

Integration

Part Three

A flash of lightning followed by the crackle of thunder lit up a dark room, briefly revealing the forms of four people. Two laid sprawled out on a large, bloodied bed while another sat in a chair covered by a blanket. The fourth was on his knees next to the bed with a red LED flashlight in his mouth. Even in the low light, and with rain pouring through cracks in the ceiling, he sutured a gaping wound in the thigh of his patient with practiced ease.

When he had finished and reapplied the bandage he rested a hand on the shoulder of the man and whispered, "You must stop moving, or you will open it again." He only groaned in response and fell right back to sleep. The medic grabbed the blanket and covered him up then walked over to the other side of the bed to the woman. He lifted the cover and checked over her wounds, then counted her pulse, and finally inspected the saline IV drip. Finding everything in order he covered her again then turned to the man in the chair.

"I'm o-okay. Thank you," he muttered quietly when attention fell on him.

The medic shined his light on his neck anyway to inspect the state of the bandage there. Seeing nothing wrong he flicked the red light off and tucked it into a pocket. "You should be sleeping."

"You should too." The seated man tightened the blanket around himself and huddled deeper into his chair.

"Not now," he grumbled back softly then turned to cross the room. His boots kicked used medical supplies across the wet, blood spotted floor and he came to stop in a corner with a battered automatic shotgun propped up against it. He took the weapon and slung it over his shoulder then approached the only window in the room. He peered outside to try to see anything out there in the moonless night. Another flash of lightning lit up his form. He was clad in muddy, bloody, and tattered US Army ACU camouflage clothing with a dirty white band on his arm with a bright red cross emblazoned on it.

"They're gone. There's nothing out there tonight. Please get some sleep, you've done so much already," the man in the chair pleaded to the medic.

He didn't tear his tired eyes away from the night as he said back, "Can't risk it."

The injured man sighed in resignation then tried to go back to sleep. Another lightning flash lit up the horizon again; it still revealed nothing that concerned the soldier. He turned back towards the room, rapidly repacked his medical equipment into his backpack, and left it on the dresser safe from the rain water coming through the ceiling. He then left the bedroom and began looking through windows in every direction around the dark house.

Each time he waited twice for lightning to illuminate the outside world, and each time nothing new was revealed. But what they did show were the ruins of a once beautiful neighborhood. Large, multistory houses, if they were not totally in ruins, were broken husks. Their roofs were

buckled and there were entire sections missing and scattered around. The medic shook his head sadly and resumed his patrol.

He stepped into a washroom and opened a cabinet. He pulled his light out and looked it over for anything useful. He sifted through and was pleased to find a bottle of ibuprofen and iodine. He then checked under the sink where he found a small first aid kit. He took the plastic box and flipped it open to inspect his prize. Band-aids, disinfectant wipes, small gauze pads, and medical tape were inside. All typical and common, but they were all useful. He was repacking the kit when a massive explosion shook the house. His arms shot out to stabilize himself on the sink as the box fell down and spilled all over the floor. When the quaking stopped he immediately ran for the room with his patients while he brought his weapon into his hands. When he got there he found a massive, white furred hand had smashed through the wall with the window. It wrapped its horrible, clawed fingers around the bed, trapping the two people, and began to pull it across the floor.

“No!” The soldier cried and threw himself up against the forearm. The barrel of his gun pushed through the fur and he braced it to fire. A magnum slug belched out and ripped into the flesh, spraying more red onto his bloodied uniform. The arm responded by briefly releasing the bed and swatting him with so much force that it launched him off his feet and into the dresser. His helmet flew off his head and rolled across the floor and his backpack fell down into his lap. He shoved it aside and scrambled for his shotgun. He pulled it across the floor by the sling as he stumbled to his feet in pursuit of the bed as it vanished from the building. A glance to the side showed his third patient staring dumbly at the scene. He shouted for him to run while he stood in the hole left behind to find the giant form of a female, bipedal, white wolf grabbing the two helpless humans into one hand. A full moon somehow shone through the storm clouds and lit the world up- as well as the beast. She carelessly tossed the bed aside as the people flailed in her grip. Blood began to drip from her hand as their grievous wounds wept from the exertion.

He brought the hanging shotgun into his arms and readied to fire. The great wolf simply watched at him with an amused look, her victims almost forgotten. The gun boomed and flashed as if it were its own lightning storm. Seven spent casings clattered to the floor and the breech locked open and smoke poured from it. But for all the show nothing happened. The wolf merely cocked her head and a feral grin spread across her muzzle revealing massive, horrible teeth.

The weapon fell to his side limply and slid from his fingers to clatter to the floor. She brought the people toward her mouth with an exaggerated slowness. They cried and screamed for his help, but he simply stood there shaking and helpless. She opened her gaping maw, bent her head down, and clamped the end down on the woman. Blood began to pour from her en masse and her free arm thrashed about uselessly before grabbing the collar of the now crying man. The wolf bit down harder and pulled away taking the upper body of the woman with her. She made a show of hovering over the man; allowing the blood of the woman to drip from her teeth and shower him. The man looked the medic right in his eyes. He mouthed the word 'help' just before the hand squeezed. He didn't even have time to scream as his torso compacted, forcing a deluge of gore out of his mouth, and one of his eyes popped out of its socket.

The monster tossed the remains into her mouth and swallowed it all whole. Her throat bulged as

the ruined bodies slid on down. She then began to lick her hand clean with one eye focused on the human. He finally decided to move. He spun on his heel and ran from the room while grabbing his bag by a strap. He practically jumped down the stairwell and sprinted through the open front door. He could see the other human running down the street. He was much too close for the time he had to run.

The massive legs of the white wolf stepped over the house and medic as the giant gave chase. The soldier dropped his bag and pulled a revolver from his hip. Six shots rang out in a desperate bid to get her attention away from the other man. The cylinder clicked empty. It was just as fruitless as the other weapon.

She paid him no mind as her long strides easily closed the distance. She stomped a paw down in front of the man who then slammed into, bounced off, and landed on his back. She then used the other to pin him down, but not with enough force to kill him. The soldier could hear his cries for help as the wolf looked towards the medic where they locked eyes. With another evil grin she pressed her paw down harder. The man screamed louder beneath her foot before a crunch as loud as the thunder hit his ears. As she ground her victim into the pavement the soldier cried out and chucked his empty handgun towards the creature where it fell way short on the cracked asphalt.

Her footsteps shook the ground as she approached him, but he didn't move. Her feet came crashing down on either side of him. She used one paw to almost gently kick him over onto his back where he made no move to escape. She hovered her foot right over him. The pads glistened with moisture, and drops of collected rain dripped from her claws onto his body. He only gave a sneer as it came down towards him.

Dylan's eyes shot open and he took in a deep breath, but he didn't yell out in fright. He sat up and climbed out of his cot. It was dark in the barracks but there was a small amount of light coming from the bathrooms to provide just enough illumination to see where he was going. He quickly scurried towards it and the door slid open. The light brightened and blinded him. He squeezed his eyes closed and shakily walked through the door and propped himself against one of the sinks.

Once his sight adjusted a look in the mirror revealed his brown eyes were bloodshot and drying moisture was on his cheeks. His face scrunched up as fresh tears started to make their way out. He turned to one of the stalls and sat down on the toilet.

He looked at his hands, they were trembling, and he grabbed one with the other to steady them. When he noticed his legs were shivering too he gripped his thighs with both hands. He had been having nightmares for months now, and he had learned to live with them. They were only dreams, after all. Dreams of his time in the zone, certainly, but still just dreams. But occasionally his barriers collapsed from stress and he would lose himself like this. This was one of those times. His head banged against the side of the stall and rested there, and he began to weep. Kira. Why the hell did his mind replace the Rynar in that nightmare with Kira? Was his subconscious working against him here?

He didn't even know why he had that nightmare. Most of his dreams were random messes of the terrors he witnessed. But this one, it never happened and it was the only one that recurred, but it

effected him the most. Occasionally his unconscious mind would recognize it and he could force himself to never leave the survivors until the beast came. It always played out the same. Each time he could not save them. He could confront the monster head on, but every time it got them. The couple was always consumed. The runner never got away. He was simply too helpless to do a thing. Too small, too weak, and too alone. He alone had to save those people, and every single time he failed. The monster won every time. But it was always a Rynar. Always! Now his mind decided to screw him over and put his guardian in there instead. He sobbed some more. Why was this happening? His nerves were shot over this. It was as if the primal part of his mind was saying, 'See? See what she can do? Have you learned nothing?'

But he knew she was not like that! He knew! Why must instincts scream otherwise? He growled in frustration and wiped away his tears as he regained his composure. They were only nightmares. He had to deal with the real thing. Dreams were a joke compared to that. He started rationalizing with himself. It must have been the time he spent with her, or even eating with her in the mess. She was the first giant he had gotten to know, and the most pressing in his mind.

He began thinking about Kira to flush the image of the sadistic killer out. She carried him around the base, much to his delight. He even talked to her as if they were new acquaintances. He smiled slightly as his mind filled with the real Kira. The twenty four year old budding career soldier who volunteered to share her kindness with a little twenty two year old alien that lost his way and needed a friend. She had a tendency to stroke him like a pet. He chuckled lightly to himself as she was actually worried when he voiced that concern, but he shrugged it off. The poor giant just wanted to show affection. She couldn't exactly give him a pat on the back or rest a hand on his shoulder.

A frown pursed his lips. The mess hall ended up bringing back some unfortunate memories. She was still a predator and was quite fond of meat. Maybe that was what pushed her into his nightmare. But she wasn't exactly stuffing screaming people into her maw. He snorted in amusement, when she noticed him looking she gave him the most innocent look. It was actually rather adorable.

Feeling slightly better Dylan stood up and headed back to bed. He was feeling more frustrated than upset now. It was his first day here and his dreams were already finding new ways to work against him. Not that they ever worked for him, though.

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The battalion guardians had all gathered in second platoon's section to collect their charges, all of whom were quartered in the specially designed human barracks in this area. Today was the first day of their training, and it would be simulations. Kira had laid out her palm on the pad for Dylan and waited for him to get on. Yesterday went extremely well, she thought. She had wandered the base with the medic, and they chatted a fair bit. They even talked about their families. He was interested to hear how her mother was a captain on a battlecruiser that fought for Earth while her father was a manager at a restaurant and that her siblings were in school. All things that two people first meeting each other talked about, and he got into it so well. She was happy that he opened up to her. Though he was reluctant to talk about his own family. She sensed

he lost a few in the war and just didn't want to talk about it.

But he was happy to talk about his interests in medicine. He revealed to her his years stumbling through university, growing frustrated, and dropping out with nothing to show for it. His joining the military and training to become a medic sparked an unknown passion within him. He claimed the work he did brought him immense pride, and a sense of fulfillment he never found in school, despite the hardships that came with losing a patient. He was just so open and spirited that evening. His fear of her waned much. So, what was wrong with him now?

She smelled fear, and he looked very apprehensive. He looked at his boots and shook his head and when he looked back at her hand he had that familiar terrified look. His ears folded back. Did she do something wrong? He gazed up at her and frowned when he saw her sad look. He quickly steeled himself and immediately climbed into her palm. She backed away from the platform to make room for the others. She then started to raise him up to face level, but he actually gasped and scooted backwards in her palm! She squealed in confusion and her ears folded yet again as she stopped the movement.

“What's wrong? Why am I scaring you?” she asked, slightly frustrated. She could have sworn they worked this out! He may have been mortified of others, but he seemed alright with her!

“I- oh, jeez I'm sorry Kira. I get some serious nightmares most nights.” He shivered slightly as he said that. Of course, nightmares. Someone like him must get hammered by them. “I normally just deal with them, and I thought I already did. I've seen worse, you know? But sometimes they just get to me.”

In response she raised her free hand to gently stroke him. He leaned into that, she noted. But he was hesitant to climb into her hand, and he briefly panicked when she raised him towards her muzzle. Perhaps he was devoured by a Rynar in his dream. That was a fairly common story even outside of the zone and there was no doubt he saw it happen a few times. “It's okay,” she cooed to him, “I understand. Want to talk about it?” This was certainly something best suited for a specialist, but they didn't ship out any human therapists just yet. She was the only one that had any inkling of what he went through beyond the knowledge that he was a zone veteran. At this point she might have been the only one he would be willing to talk to about it.

“No, I'm fine. I get them all the time. I'm just a little shook up by it. It'll pass.” Or perhaps not. It was probably for the best. Having him recall his nightmares was probably not a good idea, and she doubted she would enjoy hearing them. He sighed and stroked her fur, which she could tell nearly immediately had a positive effect on him.

“Alright then.” She brought him toward her stomach for the added security. “Just remember, if I even smell one of those lizards anywhere near you I'll hunt it down and tear its throat out.” She'd do it even if it was nowhere near Dylan, but she'd say anything to make the little one feel safe. He chuckled lightly and thanked her.

They waited for the rest of the guardians to collect their charges. Most went fine, but then came Kemeng. He and Yirshan glared at each other as she had her palm ready. The man huffed and

stepped aboard. Although he did it with stiffness and a clear air of an attempt at dominance. He then stood there in her hand rather than sitting down for his own safety. The dragoness curled one digit and used it to prod him and knock him down onto his rump. It was really difficult to appear as the 'strong' male when she could kill him with a single finger. The wolf had to bite back some laughter at the sight. Once the human was secure, she heard Yirshan say to him, "Once we're in the sims, I have news for you, male."

Kira greatly wondered how Kemeng would react to the news. Would it make things worse, or better? If the situation didn't improve then the dragoness would have to recommend him for expulsion from the program. Such behavior was not acceptable for military coordination. Kira thought about recommending Dylan herself, but it was starting to appear his fears were not as severe as she thought they would be. Familiarity seemed to quell his anxiety.

A fox Kira recognized from a reconnaissance unit in the battalion approached his human. Corporal Trikil Nahtur, she recalled his name, reached out a hand... and promptly wrapped it around the man and pulled him from the pad. The soldier yelped as he was lifted away. The fox unfurled his hand, and the human was sprawled out on it, looking a bit shocked, but otherwise totally fine.

However, that was still a major blunder. Ufurin was quick to react as the tiger came marching up to the fox. "What do you think you're doing?!" he demanded with a very angry look in his eyes and his teeth bared.

Trikil's ears folded back and he stuttered in response, "I-I picked up my human."

Ufurin growled at him. "Letting them climb into your hand was not a recommendation, it's an order! Unless your charge is comfortable with it, do not ever grab them unless it's an emergency! Do I make myself clear?" The fox sputtered out an acknowledgment. "Good. And he's not 'your' human." He turned to look at the rest of the guardians. "The humans are your fellow soldiers, your comrades, your charges, your friends. They are not your pets! It's not my job to get this 'my human' nonsense dealt with, but start killing that habit, right now. Show some respect. Half of them have killed more Rynar than you have in your dreams. Don't forget that."

Kira glanced down at Dylan. She was in that camp. It seemed so harmless, but Ufurin was right. It did sound like he was a pet when referred to as 'her human.' She would much rather be his friend than his owner. She wasn't sure if Dylan ever killed a Rynar, but the man was a medic and had undoubtedly saved lives and would be saving hers and her comrades in the future. That deserved just as much respect.

With all the pairs together they headed off towards the simulation hive. Today the guardians would engage in the simulations with their charges along with the rest of her platoon and a tank squadron for their scheduled sessions. Kira had mixed feelings about this. She was going to see Dylan on a normal scale. But the first combat portion of these simulations were well known to be terrifying, and the only ones known for not coming out particularly shaken up were the humans.

During their walk across the base Kira curiously scanned over the other guardians. Most simply

carried their charges in their hands. But there were a couple exceptions already. First Lieutenant Fahne Kulshah, the golden dragoness, had her charge on her head. The man was holding onto one of her horns as they chatted. Private Nahni Ji'al had his on his shoulder while the smaller soldier held onto the rabbit's neck fur. She looked to Major Ufurin Mahjal. His charge was plodding alongside him in a mech that was nearly a head taller than he.

The duality was so amazing. By themselves the little aliens were practically harmless. But give them technology and they could be powerful. She held Dylan in the palm of her hand now, but in the future he may very well carry her broken body off of a battlefield. The irony that the smallest species in the alliance were on track to become the heaviest infantry ever conceived was not lost on her. It was like the Tordenchi and Ashar taken to an absurd extreme.

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As they entered the simulation building Dylan understood why they called it a hive. He could see rows upon rows of pods on multiple levels. It was like something from a movie. There were UTO troops inside many of them, presumably engaging in these simulations, but these pods were much too large for a human. So there had to be smaller versions somewhere.

The guardians were escorted by Ufurin and Mitchell off to the side, and Dylan quickly found his question answered. Several hundred human sized pods dotted this wall of the building. The humans were placed down again on a pad just like the one back at the barracks. Sergeant Mitchell parked his mech nearby and Ufurin brought him over to the rest of the human soldiers. The tiger padded off to join the rest of the giants. Dylan noted there were a few rodents mixed in with them that would be participating as well.

Now they were alone with the older human sergeant. “Alright boys, before we get into the sims you're gonna have to talk to the administrator.” Mitchell paused for a moment before saying, “He should be here right... now.” Before he even finished the word 'now' the form of a blue furred male fox suddenly popped into existence right next to the sergeant and ended up shocking a few of the humans into backing up a few steps. The fox was as tall as the humans were, and strangely enough he was wearing what looked like Roman legionnaire armor.

Mitchell and the vulpine exchanged knowing grins before the administrator looked back at the humans and beamed. “Greetings! I am Dahashi, the administrator and artificial intelligence of this facility.” Though his mouth moved with the words, a voice did not come from him. It was a projection, and his voice was being directly transmitted into Dylan's earpiece in perfect English rather than being translated.

“No way! An AI? A real AI? We finally get to meet one?” someone from the group asked. Some took a few steps forward curiously. Dylan knew the UTO had artificial intelligences classified as citizens, but this was the first time he had gotten to meet one.

“Yep!” he chirped happily, then the avatar looked like it was scanning over their uniforms. “And you're real humans! Let's see what we have here... Chinese PLA, US Marines, US Army Rangers, Canadian Army, German Bundeswehr, French Commandos Marine, and... oh my,

British Special Air Service, you guys are amazing. And..." He cocked his head confusedly at Dylan for a moment before a look of realization crossed his face. "US Army Maryland National Guard! Did I miss anything?"

Mitchell shook his head, "Nope. That's all of 'em. You've been studying."

The blue vulpine raised a fist in triumph. "It's what I do!" Gathering himself, the AI decided to explain, "I am one of the many AIs contracted by the UTO military to manage and create the simulations used in military training. Most recently we have been working nonstop to implement you humans and all of your wonderful creations into the program."

"Are you sure you have the right millennium?" one of the Germans asked.

Dahashi looked down at his outfit. "What, this? I've been recreating Imperial Rome on the side. Simply fascinating time period. Any other questions?"

"If you're an AI, can you hack into my iPod or something?" a marine asked.

The roman fox looked at the man with a look of offense on his muzzle. "Good sir! How could you compare me to one of those cyber warfare goons? I am an artist!" He brought a fist to his chest and stood on his toes as he looked up. Dylan noted that the AI did not answer the question as it changed the subject. "If that is all, then we should get started. The pods are idiot proof, really. I handle everything, you just get in and relax." The fox motioned with both of his hands to get them into gear. "Get moving now. I love these guardian and charge meetings! Pick any pod." The avatar then flicked out as quickly as it appeared.

Dylan turned to look at the pods. They were arranged all along one wall in multiple levels. He would need to ascend the catwalks to reach the higher ones. However, the rows were thirty wide so all twenty one of the soldiers could use the bottom row. The medic approached a pod and looked it over. It had an unsettling likeness to a coffin. The inside was padded with a dark gray fabric with a door that would more than likely close on him. It was totally unassuming, but looking closely he could see that all over the pod were little panels that would open up to reveal the instruments that he assumed would immerse his body into the simulated world.

He was about to step into it when Dahashi popped up next to him, causing Dylan to flinch in surprise. "Hah! Sorry," the AI said with a grin. "So you're Maryland National Guard? That means you were in the DC area bombardment zone, right?" Dylan nodded. "That is the most horrifying simulation I have ever had the misfortune of building. It is also the most difficult, not many are willing to lend their mind to it, so I have to build it all based on what I read. Since you were a soldier in there, you must have seen much. Would you be willing to help me build the simulation in the future?"

The medic shook his head and closed his eyes. "No... no. Don't ever put me into a simulation of the zone, please. I live it again every night, I don't need to see it in the day."

One of the projection's ears twitched. "Was it really so bad?"

Dylan sighed sadly. "If you have to ask that, then you have no idea."

"Very well." With that he just flashed out of existence again.

The medic returned his attention to the pod and regarded it for a moment before spinning around and backing into it. It was leaning back a bit so it saved him from standing. He shifted until he was comfortable, and then he waited. Soon enough the pod closed, sealing him behind glass as if he were an action figure on a shelf, considering the scale of everything. He only had a moment to note how typically sci-fi this seemed when something touched his neck just before everything went white.

Before the white began to fade he started to hear familiar sounds. He picked up on the chirping of birds, the sound of a breeze rustling trees, and the rumble of falling water. Next he started to feel warm air touching his skin. Shortly after that the blindness began to fade rather quickly. He could see green trees covering rolling hills. He looked down to see he was standing on a stone outcropping with a small river down below thundering down the mountainside. Behind him was a rough trail headed further up the slope. He knew this place, and he could not believe how real it looked.

"Dylan!" a familiar voice call out to him.

He saw her coming down the trail towards him. It was the white furred wolf he knew as Kira, and to his amazement she was at a much more reasonable size. As she approached he realized the scales still were not balanced, just a lot less extreme. When she came to a stop in front of him the crown of his head only reached the bottom of her breasts. Her reduced size also made him realize how bulky she was. Even if she were as tall as he was she would still make him look scrawny. Apparently they made them big all around in the UTO infantry.

"Kira," he said, then smiled. "I didn't expect it all to look so real."

"It feels real, too." She reached out and took his hand in hers. "Familiar?" The soft fur and her pads felt just like they did in reality. Out of a developing habit he stroked the fur and felt the familiar comforting sensation that it always brought him when she was big. It felt real, indeed.

"Amazing," he whispered quietly.

"I assume this is a place on Earth?" She looked up to take in all of the trees around them. He could see her nostrils flaring as she soaked up the undoubtedly countless smells her canine nose was detecting. He took a good sniff as well. He couldn't isolate anything, but it sure smelled like nature.

"Yeah. I think this is Shenandoah National Park, Virginia. Old Rag mountain, I believe." He smiled as pleasant memories went through him. "I hiked here a few times with some friends." Apparently this system was quite good at delving into a mind. There was no way this was a coincidence.

“It's beautiful.” She looked back down at him. She stared at him for a moment and he stared right back. “You're still small.” She smirked at that.

He snorted in amusement. “And you're still pretty big. Though this is manageable.”

“Manageable? Does the small one think he could handle me?” She bent down to eye level with him, bared her fangs, and growled playfully. He did the same right back, which abruptly replaced her angry look with a laugh. “You're about as intimidating as a pup.”

“Alright, the claws and teeth as well as the size may make things tricky.” His voice was laced with humor. They both knew very well he would not stand much of a chance.

“Well, I wouldn't use them anyway. It's a bad omen to hurt an unarmed medic, so I'd have to subdue you. That should give you a chance.”

He shrugged and shook his head. “Not much. I barely know any hand to hand.”

She perked up at his mention of inexperience. “Really? I think we need to fix that. I could teach you in these simulations.”

“I'd like that.” She would probably pound him into the ground. But he could use the training if he was going to be a part of this military, and he certainly wouldn't mind seeing her more at this size.

She brushed past him and sat down on the edge of the cliff and patted the stone next to her. He very briefly hesitated. He sat in that very place with his little brother years ago. He could almost see an apparition of him perched next to her. He quickly repressed the memory and placed himself by her larger form.

They were silent for a few moments as Kira looked at the river below. When she looked back up at him with a pleasant smile Dylan sighed sadly and said, “This is how it should have been.”

“What do you mean?” She cocked her head in mild confusion.

“I mean we got screwed by nature. It's remarkably unfair that we ended up so tiny.” This was not what mankind had in mind when we imagined alien contact. “I... I enjoy this. Just a couple aliens getting to know each other.”

“We do this outside the simulations, too.”

“Sure!” He lifted his arms and gestured to the area around them. “But in reality your paw is half the size of this rock. We wouldn't be able to just sit here and talk. Or like in the mess hall yesterday. If things were normal I could sit across from you. But instead I have to be on the table.”

“This is not normal.” She placed a hand to her chest. “What is out there is normal. You being able to sit in the palm of my hand is normal. I know it must be so strange to be the little one, but it is strange for me as well. It's an absolutely odd experience holding a person like that. But we have to get used to it, as it's now normal and we must accept it.” She got a look in her eyes that Dylan was not quite sure how to interpret, but it almost looked like longing.

“It's going to be very hard to fit in.”

“I know it's not as extreme, but that was what the Tordenchi thought, too. You don't see them in the general infantry, their small sizes and frames make poor infantry when there are so many other races that are bigger and stronger.” Dylan was not sure about all of the species names yet, but based on context he gathered that she was referring to one of the rodent species. There were two as far as he could tell- the rats and the mice. He saw a couple yesterday and they were about as big as he was now with Kira. “But do you know what their size allowed them to do?”

When he shook his head she continued, “They control the tank corps. Tanks were redesigned to incorporate their small, compact sizes. The UTO ended up with the best tanks ever designed. More armor, better armaments, more powerful engines and a smaller profile, all because the crew compartment was shrunk down significantly. The only problem was getting enough of them to enlist into armor. That balanced out after the Ashar joined. They're a bit bigger, but those two species really can squeeze. The Tordenchi and the Ashar are practically synonymous with tanks now and fit right in with the military. And now there are the humans, even smaller.” Kira continued, “You little ones are on course to revolutionize power armored infantry, like what the Tordenchi first did with the tanks.”

“Technology makes us all equal, huh?”

“Exactly. And here, we can be with each other on a closer scale.”

“Yeah... about that. Why are you still bigger than me? I figured the sims would make us about the same.” He didn't really mind her being so large considering in reality he was as tall as her ankle, but it did strike him as odd.

“Well, it would be a bit unfair to make you humans bigger than the Tordenchi and Ashar, they don't get brought up to our height in most simulations.” That made some sense. It would be a sort of 'screw you' towards the rats and mice if the smallest species in the alliance were bigger than them in the virtual world.

Based on the way he had heard 'rodent' being tossed around to describe humans there must have been some animosity towards the rodent species that the military would strive to avoid encouraging. Remembering that brought him to his next question. “Kira, why is rodent an insult towards humans when rodents are a part of the UTO?”

She looked at him confusedly. “What?... the rodents are not a part of the UTO, they're not even sentient.”

It was his turn to be confused. “Er, what? You know, the Tordenchi and Ashar. They are the ones with the furless tails, right?”

“Of course, but they're not rodents. They look nothing like them. And neither do humans for that matter.”

“Oh, hold on a moment. Something is getting screwed up in the translators here. What is a rodent to you?” He heard about these, how words would get mixed up. One of the earliest was the English word 'fire' in reference to firing a gun. So if a tank was reported to be 'on fire' in combat it wouldn't make any sense when translated to UTO troops. This was starting to sound like a rather sneaky lapse in translation.

“Rodents are what we call these little lizards that managed to spread all over the galaxy. They're pests, but they're harmless. Calling someone a rodent is an insult. It's starting to take on as a regular jab towards humans, despite you being primates and not lizards. What are you hearing when I say 'rodent?’”

“I'm hearing rodent, that's what I'm hearing! To me, rodent refers to the type of mammals that the Tordenchi and Ashar are. You know, like you the Lupari are canids.”

Her eyes widened in realization. “Dahashi, have you been listening to this?”

A disembodied voice responded, “I'm already compiling an update to the translation software and...” he paused for a few moments, “now I'm updating. I have to deactivate the translations to do this, so you won't be able to understand each other for a bit. Turning it off... now.”

She looked back at Dylan, grinned, and then said something totally unintelligible to him. It was a series of what must have been spoken words, the odd bark and yip, and just all around sounding like total nonsense to him. He responded with, “I have no idea what you said.” She cocked her head at him and her ears turned towards him. “But it sounded like absolute gibberish. I don't think I could even speak your language.”

Shortly after he spoke the AI confirmed the completion of the update and that the translation software was running again. Kira immediately said, “Your language sounds very exotic.”

“Likewise. Rodents. That is what the Tordenchi and Ashar are. Rodents.”

“Yes! There we go. The little animals I thought we were talking about are called hukars.”

Dylan laughed, it lined up so well. “I think I can see how it got mixed up in translation. Calling someone a rodent is an insult to humans. Some of the quadruped versions of those two races are common pests back on Earth unless they are kept as pets.”

She cocked her head again. “Is that so? Can you tell me about my species counterparts? The wolves?”

Before Dylan could respond Dahashi interrupted. “No time for that. I'm loading the combat simulation ready room now.” The pair only had time to glance at each other before the white light came back and washed everything away.