

The Fulcrum in the Void Chapter 2 Story

The Competitor

1076H - Class of 1078H, Second Year

Diamanta Eglan did not know what to expect. She had grown up in a humble town outside Aalsmeer Dunes. The town was made of simple concrete and synthwood buildings. It could even be called backwater. The only opulence she ever saw were the luxury hovercars that rich tourists zipped through with on their way to the beach. Even Aalsmeer Military College had been an uncomplicated complex of rectangular, utilitarian buildings. But Kinnomori Military Academy was unlike anything she had ever seen.

She let her knapsack slide off her shoulder and drop to the ground as she took it in. Marbleite pillars ringed the circular courtyard, and in between them, sculpted doors led into long hallways. It would have been gaudy, were it not so dazzling. The most stunning feature was the courtyard itself - a massive Earthen tree surrounded by bright green Earthen grass. Save for the palm trees in the Dunes, she had never seen an Earthen tree in her life. And she had never seen so much *green*. Herthan pseudo-plant life was blessed by endless shades of blue.

She had been studying in the support pilot program at AMC, but her secondary aptitude testing suggested she was better suited to the combat pilot program at KMA. Her instructors strongly suggested she pursue this path, so she transferred at the beginning of second year. It made no difference to her either way. She was going to serve no matter what, and she was determined to rise to the top anywhere she ended up. She grew up in a military family - both her parents had been soldiers, and one of her brothers had gone to the Infantry. Serving the Dominion was a given. For her family, Aequalis was not even the reason - they genuinely wanted to uphold the Dominion's laws and ideals. To Dia, it always seemed deeply ironic, given that they were a family of Primals, with skin as dark as Old Earth coffee beans. She felt that the Dominion's ideals marginalized them deliberately, as imperfect examples of the species. Of course they were allowed to earn Aequalis, but the status was given up only grudgingly to people who fell so far outside the Optimal Standard. As a result, military service was the surest shot to Aequalis. Dia's parents may have been patriots, but all she wanted out of the Army was the legal status of an actual human being. And to be the best at whatever role she was shoved into. She was ready to do what was necessary. She would have mopped the floors in uniform if that had been what her aptitude testing dictated. And she would have been the best mopper the Army had ever seen, because to Diamanta Eglan, nothing was worth doing unless no one could do it better than her.

Dia heard a door swing open, and turned her head. A tall, perfectly Optimal girl strode toward her, wearing a mustard yellow uniform jacket and black pants. As the girl approached,

she could not hide the surprise on her olive-skinned face. Dia assumed it was because of her atypical phenotype. The girl corrected her expression quickly, appearing almost friendly.

“Hi, you’re Eglan, right?” The girl asked in a crisp, no-nonsense voice. Her short-cropped hair was dark brown, framing delicate features and almond-shaped nearly black eyes.

“Yes,” Dia answered, and lifted her knapsack again.

“I’m Amy Levy,” she said, and offered a hand. Dia shook. Amy continued, “I’m your bunkmate for this half. Everybody else arrived yesterday, so you’ll be the last to settle in. Come on, I’ll show you the room then walk you around the rest of the place.”

Amy led Dia into the door she had come out of. The hallway was severe and unadorned, a stark contrast to the beauty of the courtyard. They walked almost to the back end of the hallway, where it connected to the round outer hallway that Dia later learned was called the “wheel”. The hallway they were in was one of the twelve “spokes” of KMA’s main building. At the second to last door on the right, Amy turned.

“This is it, 114,” she said, and pointed to the open doorway. She gestured for Dia to enter first. As she stepped in, she looked around. The room was sparse. A T-shaped desk took up the right wall, a modest window on the back wall, and an angular steel bunk bed on the left wall. There was very little floor space remaining.

“I’m on the top,” Amy told her. She pointed to the bottom bunk, “Bottom’s all yours. You can kick your stuff under the bunk to keep the floor clear. First Cadet doesn’t like a speck of clutter at inspection. Room had better look like no one lives in it, as far as he’s concerned.” She said this last with something like wry irritation, tinged with affection. Dia wondered who the First Cadet was, to elicit that reaction.

A knock came from the open doorway. Dia turned to look, and saw a very tall, very Optimal boy standing casually in the open portal. His brown hair was an indecorous mess, but it seemed deliberate. He chewed on a nutri-bar and watched her.

“What do you want, Kal?” Amy sounded annoyed.

“Just wanted to see her. They were right, she’s thrown back farther than Adam. Real dark.” He spoke without judgment, just casual observation.. Kal took another bite of his nutri-bar, and looked Dia dead in the eyes. “Hi, welcome to KMA. Everyone here sucks.”

Amy crossed the room and shoved Kal out of the doorway. “Rude! Go away, Kalliovas!” He strode off down the hallway with an easy swagger, as if this kind of thing happened frequently.

Amy glanced at Dia, "Sorry about him. He's our resident ass." She pondered for a moment, "Well, one of them. Can't forget Tawney."

"Of *the* Tawneys?" Dia asked, surprised. What would a rich boy be doing in the Army? He could just pay Sacrifice.

"Of course, don't you watch the news?" Amy raised an eyebrow. "We have a princeling right here among us. He's the worst. I advise avoidance. You can't miss him, he's the big red guy. Go on, stash your bag, and we'll take a walk."

Dia pushed her knapsack under the bunk, with some effort, flattening her possessions so they would fit. She trailed Amy out of the room, and out to the wheel. They strolled to the next spoke, and Amy showed Dia the cafeteria, and then the two lecture halls at the other end.

"These are really all you need to know about in the building for now, the rest are other programs and bunks for the other tracks," Amy said. "Here, I'll show you the blacktop and the garage."

She led Dia out behind the building onto a massive blacktop. Dia understood immediately that this was a practice area, though no golems were currently using it. At the far end of the vast blackness, a many-doored garage stood. Some of the doors were open, and she could see rows of golems in their maintenance stocks.

"And that over there is exactly what it looks like," Amy waved her arm to the garage. "So those are all the places you're going to need to go for the next few weeks. Oh, you need to pick up uniforms?"

"Yes," Dia said, "Thanks for reminding me."

"That's this way, come on," she waved Dia to follow and they marched back into the building and around the wheel to the other side.

The quartermaster looked Dia up and down with a scowl.

"Don't think I've ever fit someone short as you," he complained.

"Sorry, sir." She bristled in irritation, but had no idea what else to say.

"Not like you can help it, kid," he grumbled.

After a deal of measuring, cutting, and the roar of the computerized sewing machine, he handed Dia two uniforms on hangers, a pair of black canvas boots, a few undershirts, two sets of black sweats, all topped by a yellow-piped black cap.

Amy had waited outside the door for her. With her arms full, Dia looked up at her.

“That didn’t take so long at all. I heard him complaining. He finds something about everyone to complain about.” She brushed her hand dismissively at the quartermaster’s office. “Everyone in our class is just milling around today, catching up and getting ready for tomorrow. If you’re up for it, we can go to the class lounge. I’ll introduce you to some people. Just a warning, you’re going to be the center of attention. We’re used to people washing out, not joining the ranks.”

“Uh, sure, I guess,” Dia agreed. What else was she going to do, sit in the dorm room? Amy looked at her with a shrewd gaze.

“Let’s go back to the room, you should change. No offense, you’re going to stand out anyway, but it will be less shocking if you’re not in another school’s uniform,” she advised.

“Ah,” Dia breathed. She was wearing the dark blue jacket and gray slacks of Aalsmeer Military College. She’d needed to arrive in some kind of uniform - showing up in civvies would have been inappropriate. “That makes sense.”

They trekked back to their room, and Dia changed into a pair of KMA uniform sweatpants, an undershirt, and the canvas boots. Amy sat at the desk and twiddled at her tablet while Dia got ready.

“Is this alright?” Dia felt strange being clad completely in black, and the undershirt fit very snugly. She preferred baggier clothes, given a choice. She did not like her form so revealed.

“Looks great. Damn,” Amy whistled, eyeing Dia’s chest. “Some of the boys are going to swoon. But don’t pay them any mind, they’re rude little shits. You’d think we’d be over boob obsession by this point in human evolution.”

Dia felt heat rising to her cheeks. “Maybe I should wear the sweatshirt.” She had never been competitive about her appearance, just her abilities.

“Don’t you dare. This is the perfect way to make a first impression.” Amy laughed. “I love it.”

Dia could tell Amy craved drama. She liked her so far, but she would need to be wary she did not become involved in it. Uncomfortable in her clothes, Dia followed Amy out to the class lounge.

The lounge was crowded. Padded benches circled the large room, with tables interspersed in front of them. A large holo-TV took up the center of the room. Heads barely glanced up when Amy stepped in, but when Dia followed her through the doorway she felt all eyes on her. Dia glanced at Amy, who cast a fiery glare around the room. Some of the staring subsided.

One corner of the room caught Dia's eye. A large, copper haired boy sat on the bench, an arm behind his neck, the other stretched out along the top of the bench. He sat with one leg crossed over his thigh. He was grinning, talking to the boy next to him. This one sat with his elbows propped on his thighs, hands hanging over his knees. Just as Dia noticed him, he glanced up at her, and the light caught in the most brilliant blue eyes she had ever seen. Definitely not Optimal. He stared for half a second, blinked, then turned to answer the copper-haired boy with a broad smile.

Amy took Dia's shoulder and led her to a different part of the lounge, and introduced her to several of their classmates. Dia introduced herself as "Dia" instead of her full name, "Diamanta". She did her best to be polite, although all she really wanted to do after all was retreat to the dorm room. After a while, Amy left her to her own devices to answer the interrogation about her background, what music she liked, and what golem she wanted to pilot. Gradually, they became less interested in her and resumed their previous conversations. In time, Dia felt like an accessory, so she sidled toward the door and made her exit.

Back at the dorm room, Dia took off her sweatpants, then laid on top of the tightly fitted bottom bunk. She crossed her arms behind her head and stared at the underside of Amy's mattress. Dia had looked for a light pad on her way in, like the dorms at Aalsmeer Military College had, but there was none. The lights were on the brightest setting, and there was no way to dim them. Dia assumed they must be automated, and would turn completely off at lights-out. She was struggling not to feel overwhelmed by KMA. Her class size was not much bigger than before, but the facility was massive. But, despite her anxiety, she was still determined that she would climb to the top of KMA just as she had climbed to the top of her previous class. Like her father taught her, "There's no point doing something unless you strive to be the best at it." With those words in her mind, she fell asleep and did not wake until her personal comm's alarm.

Amy and Dia prepared for inspection silently. Dia shrugged on her yellow jacket and tugged the front flap over to latch on the distant toggle that held the triangular wrapped front tight. She affixed the remaining golden toggles. She pulled the black, yellow-piped cap down onto her head, and adjusted the bill down on her forehead. Being brand new, her boots were satisfactory, no polish needed on the toes. She supposed she looked as appropriate as possible, so she turned to ask Amy's approval.

"How's this?" Dia asked Amy, who was pulling on her boots, braced against a chair.

“Don’t tuck the trousers,” Amy warned her, “Not allowed until you’re in the field.”

“Really? At AMC -”

“Well, that’s them, isn’t it?” Amy shrugged. “Alright, untuck them and line up, he’ll be here soon.” Amy stepped across the room to open the door wide. She came back and stood next to Dia, hands clasped in front of her, feet slightly apart, chin high, back ramrod straight. Dia finished pulling her trousers out of her boots and, familiar with this pose herself, did the same as Amy. She cleared her expression, leaving her face neutral, staring unfocused at the hallway through the open door.

Footsteps sounded in the hall, and then a deep voice from the neighboring room. Two answering voices. Footsteps again, then a tall, almost Optimal boy entered. Dia noticed immediately that it was the blue-eyed boy from the class lounge. Dia tried to avoid staring, but the boy’s angular features, surrounding the pale ice blue eyes, were arresting. She knew his name was Hiroaki Yeo; Amy had told her before inspection. His eyes flicked from Amy to Dia. He took his time, as if he knew it was making them uncomfortable.

“Good morning, Cadets,” Yeo’s voice rang, deep and clear. To Dia, he sounded as if he had a West KC accent - not a Westdown accent, but the neighboring lower income section of Kinnomori City, home to some of the finest school sports teams in the city. It was featured in movies frequently. What was that neighborhood called again? Underwood, that’s right. Always a joke, because no trees, Herthan or Earthen, broke the sprawling concrete. So that meant Yeo was as city-boy and street-corners as it got. Very different from her own rural upbringing, running through the blue sand-trees with her friends after school, a clear amethyst sky overhead.

“Good morning, First Cadet Yeo,” the two girls responded. Yeo proceeded to look them both up and down, then walk a slow circle around them until he stood in front of them again.

“Pass,” he said, and saluted by tapping his fist to his chest. Amy and Dia saluted in return, and Yeo turned on his heel to tend to the next room. Amy relaxed first, then Dia let her shoulders drop.

“I really thought he’d say something to you,” Amy confided.

“What - why?” Dia asked, confused. What could the First Cadet possibly have to say?

“Oh, ‘Welcome’ or something. He’s usually good like that.”

“You seem to know him well?” Dia said, and took her cap off to scratch her head.

“We all do. He gets in everyone’s business. Not in a bad way, but he takes his ‘job’ seriously and tries to keep us all in line,” Amy explained. Then, quieter, “And he likes to make sure we’re alright.” That last sounded personal, to Dia, but she did not pry.

The next two weeks were a blur. Dia’s days were spent full of classes on military history, large asset tactics, golem piloting theory, simulator sessions and hands-on golem repair exercises in the evenings. She got to know several other Cadets, and took a particular shine to Kalliavas, whom she had determined was a prickly shell hiding a good natured, genuine inside. She also began to realize just how often the other Cadets discussed Hiroaki Yeo. She came to find out he was the top pilot in class, and he had carried the highest marks since the beginning of first year. Dia realized he was the man to beat, and she knew she could do it. She had to. Her determination grew so solid that she stopped seeing Yeo as a classmate, and rather as a rival. Inspections every morning rankled her, having to be subservient to someone she knew she could beat. As a result, the events of that morning after the simulator session surprised her. She had been forced to see him as human.

Dia sat up and swung her legs out of the oblong simulation pod. She sat for a moment to adjust her vision back to reality. When she felt grounded, she stood. She had left her tablet on a nearby table, and moved toward it. Someone stepped in front of her, with his hand outstretched. She looked up at his face.

“We haven’t properly met. I’m Aki Yeo, First Cadet,” he said. The sim hall was dark; his blue eyes were shaded, seeming more like a stormy sky than their usual ice. Dia looked at his hand, then back up to his face.

“I know who you are,” she said, her voice cold. “I see you every morning, and you’re all anyone talks about around here.”

Aki lowered his hand, and his brow furrowed. He didn’t speak.

“Seems to me you’re the one to beat, you were the only one giving me a run in the sim,” Dia continued. During the simulation, Aki’s *Opal* had harried Dia’s *Akuma* as she tried to defend her team’s flank. To her frustration, she was not able to easily dispatch him.

Aki raised an eyebrow then lifted his hand to run his fingers through his honey-brown hair.

“Alright,” he said, “I guess you needed to get that out of your system. Do you want to try again?” He extended his hand one more time. “Hi, I’m Aki Yeo,” he repeated. Dia paused. She was so used to competition, she could not understand why he was not leaping at the occasion. Looking into his somewhat confused yet bemused face, she considered she may have made a mistake in trying to make an enemy of him. Someone else came up and wrapped his arm around Aki’s shoulders and shook him.

“Aki! We’re going to Temple tonight, Kal said he’ll do karaoke if I do, and what better time to debut my dulcet tones?” It was the copper-haired boy who had been sitting next to Aki those weeks ago in the lounge. Dia had seen him around but never occasioned to speak with him. He had to be Tawney, Amy had mentioned he was the red one. Dia watched Aki look to Tawney, then flick his eyes toward Dia.

“Yeah I know you’re in a conversation, man, but the pretty lady will still be there when I go away. Won’t you, doll?” Tawney glanced at Dia. Her jaw dropped. *Doll? PRETTY?* “Anyway, Aki, you’re coming, right?”

Aki sighed. “You know I can’t go to Temple, I know what you get up to there.”

“Shut up,” Tawney drew out the words, and rolled his heavy-lidded brown eyes. “We’re meeting in the courtyard, just before dark. See you there.” Tawney dropped his arm from Aki’s shoulders then turned to walk up the steps. He waved one hand haughtily. “And bring *her*.”

Aki slowly turned his head and met Dia’s gaze. He looked embarrassed. “Sorry.”

“*That* guy is your *friend*?” Dia exclaimed.

“The best one I have, I’m afraid,” Aki chuckled ruefully. Dia saw a twinkle of humor in his eyes. “So, do you want to go?”

“I thought you said you couldn’t go?” Dia adjusted her tablet higher in the crook of her arm.

“Oh, I always say that. I’m supposed to report them if I see them drinking, or if anyone shows up to inspection drunk or hung over. But Temple is a KMA tradition going back generations. They know we’re not supposed to drink, obviously. And KMA knows we go there. It’s like an unspoken agreement as long as we don’t show up trashed in the morning.” Aki smiled then, a broad guile-less smile that communicated only openness and friendship. Dia tried to process the sheer *goodness* of it. “Come on,” he said, “Let us break you in, make you one of us for real.”

“I uh,” Dia paused, thinking she did not want to be in a bar with a bunch of people she didn’t know very well. “Can I bring Amy?”

Aki winced. “Levy? Ah. I mean, I guess, but I doubt she’ll want to go.”

“Why?”

“She doesn’t really like Temple. Plus she and Kiva don’t get along. And I can tell he’s going to be a handful tonight.” Aki said.

“Kiva?”

“Oh. Tawney. The red haired guy, was just here,” Aki explained.

“I see. Well, I’ll invite her anyway,” Dia determined.

“Suit yourself, maybe she’s over it -”

“Get out of my sim hall, mongrels! You can chatter in the courtyard!” Lieutenant Carey shouted from the back of the row of pods. “Get out! This fine institution doesn’t have time for your petty goings on!” Carey dramatically armed the laser pistol she carried at her side.

“Yes, sir!” They both barked automatically, and turned on their heels toward the door.

Aki hid a laugh. Just outside the sim hall, he smirked at Dia. “Alright, courtyard just before full dark, see you then.” He strode down the hallway. Dia slunk away from the room feeling as if Carey’s eyes were still on her back. This was not how she had wanted to get noticed.

Dia mused. She knew free time came regularly, where the class was free to do whatever they liked on or off grounds for two and a half days, the first night starting just after dinner. The only requirement was that all Cadets be present and accounted for at inspection every morning, and show no evidence of drunkenness or other intoxication. Some went home to visit family if they lived close enough, some stayed on grounds catching up on assignments. Dia had no idea KMA had a place they could go and actually drink, however. Her old school was in the middle of nowhere, with no place to go on free time. Some Cadets there would smuggle in alcohol but it was difficult, and expensive. She was intrigued by Temple. What could such a place be like, that it had been a KMA pilot class tradition for generations? She felt like she needed to see it. But could she trust Yeo? And how much of a problem was Kiva going to be? And what if Amy refused to go with her?

Dia rubbed her face with one hand as she laid on her bunk thinking. Amy had not come in from dinner yet; she usually stayed late chatting in the cafeteria. Dia had decided not to stay at the table to talk, despite Kal’s protests, and she headed back to her dorm room to rest then freshen up for the night. She realized she had no idea what to wear. She did not have Aki’s comm information to ask him what was expected. She hoped Amy might know, when she came back.

Amy returned about an hour later, looking weary. Dia sat up right away.

“Whoa,” Amy said. “Relax. What’s up?” She walked to the far side of the desk and sat, sighing, in her chair.

“I got invited to Temple tonight,” Dia said, straightforward. Amy started.

“You what? Really?”

“Yeo caught me after sim hall, and either he or Tawney or - somebody - somehow I was invited,” Dia explained. “I told Yeo I wanted to invite you. I don’t want to go alone.”

“Oh. You don’t need to worry about them, you know. They’re safe enough,” Amy reassured her.

“*You* warned me away from Tawney. Anyway, will you go?” Dia asked.

“No, that crowd’s not for me,” Amy said regretfully. “But if you can get in with them, you should. It’ll be good for your career.”

“What do you mean, my career?” Dia was perplexed.

“Yeo and Tawney are shooting stars. They’re going far. It would be in your best interest to be friends with them. Especially Yeo,” Amy said, picking at her nails. Dia frowned. *She* wanted to be the shooting star. How could she be friends with her direct competitors?

“If you’re not going ... should I go? Really?” Dia asked.

“Absolutely, you’ll have a blast. And getting in with Aki is worth any effort, everything comes easy to him. The guy is charmed,” Amy snorted in disgust. It was the first time she’d used his nickname to Dia.

“OK. In that case, what the hell am I supposed to wear to Temple?” Dia asked, not sure she should trust Amy’s fashion suggestions after last time.

“Civvies, you can’t wear any Army logos while drinking, you know that. What eras do you have?” Amy stood and walked over, expecting Dia to drag her bag out from under the bunk. Dia did not move. She had not brought any era clothing, nothing to reflect the fashion decades on Old Earth. Her parents had never let her indulge in that expensive and fickle pastime.

“I don’t want to overdo it,” Dia warned. “Fuck it, I’ll wear a black undershirt and jeans.” Dia decided.

“Oh, you’re one of those. They’ll like that,” Amy said cryptically.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, just that it’ll work,” Amy smiled. “Besides, nobody looks at anybody in Temple, the walls are too busy to focus anywhere.”

When Dia exited into the courtyard, she saw a handful of cadets standing under the giant live oak tree in the center, a dark mass in the dim light. One cadet craned his neck to look up into the limbs of the tree. As Dia came closer, she could see that it was James Olivieri, another classmate she had not occasioned to speak with much.

“Kiva, you’re going to fall,” James warned. Dia looked up to see a tall boy climbing the sprawling limbs. Through the darkness, she could see that he was dressed in a white shirt, an open vest, suspenders, and dark pants rolled up to his ankle to expose his socks. 1920s, an unusual era for a young person to choose. Still, it did look striking on him, like a snapshot of a faraway age, up in an Earthen tree. Dia stood next to James and watched Kiva make his way through the branches.

“If I was going to fall, I would’ve fallen already,” Kiva shouted down, nonchalant. “I’m not even drunk yet, James.”

“Is he always like this?” Dia asked dryly. James looked at her, surprised.

“Oh, hi Dia. I guess you wouldn’t know yet. Yes. Yes, he is,” James nodded. He folded his arms and shouted up to Kiva again, “Come down or we’ll leave without you.”

Dia glanced around, looking for Aki. She spotted him chatting with a group of cadets closer to the front gate. James said something to her, but she did not hear it. She turned back to him.

“Sorry, what?” She asked.

“I said, are you coming with us tonight?” James asked, his eyes smiling. Had he caught her looking for Aki?

“Yeah,” Dia said. “Though I don’t really know anybody well. Technically, he invited me.” Dia pointed to Kiva, who had reached limbs that could not hold his body weight.

“And that’s as far as I go,” Kiva announced.

“Good,” James yelled. “He’s an idiot,” he muttered to Dia, “I don’t know why I put up with it.”

“Oh - you and he?” Dia asked.

“Ugh. Yes. Since first year. They made the mistake of bunking us together for the first half. He won me over, in a backhanded kind of way,” James’ voice was wry.

“KMA doesn’t mind affinities?”

“Sure they mind. But what are they going to do? Nobody’s grades or performance is suffering because of it,” James waved the concern away, “Besides, Carey lets us get away with murder as long as we show up on time, clean, sober, and with a straight back. Unless it actually is murder, in which case she’d kill us with her bare hands to show us how it’s done.”

A thump sounded on the other side of the tree, then Kiva came around the trunk dusting himself off. He did not need to, there was not a scuff nor stain on him. Even his polished shoes were glossy in the courtyard lights.

“Oh, it’s you,” Kiva said to Dia, not unfriendly. “So Aki convinced you to come?”

“I guess you could put it that way,” Dia ventured.

“It’s alright, doll,” Kiva said, “You’re in good hands.” He pulled a cigarette case from his pocket. He took out a brown cylinder, then put it to his lips and lit it. He shoved the case and lighter back in his pocket. “Temple is a hell of a place. You’ll like it. Plus, after a night at Temple, you’ll be on the inside, here.” He winked at Dia. “Anyway, it’s nice to have someone around as thrown back as I am. You’re like my opposite on the Scale.”

“They let you smoke here?” Dia was incredulous, and had not even registered the last statement regarding her phenotype. Kiva was tall, copper-haired, pale, and freckled. She herself had skin like cocoa, and was several inches shorter than the Optimal Scale’s target. They were both equally far away from the dusky tan skin and brown hair of an Optimal.

“So far,” Kiva shrugged.

“He’s Carey’s baby,” James said mockingly, “She’d let him steal an Opal and joyride it back to Tawney Hills.”

“Now that’s an exaggeration,” Kiva drawled. Dia felt a glimmer of competitive hunger. If their primary instructor had a favorite, Dia wanted it to be her. From what she had seen so far, most of her competition would be light, but Yeo and Tawney would be her giants to topple. She figured she could still be friendly in the meantime and see what this famed Temple was all about.

At that moment, Aki appeared next to Kiva. Dia had not even seen him approach. Aki tapped Kiva’s chest with his fist in the typical Army greeting among friends, a reverse of the formal salute. Kiva switched his cigarette to his left hand, then returned the gesture with his right.

“Everyone here?” Aki asked.

“How should I know?” Kiva brandished his cigarette, “I’m not their keeper. If they aren’t here by now, they can catch up. They know where it is.”

“Fair,” Aki shrugged. Dia noticed Aki was dressed very similar to her - a black shirt, jeans and boots. Is that what Amy had meant by “they’ll like that”? Aki nodded to Dia, a faint smile on his face, then turned toward the gate. He let out a loud whistle, then raised his hand in the air, finger pointed upwards. He turned his hand in a circle, then dropped it to point out the gate. The fifteen or so waiting cadets whooped and cheered, then moved as a mass out the wrought iron gates. Uninvolved cadets from other tracks interspersed around the courtyard just watched the Pilot cadets, bemused. Their own classes would never dare to frequent Temple. And their own instructors would never permit it. All of KMA knew well that the pilot cadets were a different sort, and were treated like it.

Dia walked with her hands in her pockets. She had been too awestruck on her way in to KMA to notice the landscape outside the gates. Now she saw that a large park surrounded the school, buffering it from the looming buildings ahead. Herthan shrubs and trees dotted the park in haphazard arrangements. Dia could not help but notice that the mostly blue plants had been allowed to move wherever they pleased, either deliberately, or because the park was not well-tended. The coarse, gravelly dirt of the main path crunched under her boots as the group of cadets made their way toward the city.

At the end of the path was an archway, the only gap in a twelve foot wall that surrounded the park. Another open gate waited; this one appeared rusted, as if it had not been swung open or shut in years. The archway opened onto a street lined with sidewalks, and three-story buildings to either side. Aki had taken the lead. Kiva and James kept to the middle of the pack. Dia trailed behind, chatting with Kalliavas.

Temple proved to be surprisingly close. Only two blocks away. Aki stopped at a sunken doorway. Four steps down, a tattered door waited. The building was nondescript, purplish-gray in the inky night. On the concrete slab over the stairway, the word “Temple” was etched in severe caps. Aki knocked at the door. After a moment, it swung open. A medium-build Optimal woman blocked the doorway. She was covered in swirling tattoos; they sparkled and rippled, changing shape and pulsing along her arms. It was the first time Dia had ever seen a sub-cutaneous tattoo matrix in person. Colorful, smoky light billowed behind the woman. When she saw Aki’s face she grinned.

“If it isn’t the paladin of Pilot Class 1078. How’s second year going so far? Let me scan chip,” she greeted him, and passed a scanner over Aki’s left hand. The scan was a formality. As a military-only establishment, Temple wanted to check that a military code had indeed been added to an individual’s ID chip.

“It’s going fine, Sojo, but I’m happier to be here,” Aki clapped her on the shoulder, then entered.

“Don’t be too damn *good* this time!” Sojo called after him. One by one the other cadets followed suit, greeting the doorman and allowing her to scan their chips. At last, Dia trailed in. Sojo looked her up and down, and arched one eyebrow over a dark brown eye.

“You’re new,” she observed.

“Yeah, transfer,” Dia said.

“You picked a good crew,” Sojo said. “Give me your hand.” Dia lifted her hand, and Sojo scanned it.

“I think they picked me,” Dia admitted.

“Even better. Welcome to Temple, take it easy. And don’t let Tawney trick you into drinking Basilisk,” Sojo warned her, tapping Dia’s wrist with the scanner in emphasis.

“Noted, thanks,” Dia said, and stepped past Sojo. She looked around, mesmerized. The ceiling rose toward the heavens, arches flying up like a cathedral. Stained glass windows lined the walls above, letting colored light filter through. The illusion was so realistic, it took Dia a few moments to realize it was a holoprojection. The lower walls on the left side were covered in vintage recruitment posters. Along the right wall were two rows of red pews facing a stand lined with several tiers of electric candles, half of them lit. Above the stand was a crooked hand-painted sign, its letters dripping. It read, “Light One For the Fallen”. In the far right corner was a split-rail fence wrapped in barbed wire. A worn cross rose tall behind it, leaning against the corner. Five realistic skulls ringed the base of the cross. A small sign was nailed to the cross. Dia approached to read it. “There is no man more religious than a soldier.” Dia felt her skin crawl just a little bit. Religion was practically anathema in Dominion society. She felt like an innocent intruding on some sacred and horrible secret. She turned away from the disturbing barbed wire installation, and approached the opposite corner. An opulent shelf held icons and statuary from virtually every Old Earth religion imaginable. The focal piece was a huge, golden, laughing fat man. She felt an urge to touch his bald head, smoothed shiny by many fingers before hers. She saw his belly was even glossier, from years of contact.

“Go ahead, rub his belly,” the bartender called from behind the tall counter to her left. “That’s the Buddha, he’ll bring you luck.”

“Superstition?” Dia asked, confused.

“Call it what you want, kid. But when the lasers just cut your buddy down, and you hear the thunder of golem feet, you’ll want something to cling to,” she said while drawing a pint. “Not much can keep your feet moving forward in that situation. Definitely not faith in the bloody Dominion,” she spat. Dia winced, not used to hearing criticism of the state, much less from a soldier. “More like faith in yourself, faith in your men, and a fervent hope that there will be

something to see after your brains fall on the dirt.” The woman sounded very tired, and very jaded. Her Optimal brown hair was streaked with gray.

“Where were you stationed?” Dia asked. The bartender slid the pint across the counter to the waiting man, then turned to Dia.

“Kelminster campaign. Blue Fen. All over the place in Babalon,” the bartender said. “Leg hunter.” She referred to the hammer guard, a specialized group of infantry dedicated to disabling golems with massive electromagnetic warhammers designed to impact and short-circuit legs and feet. It was a highly trained, highly dangerous position. “All for nothing, really - the Commonwealth owns all that land now, and we watered it for them with our blood.”

Dia stood silently, awed by the veteran before her. She felt like nothing, compared to this woman. Just a student playing at soldier. She did not even feel worthy to be in this establishment.

“I’m just telling you this so you think about believing in something,” the bartender laughed to lighten the mood. “Because believing in the Dominion and ShadSo isn’t going to satisfy you when Insurrection *Halcyons* storm your lines.”

“They still use *Halcyons*?” Dia’s voice was shocked. The apocalyptically armed but fragile *Halcyon* had been out of production for over 20 E-years due to a fatal reactor flaw which resulted in devastating explosions.

“The hell are they teaching you at KMA? Fuck, it’s *mostly Halcyons*. I’ve seen companies get obliterated when the damn things explode. Hey, I’m Bo by the way, Temple’s mine,” Bo offered her hand over the bar, and Dia shook it.

“Dia. Eglan.”

“Welcome. If you want more stories, most of these old bastards are all too happy to talk. They’ll talk to Army kids, but not to their own kids. You know how it is.” Bo shook her head, then continued in a brighter tone, “You’ve got a good crew, this class. We’ve seen you pilot kids come and go for years, but this group is my favorite. Especially this one,” Bo pointed over Dia’s shoulder with an empty glass.

At that moment, someone bumped Dia’s left shoulder, and she looked over - then up. Aki smiled at the bartender. “Hey, Bo,” Aki rapped the counter with his knuckles, then turned to Dia, “Want to sit? Or are you still looking around?” Dia was surprised. Aki wanted to sit with *her*? Maybe he was just being kind. Or maybe he felt like he needed to stick with her since he brought her.

“Oh - sure. Where?” Dia tried to tune out the noise and the visual spectacle.

“Booth? It’s a little less overwhelming over there,” Aki chuckled. “Come on.” He twitched his hand toward the far wall and stepped away. Dia followed. Aki slid onto the bench, and Dia sat opposite him. The tall wooden backs to the benches did isolate them from some of the noise and light. She leaned her elbows on the tabletop, and gazed out into the room. She noted Kiva at the bar, and James sitting with Kalliavas at a center table. The other cadets in their class had scattered around the bar in groups, with some waiting for drinks. Other patrons greeted the cadets with familiarity.

“They really let you drink here?” Dia asked. Aki’s lips curved in a mischievous smile.

“No,” he said, and nodded.

“What? Oh.” Dia snorted when it dawned on her. “No. Got it. So what do you order?”

“Oh, I’m First Cadet, I don’t order anything,” Aki ran his fingers through his hair. “That would just be improper wouldn’t it? I’m simply here to observe, and make sure no one gets in trouble.”

“Oh, I see, so you get a lackey to do it for you,” Dia snarked.

“A lackey? No, I just wait for Kiva to get it,” Aki laughed. “Speaking of which.” Aki craned his neck to look over his shoulder at the bar. Kiva still stood there, talking to the bartender. “Oh, he’s flirting with Bo. She likes to humor him, it might be a while. You should go up and get something.”

“I wouldn’t know what to get,” Dia said honestly. Alcohol was not something she had much experience with.

“Well, when I had that same problem, someone once told me, ‘Just go up and ask what beers they have. Then pick one that sounds good.’” Aki shrugged. But at that moment, Dia saw Kiva approaching from the bar, carrying three drinks, awkwardly. Somehow he managed to keep his cigarette tight between his fingers. He set the drinks on the table, then edged onto the bench next to Aki, shoving him over. Aki rolled his eyes.

“You can just *ask* me to move,” Aki complained.

“No fun,” Kiva said, then picked a drink up and set it in front of Dia. With his other hand, he brought his cigarette to his lips. He slid a beer to Aki, and took the last drink himself. Dia peered at her drink - it was a fluorescent green, with a pink layer on top.

“What the fuck is this?” She blurted.

“A free drink. Are you going to be rude?” Kiva fake-pouted.

“No - I just - it’s not a Basilisk, is it?” Dia asked, remembering Sojo’s warning. She gave Kiva a suspicious glare.

“Dammit, somebody warned you, didn’t they?” Kiva scowled. He grabbed Dia’s drink and switched it with his own, a more innocent-looking blue concoction. Aki watched the exchange with an unnaturally neutral expression.

“A toast then?” Aki said, and raised his beer.

“Right,” Kiva agreed and followed suit. Dia picked up her glass.

“To the fallen. To the future. To the Dominion. *I’m a fucking warrior*,” Aki proclaimed.

“Gods damn right,” Kiva said, tapped his glass to the table, then downed his drink. Aki did the same. Kiva pointed to Dia around his glass. “Now you.”

“Gods damn right?” Dia repeated, then tapped her glass on the table, and bravely threw her drink back. Kiva whooped, then plucked Dia’s empty glass from her fingers. He half-stood, leaned across the table.

“*That* was a Basilisk, doll,” he confided, then grinned, and sauntered back to the bar with the empty glasses.

“There’s no avoiding it,” Aki said nonchalantly, “He’ll get you every time. Now be careful, alright? That’s going to hit in about ten minutes. You’ll be fine, just don’t have much more until it wears off.”

Dia could feel it hitting already. Questions were floating in her head, and her inhibition was floating away.

“Why are you sitting with me?” She asked suddenly. Aki raised his eyebrows.

“Should I not be? Are you a criminal or something?”

“No - I just - I’m new. Not anybody yet. Plus I’m a throwback. Plus I challenged you,” Dia explained.

“I wasn’t offended by that,” Aki assured her. “It’s what I like to see, anyway. We all need to have that kind of fight in us. Especially where we’re going. And do you really think Primality bothers me?” Aki’s pale blue eyes shimmered like sunlight over ice, a color most definitely unacceptable on the brown-dominated Optimal Scale. Dia’s mind had already drifted to another question.

"I heard Kiva is second only to you, how do you do that? How can you be rivals but friends?" Dia's mind felt more and more loose, free. She was not afraid to say anything she thought.

"You just keep it separate, you know?" Aki looked a touch uncomfortable. Dia seized on this subtle reaction.

"Are you trine?"

"What?" Aki's beer was halfway to his lips.

"You, Kiva, and James," Dia clarified. Aki's face was frozen in an expressionless mask. He set his beer down.

"I - no. No, we're hinge," Aki said, very quietly. After the chaos of first year, he had told himself he would never lie about the relationship if asked directly, but that he would never volunteer the information either. Until now, no one had brought it up. "Kiva's the middle."

"Ah," Dia leaned back in her bench. "That makes more sense." Dominion society recognized infinite configurations of affinities, of all genders. Some configurations were more common than others. The Dominion had liberated itself from the yoke of marriage hundreds of years prior, so sprawling constellations of affinities were very common. Monogamous people, or monogs, were a little-understood subculture.

"Does it?" Aki chuckled. "We keep it under wraps, me and Kiva, even though he and James are open. If you don't mind, don't -"

"No problem," Dia waved her hand.

Aki looked down at his beer. "Was it that obvious?"

"No, actually," Dia said. "I just had a feeling." And didn't have a filter, Dia said to herself, and wanted to giggle.

"What did I miss?" Kiva said as he slid back into the booth. He pushed an innocent-looking glass of something that seemed to be cola toward Dia. Two ice cubes clinked as the glass slid. "Just sip that, doll."

"Eglan just guessed our secret," Aki said dryly, nodding to Dia. Kiva's jaw dropped and his eyes widened in mock horror.

"Oh. Heavens. No." Kiva said. "What. Will. We. Do."

"Oh come on," Aki rolled his eyes at Kiva.

"I'm not gonna tell anybody," Dia giggled.

"You know I don't give a fuck who knows," Kiva grumbled.

"But I *do*," Aki retorted.

"Yes, I know," Kiva brushed the comment away with a push of his hand. He looked at Dia and cocked his head, "He's afraid to be publicly *associated* with the black sheep heir of the Tawney family."

"It's possible I should not be involved in this!" Dia said, feeling uncomfortable, and stood abruptly. She felt dizzy, but so happy. She wanted to go dance with the golden fat man. What was it? The Buddha? The lights had become sunbursts, and the stained glass blurred together in a kaleidoscope.

"Whoa!" Aki exclaimed and grabbed for her arm, but could not reach her in time as she moved away.

"I got her," Kiva said. He stood and wrapped an arm around Dia's shoulders. He spun her deftly and deposited her on the bench next to Aki. "You stay here, doll. You'll be alright in about twenty minutes."

"Why did you have to Basilisk her?" Aki complained.

"Temple rite of passage. Why did you *let* me?" Kiva asked. "Happened to you, happened to me, happened to every last one of us. Only Levy ever got upset over it. Anyway, I need to get over to karaoke registration. Kal swore he'd do it if I do, and I'm not letting him out of it."

"So you're gonna leave me here with this?" Aki gestured at Dia, who had begun giggling uncontrollably.

"You're the best option, to be fair," Kiva gave a grandiose shrug, "Imagine what less honorable men might do, in a more savage age." Aki sighed. Dia was at no risk from anyone in Temple, and sexual violence was virtually unheard of in the Dominion, but she could still get in trouble unsupervised. Basilisk was a little-known cocktail graced with a Herthan pseudofungal liqueur that caused moderate euphoria and disinhibition. Kiva strode away, ruffling James' hair as he passed his table. He said something to Kal, then sneered. Kal stuck out his jaw, then stood to follow Kiva to the karaoke host. Dia wondered why Kal had not talked to her since they entered Temple, then remembered who she was sitting with. Was Aki that unapproachable? She was about to wander over to Kal at the karaoke table when Aki's voice distracted her.

"Dia?" Aki asked. He knew he needed to maintain her focus or she would flutter off like an Old Earth butterfly.

"Hm?" She tittered.

"Tell me about your old school, what was it -"

"Aalsmeer Military College, AMC. It was a shithole, just like the rest of Aalsmeer," Dia declared.

"Uh-huh. You were in the pilot program there?"

"Yeah, for support. But my aptitudes were too good to be stuck in a Trundle, they said," Dia said. "AMC didn't have combat programs."

"You must have pretty damn high scores to transfer to KMA," Aki said with admiration.

"You can look them up if you want," Dia shrugged. "Scores're no secret."

"Yeah, I know." He had already seen them. "So what else should someone know about you?" Aki sipped his beer. He hoped he could drag this out long enough for the Basilisk to wear off. If he did not keep her attention, she was liable to float about the room asking rude questions.

"About me? My whole family's military. I want Aequalis. And I want to win, most of all." Dia's voice was very serious. "I also like classical music. I play violin. I didn't bring my violin to KMA."

"Yeah they never would have let you. That's a shame. I like music. Mostly OE metal; there's a fair amount of classical in it," Aki mused.

A speaker crackled, and someone tapped a microphone. They looked toward the small stage next to the bar. A man dressed in 1980s-era civvies stood, preparing to make announcements.

"Welcome to Temple karaoke night, soldiers," the announcer said. "We have a full house tonight, so this should be something. We've got hammer guard, we've got infantry, we've even got KMA Pilot Class 1078 in the house. We're serving the kids *juice* as usual." The announcer winked, and a rumbling chuckle rolled through the room. "I hope you're all ready to embarrass yourselves! This is an anything goes night. *Anything* on the Nexus is fair game. Come up and register, and stake your claim. Options are *limited*," the announcer joked. The Nexus contained every song, composition, movie, television or holo show, and more, from the present 1076H back to the dawn of recording on Old Earth. The choices were inexhaustible.

"I hate karaoke," Dia said.

"Me, too," Aki grumbled. "But, we'll get to see Kalliavas make a fool out of himself."

“What if he can sing?” Dia wondered.

“Then it will be even funnier, can you imagine?” Aki chuckled. “Kal of the golden voice.”

“What made you want to be a pilot?” Dia asked suddenly. The Basilisk had caused her pupils to dilate, and her dark brown irises looked nearly black. Aki reoriented himself to the conversation.

“You mean they haven’t told you my life story yet? With how much they apparently talk about me?” Aki’s voice was droll.

“No, actually,” Dia admitted.

“My father was a pilot. Joseph Yeo. Maybe you’ve heard of him?” Aki began.

“Wait - that deserter?” Dia’s jaw dropped.

“Yes,” Aki drew the word out. “I want to serve, of course. I want to protect the tenets of the Dominion and support the Shadow Sovereign’s vision for humanity’s future. I see the Herthan Commonwealth as my enemies in that regard. But I also want to clear my family’s name. Ever since my father ... did what he did, my family has cut my mom and me out. They left us to twist in the slums one spit away from Westdown. I guess you could say I have something to prove.”

“Wow. You really are, aren’t you?” Dia’s voice sounded airy, like she was in the clouds.

“What?” Aki’s voice was deep and grounded.

“The hero type, like they all say. Honor and glory, huh?” Dia giggled again. She wanted to do handstands on the bench, but did not have enough room. Aki’s dusky cheeks flushed red and he hid his face in his beer. He drank deeply, hoping for the color in his face to fade.

“Is that what they say about me?” He ventured, lowering his glass.

“Oh, all the time. Some even call you a paladin, like the woman at the door did,” Dia grinned.

“I’m not so good as all that,” Aki scowled.

Just then, Kiva’s gravelly tenor came over the speakers.

"I promised I'd do this," he purred, "And I keep my word. Kal had better keep his, or this whole place will shame him. Right?" Cheers of support erupted from the tables, and not just from the Cadets.

Aki looked back over his shoulder to watch. Dia swiveled on the end of the wood seat, and leaned on the back of the bench. Temple had erected some kind of lighting system, so purple and green lights played off of Kiva's hair and skin. The music began, and Dia's eyes widened as the first notes came out of Kiva's mouth.

Dia breathed a sigh of relief as Kalliavas' final croak faded. The bar erupted in cheers and laughter. He gave a low bow, then hopped off the stage. He strolled back to his table as though he were a star.

"Gods of man. Well, that was horrific," Aki said, turning back to rest his elbows on the table, Kal's froglike voice still ringing in his ears.

"I never would have guessed Kiva could sing that well. He could've made it in Agora, he's better than half of what comes out these days. He doesn't sound that clear when he talks, more like a barrel of rocks rolling downhill," Dia mused aloud. "Kal was a trainwreck though."

"Kiva likes to hide what he's capable of. And at least Kal kept his word," Aki chuckled. Dia seemed to be coming down from the Basilisk; she was less erratic and distracted. She picked up the drink Kiva had left her; the ice was mostly melted.

"Would it be a mistake to drink this?" Dia asked. A little humor tinged her words.

"You're fine, that's just a regular whiskey and cola. Call it an apology," Aki smirked. "It's the only apology you'll get from him."

"Why aren't you visiting with the others?" Dia pointed surreptitiously at other groups from KMA.

"Oh - well. I meant it when I said the First Cadet is supposed to keep an eye on them. They clam up and get on their best behavior when I crash their conversations. Best to let them be, blow off steam. They don't feel free to, with me there. Give it a little more time and you'll start doing the same around me," Aki said, as if the statement were an inconsequential fact. He finished his beer.

"Aha," Dia gingerly sipped her whiskey and cola. She had never had whiskey before - back home in Aalsmeer, Earthen spirits were rare. Her eyebrows raised. It was delicious. "What if I don't?"

Aki stared at her, frowning.

“What I mean is, I intend to beat you,” she said. A little of the Basilisk still coursed through her veins, so she had no qualms about renewing the challenge. “I intend to beat you and Tawney both. I’m not about to start showing fear or deference to someone I’m preparing to take down.” She took a gulp of her drink. “And First Cadet isn’t a real rank, anyway.”

Aki’s lips twitched. The corners of his eyes crinkled, like he was trying to suppress laughter. “Why’s it so important to you? You’re already in the best pilot program on Hertha, you’re already at the top.”

Dia grinned wolfishly. “I’m not at the top until I’m at the top. And I don’t settle.”

Aki let out a low whistle. His eyes danced. “I dunno, Eglan. I would’ve liked to be friends. But if you’re gunning for me...”

She grinned again. “We can be friends, Yeo. After I win.”

NOW

Dia squatted with her elbows on her knees, fingers trailing over the grass, making it squeak and retreat from her touch. Her mind reeled. She oscillated between rage and panic. Kiva stood watching her, his arms folded. James reached out a hand and touched her shoulder, wordlessly. After a long moment, Dia took a deep breath and looked up at Kiva. His face was grave, eyes slightly narrowed. The burn scars on his black-tattooed neck and arm stood out pink and savage in the morning light. He had refused any cosmetic repair, the same as he had done back in first year when James broke his nose.

“We’re a day behind him. Why did you wait until *now* to tell me?” Dia asked, trying to make her voice harsh but succeeding only in a croak. The news of the Army’s imminent betrayal had hit her like a punch in the gut.

“I guess I was hoping for more news, to tell me the threat was dropped,” Kiva admitted. “Sorry.” He did not sound sorry. Dia’s anger flickered.

“‘Sorry’. You’ve never been sorry for anything,” she spat. Kiva winced, almost imperceptibly.

“That’s not true,” James said. “Anyway, you know now, Dia,” He squeezed her shoulder. He smirked, and his green eyes flashed with dark humor. “No use arguing. We need to figure out what to do.”

Dia stood, groaning, "Gods of man." She took another deep, calming breath, and exhaled. "We have the heads-up, so we can be ready. When we find that fucking idiot and his silver lady, we'll be ready. There's only one thing to do: if we want to live, we have to fight."

"Then what?" James asked, his voice sardonic.

"Then we survive, and make every day count," Kiva said. "If we get out of this, all we will have done is bought some time. As for making it count, I for one have a score to settle."

"Gods of man," Dia repeated, shaking her head. "You're a curse, Tawney." She patted his chest gently, then walked away from them, back toward her *Grendel*. She felt a need to rub the shiny belly of the golden Buddha in her cockpit.