seeing, but the few recognizable items, like forklifts driving around and such, were... different.

Unmanned.

"Professor..." Akami started, mouth open.

"This way, Akami," Bath said, gesturing towards one of the long walls, peppered with windows. "They're all waiting."

Akami fell in step with the professor, eyes wide as she stared around.

"Professor, there's nobody driving that forklift."

Bath glanced over where she was pointing nonchalantly, and said, "Yes there is. Just not here. Wait just a little longer, Akami, the answers are coming."

Akami followed Bath through a set of double doors, down another hallway and so on, until she was totally lost. After ten minutes of following the Professor, Akami started to get a rough idea of how huge the complex was.

Finally, they stopped and Bath turned to face Akami. "The conference room is directly ahead. Don't be afraid. They're all nice people."

That sounded ominous, implying that there were not-nice people. Akami felt a shiver of fear run up her spine. She followed the professor through the indicated door and halted dead. There were a few people here, but there were also machines occupying positions around the table where people would normally sit. Machines that looked like people, but still machines, with not a scrap of biological material on them. Telepresence. Akami's mind froze.

Bath took a few steps before noticing she had stopped following. "Akami..." He turned back and took her arm, then led her to a chair and sat her in it.

"Gentlemen, ladies, I give you the latest addition to our team. Akami, meet the men and women who won the war." Bath smiled, reveling in the dramatic.

Akami felt sick.

Bath spoke to fill the silence. "You've been waiting for answers, Akami. We'll answer them to the best of our ability."

Akami took a deep breath and asked the one question that was pounding in her head. "Why me?"

Glances shot around the table. Apparently, she'd just asked a doozy. An aging man, heavy-set and still in good shape, stood up on the far side of the table and said, "I'll field this one, Bath." Bath nodded and sat down.

"My name is Halleck. I'm the commander here in our Pacific base. The only way you'll understand it fully is if I tell it from the beginning. You know what the rest of the world knows about the end of the war. Humanity was losing. Hard core. The Thriven could amass more sheer biomass than we could localize firepower in either defense or offense. Every single battle was decided overwhelmingly in their favor.

"Every trick in the book failed against them, both in space and on the ground. We were losing. The united governments on Earth were desperate to do something, anything, to stop the advance of the Thriven across the Solar system. Eventually, someone thought of the telepresence rig. It was a good idea but they couldn't seem to get it to work well. It was awfully crude in those days. Only one person out of a hundred thousand could get it to operate.

"This didn't jive with the current mindset of the government which was all men were created equal, so they experimented to try to get the rigs working on anyone. They failed." That one sentence held years of pain in it. "Not only that, but they discovered only... special... individuals could operate the rigs. Tests were developed to locate such individuals, some more crude than others, some more successful than others." Halleck looked haggard, remembering as he gave his narrative. He paused to gather himself then continued.

"The resulting force was fielded against the advancing Thriven in the asteroid belt operating rudimentary rigs from a transport a couple thousand kilometers away. We used gun platforms with propulsion systems. Very simple, but effective. That battle was insane. The operators were still learning to use the rigs and the Thriven were better organized than we were. Even so, we managed to give as good as we took and the battle eventually ground to a stalemate.

"The rest of the war was fairly straightforward. We learned how to use the rigs better, the development of the rigs improved exponentially, the gun platforms were replaced with battle mechs that were more human-shaped and responded to the rigs better. The only bottleneck was how fast new mechs could be made to replace the ones lost in combat. More operators were trained and our potential force in the field grew larger.

"We drove the Thriven out of our system in a series of decisive battles, culminating in the killing of what we think was the Queen, a Thriven bioform unencountered previously that seemed to have a... mental control over the rest of the Thriven.

"Upon its destruction, the remaining Thriven warriors went docile. Many were taken for experimentation, many more were frozen, and the rest were left to live or die. We wanted to stage a long-distance campaign to find their source and destroy them, but the powers that be decided no, the war was over, we had won. Against the better judgment of the people who were out fighting, land-based bureaucracy pulled all our forces back to Earth.

"We were homecoming heroes for about a month. Nobody now is sure who struck first. Personally, I think it was China or Russia. About ten battle mechs attacked Washington D.C. in a blitzkrieg and leveled the Pentagon and the White House, among other buildings, before they could be destroyed.

"There was a power struggle by the governments, using the gifted individuals to wage a brief and bloody war. Everyone blamed everyone else for the D.C. strike. That was the 'landing of the Thriven' that the propagandists spread about. In reality, the Thriven never made it closer than Mars.

"The solution that was put into effect was simple. Kill all the rig operators. Hundreds of us were assassinated overnight. The rest went underground. We were hunted for fear of what we could do. It was chaos for a month then out of that chaos the World Government was formed as you know it -- a single entity governing the world.

"Your history books document the gradual dissolution of the World Government as individual nations moved back to their customary independence. There is still a figurehead in place that lacks much influence, but it does retain control of the combined military forces."

"I know all that," Akami cut in. "Except the bit with the rig operators. How does this relate to me? And you? Why am I *here*?"

"Like I said, the rig operators that managed to escape went underground. Now, mere hundreds of us are left in hiding, preparing ourselves for the inevitable war with the Thriven we know are returning and bolstering our forces with new blood."

"Us? You mean you're a rig operator? You all are?" Akami knew she sounded a bit like a broken record but she couldn't help it.

Halleck smiled. "Yes. Well, some of us have different ability with the rig, but yes, we all can use one.

"You asked why you. Here's your answer. You were found to be possessed of whatever X quality is needed to power the telepresence rigs. If you would rise to the occasion, we would welcome you gladly among us. If not..." He left the sentence hanging.

Akami sat in silence. In an odd way, she wondered why she hadn't figured it out before. The lie put forth by the government was so convincing that she, and the rest of humanity, accepted it without question. Perhaps, since the lie was really quite frail, she just refused to accept what it meant if the story wasn't the truth. What Halleck had told her filled all the blanks that she had never questioned before.

"So I... what? What does joining you mean?"

Bath answered her, "You would train in the use of the telepresence rig, ultimately joining us in the war against the Thriven."

"But they're all destroyed. What is there left to be at war with?"

"Ah, perhaps 'won' is a bit of a misnomer," Halleck said. "The Queen was destroyed, but there are still hives of Thriven populating several of Jupiter's moons."

"So you kill them?"

"We keep the population in check. We don't have the resources to eradicate them totally. But our purpose isn't extermination. We're a watchdog group waiting for the inevitable return of another Queen."

"I see." She didn't, but Akami needed some time to think. Her world had done a violent about-face in the last ten minutes. Thoughts of her class schedule

chased the image of the cute guy working on his doctorate over in Engineering. For the life of her, she couldn't focus on anything important.

"My family?" Akami finally asked. She couldn't make up her mind. The concept of just dropping everything she had known for years was hard to face.

"There was a wreck not far from here, involving a gasoline tanker and a young woman riding a bike. No remains worth mentioning were found after a thousand gallons of high octane fuel burned out." This came from a man, a few years shy of thirty with a blonde crew cut and a solid jaw. He was leaning back against his chair, muscled arms crossed over his chest, confident and smiling. "I'm Riker."

Akami was stunned. Nobody would try to find her if she was dead. "You killed me?"

"Easiest way," Bath said.

"But you can't just go around killing people!" Akami protested.

"Who said anything about killing people?" Riker asked, a confused look on his face. "We created an illusion. Don't worry, the truck driver is fine."

"What about Buck? My fish?"

"Already here. We took the liberty of freeing him from that miserably small tank when you left your house this morning." An aging beauty nodded at her, long white hair flowing loose around her shoulders. "I'm Agate. Buck's waiting in your rooms. How did you get him to grow that large?"

"Wouldn't somebody notice he was gone?" Akami asked.

"Not really." A machine spoke, this time, out of a speaker. "We found a replacement fish. Not as big as yours, but a casual observer wouldn't find anything odd. Call me Asgard."

"I..." Akami started, then stopped. Her mind swirled. Her choices were limited, really. Yes or no. Saying no would likely be her death warrant. Yes... A spark of interest burned suddenly. She always dreamed of adventure. Here was adventure proposed that exceeded every dream she ever had.

Petty problems came and went, none registering enough to elicit the effort to voice them. "Can I have some time?"

"Take as long as you need," Bath said.

The way they had covered her tracks so thoroughly made an impression eventually, and Halleck's statement rang ominously in Akami's mind. They had

already killed her. Killing her again would just be an admin exercise. If nobody else, Halleck looked more than capable enough to wax a young Japanese girl. Riker looked grim. Even Bath was looking distinctly hard.

*It's not that I have a choice...and besides, the adventure of it would be worth it.*

"Ok," Akami swallowed, "I'm in."

Tension that Akami hadn't noticed before drained out of the room. "Excellent!" Bath jumped up and shook her hand vigorously. "Welcome to the last chance humanity has."

"One more step," Halleck said, all smiles. "We all choose names when we join, to protect our identity. It's a superstition, to avoid having our identity stolen. It's time to pick yours. Give me the first thing that comes to mind when I snap my fingers." He held up a hand then snapped his fingers loudly.

Akami's brain froze and she stuttered out, "S-soda."

There was dead silence, then loud laughter from Riker.

"Soda it is," Halleck announced, his solemnity in stark contrast to Riker's hilarity. "Welcome to the Diatribe."