

UC B1 CH 3

A huge ring of light at the very bottom of the structure began to furiously shine, with a loud but high-pitched charging noise indicating an oncoming calamity. The light ring then projected its light downwards, a circular beacon encapsulating the entire area of the city across continents.

Wails from all the way across the ocean reached Nick, making his hair stand on end. The whole city must be crying out in terror all at once.

His aunt, one of them.

Suddenly, the light ring explodes, being followed by a rapid barrage of bright energy bombs being flung downward at the city. A huge cloud of smoke and blue light encompassed the city, the buildings emerging above it quickly collapsing into it. The millions of explosions quickly deafened each and every scream.

"You... You c-can't be serious, this i-isn't my fault, right? I'm just a-a... I..." Nick stammered, shaking like a jackhammer. This had to have been the army Ian had mentioned.

For a moment, he considered turning his gun on himself. The robot had entrusted him to warn the world, but he was too late. Tens of millions may be dead because of him.

But it'd only been about 5 minutes since he met the robot. Could anyone have stopped that army in time? Could even the Loyalty have saved the entire city in that time?

If only he didn't hesitate to pull the trigger.

Nick swallowed his regrets, though, knowing his city may be next. He had to run to safety and attempt to protect the few people he knew here. He sprinted full speed to try and get back to his underground rat den, gather his thoughts, and analyse the devices he'd been given by the robot.

After running for a minute down the street, a huge transport ship, easily a hundred meters across, soared above him, blowing dust everywhere and pushing him slightly off balance. It landed in an open field to the right of the city, and a hundred cries of war came from it.

Soldiers?

If so, he couldn't fight them. Not now. He just had to keep running.

So he did. After another painfully slow minute of him sprinting, he finally made it to the abandoned entrance of his den and climbed into it. He surfed down the stairs on a wooden pallet and reached the central hub of the railway station below.

Leaping across the gaps where tracks were and making it into the small tunnel that led to his room, he moved the metal sheet back in the way of it and completely hid his tracks.

But he stumbled before reaching his room. He fell to the ground, grazing his knee.

He'd just delved close to fire and smog, then sprinted full force a long way back to his home. And he encountered the commander of the army that had just presumably destroyed the central city. It was a miracle he was still alive.

He leant up against one of the walls, holding his injured knee, wishing he could just shake off the initial shock and get straight to planning his next move.

But he couldn't.

Fear and regret overwhelmed him now that he had a moment to rest. The thoughts of guilt he never could have fathomed before had a new habitat to breed in.

He closed his eyes and rested his head up against the wall. The cold, hard brick surface was impossible to feel comfortable on, but his body still held onto hints of adrenaline, numbing his senses to it.

He rested for a few minutes. Thoughts stopped him from passing out.

Guilt. Shock. Fear.

Sighing shakily, he tried to calm down and breathe steadily, but the taste of city smog and smoke persisted in the back of his throat, reminding him of the pain.

Breathing accelerated fast.

His aunt.

The pace of his heart rate exceeded the rate of how the bombs fell over the central city.

His head fell down into his hands, shedding real tears of anguish for the first time.

Sadness and confusion turned to anger and rebuttal.

The hands that held his head clenched it so hard that his skin was torn to bleed.

"RGGGH, WHY?! WHY THE FUCK DOES THIS HAPPEN NOW OF ALL TIMES?! I'VE WORKED YEARS TO FINALLY GET SOMEWHERE AND NOW SOME... SOME BULLSHIT COMES OUT OF NOWHERE AND EVERYTHING... AAAAAARRGHHH!" He angrily rambles, blaming the fates that something so catastrophic had occurred.

He had wished on that shooting star that he'd not be alone anymore.

Now he's suddenly left with absolutely nothing.

He burst into tears.

A moment later, he took one hand away from his face and smashed it into the wall next to him.

The sorrow paralysed him. He rotted alone for several minutes, crying and screaming from a mixture of anguish, guilt, and frustration.

"Hey, code 54-C. You don't think we might get some alien disease coming down here?" said a slightly muffled voice from afar.

Nick immediately froze.

"Haven't you ever been to another planet before? We have the implants for a reason. They keep the bugs out and pull the clean air in." said another.

"But still. Whatever's been screaming down here has to have some sort of rabies." The first replied.

'These have to be soldiers from the space structure,' Nick assumed. 'Did I scream so loudly that I alerted the whole city?'

Jumping to his feet, Nick took off his jacket and threw it down the hatch into his room so had more ease of movement. His instinct took over, knowing that he would have to fight or move quickly to get out of this.

"It's stopped. It must know we're here. The boss said that a teenager had hurt him, not a demon." A third voice expressed his worries.

"I've had enough of your winging, Code 55-C. You really need to keep your shit in check if you want to stay in this army." A larger, stern voice boomed, a metallic tinge in his accent slightly audible.

"O-ok boss. I'll start looking." Code 55-C complied.

Nick's body quick assumptions. There are three down here: 2 soldiers and a larger, more qualified one, who were being tasked to look around.

One sentence piqued his interest; *"The boss said that a teenager had hurt him."*

Were they searching for him? Just because he humiliated Ian?

He slowly crouch-walked out of the tunnel, quietly moving the metal cover sheet out of the way to avoid attracting their attention.

The corners of the central hub were almost pitch black at all times, with the main paths being lit by dying bulbs on the pillars around them. Nick navigated through the dark areas, able to see where he was going due to his eye's aptitude to seeing in dark areas.

He got a good look at the three soldiers, having guessed their numbers correctly. Additionally, he had been right to assume one was much larger than the others, in standing and size equally.

One had intense, threatening metallic armour covering his whole body. It was weaved together with small hexagons, bright blue highlights around each of them. The other two had very basic-looking armour, cheap shoulder pads, carrying what looked to be laser rifles. Interestingly, the larger one carried no weapon, and none of them wore any headgear.

Despite the fact that they were probably aliens, they still appeared human, like him. Nick figured his idea of an alien was very wrong and probably rude.

They each looked around in different areas of the initial platform, struggling to see due to the lack of light. One was much more scared than the rest.

To get across platforms himself, Nick had set up wooden boards in the dark areas to help with this exact scenario if it ever arose. It felt flattering to have finally found a use for them.

He positioned himself hidden on the initial platform, waiting for an opportune moment to strike.

"I think I heard something moving." The fearless soldier noted, turning around to face opposite of where Nick was hiding.

Perfect.

Dashing out of the shadows, he took his handgun out his belt and pointed it at the terrified soldier's head. However, instead of pulling the trigger, his mind stopped his body in its tracks and refused to let him pull the trigger.

Even though he probably caused the invasion to begin with thanks to his hesitation to murder, he still couldn't bring himself to end the soldier's life.

Instead, he tilted the gun downwards at his chest, firing twice. The two shots ran straight through his chest, causing him to collapse to the floor and fall down one of the train track gaps. Blood splattered all over the fearless soldier, who was stood nearby.

"SHIT!" He yelled, turning back and facing Nick.

He dashed to one side, trying to use one of the metal pillars as cover, but was hit in the leg and chest twice by a second burst of shots sent his way. The soldier fell to the ground, holding his chest and groaning loudly.

Nick turned and aimed at the last, bigger soldier, and shot once at his stomach. The bigger soldier crashed his two fists together in front of him, generating a transparent, glowing, bright blue energy barrier in his hands, which was shaped like a roman shield and deflected the bullet.

Nick then fired every last round into the shield, hopelessly trying to break through it. After a few seconds, the handgun ran out of ammo, and he tossed it away.

The large soldier separated his fists, the shield vanishing as soon as he did so. He then began to slowly walk towards Nick, causing a loud thump and a resounding vibration in the ground with each step.

Unsheathing his knife from his belt, Nick threw it at the wiring on the ceiling, hoping for them to break and cause an electrical fire below to engulf the large soldier.

Luckily, the knife had slashed at a supporting wire of the dim ceiling bulbs, one side of the panel falling from above and smashing against the large soldier's head. The whole area then erupted into sparks of electricity and then flames, obscuring the soldier.

Nick had barely avoided the fire, having stepped backwards at the last second. He fell to one knee, breathing heavily in shock. 'So much for trying not to kill anyone,' he thought, bitter at himself for instinctively resorting to something so brutal and painful.

A hand grasps his left shoulder. Chills run down his spine.

A moment later, it transfers all of its heat into his skin, searing it with burns and making him scream in agony.

Tightening his grip on the boy, each of his fingers like a hydraulic press, the large soldier lifted him up like a doll and threw him all the way across the underground hub.

Nick crashed into the hard concrete wall, collapsing to the ground and struggling to move for a moment. His shoulder burned with sharp, constant pain, but his back ached with blunt and course pain.

The soldier jumps across each gap within the station with superhuman ability, sprinting full force faster than he'd ever seen before.

Moving quickly from pure terror, Nick dashed to his tunnel leading into his rat den, which he had luckily landed close to. He bashed the metal sheet out of the way and ran inside.

As he got further and further inside, the loud and metallic footsteps also became louder. However, the footsteps suddenly cease. A ping is heard in the distance, and Nick's stomach drops.

A small glowing blue sphere rolled into the tunnel and up to Nick's feet. It beeped and flashed continuously, the time between its intervals shortening quickly.

A grenade.

Nick instantly dived into the hole that led to his bedroom, falling straight through the tight space arms first. Upon landing lopsided on the ground and on top of his jacket, he pulled a string coming from above, closing the hatch.

A loud impulse from the room above caused the ceiling to shake and dust to fall from above. Any loose commodities left up there were completely eviscerated.

He'd just stared directly at a grenade.

Matching his very heavy and audible heartbeat, the loud and metal footsteps returned as the soldier walked through the tunnel above.

Nick frantically ran through ideas to defend himself, knowing that he was cornered now; running wasn't an option. He scurried to one end of the room, leaning against the wall. Reaching his belt, he found nothing.

Except for one thing.

The hilt given to him by the robot.

The hatch leading to Nick's bedroom was violently torn open by the soldier and thrown away, loudly clanging against the walls above. The soldier drops into the room, causing the ground to shake and any furniture or objects to fall over.

Nick held the hilt like it had a blade with both hands, searching it with his fingers to try and find any sort of button. A moment later, he unknowingly flicked a small switch near the top of the hilt with his thumb.

A blade of pure black ignited outwards furiously from the hilt, strangely cracked in the middle; half of it seemingly floated, connected by an invisible force. On its outline, a grey hue was present, signifying where the sharp ends began.

The soldier grinned.

He put his fists together again, but this time horizontally, connected by the hole that his fingers wrapped around. It was like he was holding an invisible hilt, the same way Nick was.

Then, suddenly, a bright blue greatsword burst out of nowhere as he raised his fists vertically.

"Didn't expect honour from a rat." He said. Nick only stared in anticipation and fear, waiting for the towering man in front of him to attack.

The soldier slashed diagonally down at Nick, taking the first step forward. He ducked under it, avoiding it completely and then swinging his own blade up from the ground at the face of the soldier.

The soldier dodges it as well, leaning and stepping backwards. Nick stumbled backwards after missing, clumsily trying to regain balance. The blade wasn't heavy, but it was weighted weirdly, the centre of mass indeterminate from just one swing.

However, he dashed back towards the soldier and swung wildly multiple times from a vertical angle. The adrenaline coursing through him made him strong.

The soldier blocked hit after hit, initially not losing any ground, but not for long as Nick's endless assault kept him working harder and harder just to block. With Nick's momentum increasing, the soldier slowly started to lose ground and was eventually pushed back up against the end wall of the room.

In a rash decision, the soldier stopped holding his two hands together, quickly separating them and instead projecting two smaller weapons in each hand. He had turned the one large greatsword into a small sword in his right hand and a small shield in his left.

He lashed outwards, making one big side swing at Nick with the sword, which he blocked. Then, the soldier threw forward his other hand, which held the shield, trying to knock him out with brute force.

Nick, who thought faster, kicked the soldier in the knee and caused him to stumble awkwardly before he could extend his shield forward even a few inches.

A function in the armour he wore suddenly kicked in, attempting to balance him while his legs were bent. However, he moved more like a spring holding up a heavy weight, his torso flailing around aimlessly as his body couldn't work in unison with the mechanical exoskeleton.

Eventually, the armour was unable to hold the soldier up anymore, causing him to fall backwards and smash his head on the side of a counter. He suddenly suffered irreparable damage to his motor function, paralysing him and making him appear unconscious despite being wide awake.

Nick took the sudden moment of weakness to flip his blade's direction in his hands around to point straight down at the head of the soldier. He threw his body and hands down with all of his strength, piercing through the skull of the soldier with the dark blade.

Blood spewed out from the pierced point, coating his face in deep crimson.

The blade travelled through the soldier's skull like it was a fruit to a katana.

His wide open eyes slowly drifted upwards, revealing small metal wires in place of veins.

Nick kneeled beside the soldier, still holding the blade in its place, mindlessly staring at him as he perished.

His heart raced faster than it ever had before. He'd never encountered a life or death situation like what he'd just endured, especially not with something so threatening pursuing him.

Blood began to pour out from the bottom of the soldier's head, creating a large puddle that began to flow around Nick's legs.

As the warm blood began to soak into Nick's trousers and drip down his still head, a huge wave of guilt and shock flooded into him all at once.

Upon consciously taking in the sight of the soldier's mangled and stabbed skull, Nick instantly turned away and gagged.

The blade deactivated, the hilt falling down and bouncing off the soldier's head, landing beside him.

Nick stumbled backwards onto the ground, his arms and legs quivering too much to keep him standing.

He envisioned the soldier's eyes rolling upwards, the cruel signifier of a soul drifting out of a body.

It tormented him. The blood coating his hands, head, and legs constantly reminded him of the life he just took in such a disgusting way.

All for the sake of living.

But what was that worth anymore?

He began to cry.

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10 minutes later, he emerged from a fetal position in the puddle of drying blood and tears.

A sudden worry regarding the smaller soldiers from before had come to mind, as one could still be alive and creeping up on him at any moment.

Part of him said that it wasn't worth trying to defend himself. What was the point in fighting against something that could destroy a city in seconds.

Initially climbing to his hands and knees, he then tried to stand but quickly fell back onto his stomach in the puddle of blood.

Pushing himself back up to his hands and knees, he stared at the soldier's corpse.

The armour.

Clearly, it wasn't great at helping its wearer to stand, but it might help him at least get to his feet.

However, after staring at the body again and thinking of stealing from a corpse, it made him even more ill than moments ago. He'd seen dead bodies before, but something about the death being his fault made it a hundred times worse.

The alternative wasn't any better, though. He'd always been terrified of death.

Shuffling over to sit beside the soldier, Nick reluctantly began to look around the edges of his torso for any sort of opening while trying to block out the lifeless face.

It smelt horrid, a mixture of shit, sweat, and metal. Nick was fighting off the urge to vomit every waking second within his room now. Thankfully, he had an almost empty bottle of deodorant spray hidden in a counter nearby. Though trying to find it now that his room was completely ruined wouldn't be easy.

After finding it and spraying the corpse down, he went back to his search. The armour had powered down since the soldier died, the glowing lines around each hexagonal plate now absent.

Eventually, he discovered a small overlapping patch on each of the soldier's shoulders, which, upon being lifted, revealed two small buttons labelled 'Release.'

He pressed them both at the same time, which caused all of the hexagons above his belt to fold inwards and cascade downwards, showing the soldier's conditioned and muscular body beneath. There were some metal wires in parts under his skin.

Nick suddenly recoiled backwards as the smell of sweat built up below the armour all hit him at once. He came very, very close to vomiting, but managed to resist it.

‘Must be skin-tight,’ He thought. ‘That’s gonna be uncomfortable.’

Only a pair of leggings remained, so he quickly took them off of the soldier. It was surprisingly flexible despite being made of mostly metal hexagons. It turned out that there was a polymer suit below the hexagons, stringing it all together.

After his legs outward and sliding the leggings up to his waist, the suit immediately sprung upwards and encased him in the hexagonal armour up to his neck. The lights around each edge returned, and a small vibration went off on his wrist.

Initially, the sudden movement made him shudder, but he calmed down after realising the armour hadn’t hurt him at all. There were no implants or punctures in his body.

He held up his wrist and looked at it, seeing a small interface glowing brightly. It read, ‘NEW USER DETECTED. ADJUSTING TO FIT NEW USER ERGONOMICS... PROCESSING...’

‘Huh. Okay.’ Nick thought. ‘Never used a fancy touch screen device before.’

A moment later, the interface changed to show an analogue smiling face, shutting off shortly afterwards, leaving only a small bar above. The icon of a battery engraved next to it indicated to him that this was the armour’s ‘charge’ like a torch or phone.

He then noticed he looked very much like the soldiers he just fought. If he were to be misidentified by allies, he would probably be shot on sight. However, he spotted his red jacket roughly strung up on a pole in the ceiling, which would be a perfect solution to the issue.

He stood effortlessly despite feeling weaker than ever. The armour seemed to have helped him with everything except his smell.

Grabbing the jacket from the ceiling and donning it, a tiny lifting feeling of confidence swelled up in his heart. However, it vanished mere moments after it surfaced.

He could feel as powerful as he wanted, but he couldn't ever bring back his aunt.

Why did he even need to stand? What was the point of trying to live now that there was nothing left?

His bodily autopilot had kicked in before his mind had a chance to interrupt him, though. Something intangible was pushing him out of his room. A feeling? An instinct? He did not know.

Kicking the hilt of the blade he used earlier as he walked, he looked down at it and flashed back to the moment he killed the soldier. A deep sorrow and anger at himself shot through him.

Reluctantly leaning over and grabbing it, he instinctively went to place it on his belt, forgetting it was now covered by the armour. However, magnets on the waist of the armour grasped the blade and kept it sturdily in place.

'Oh. Nice.' He thought.

Climbing up and out of his room, then exiting through the tunnel, he once again returned to the underground railroad hub and saw one soldier lying against a metal pillar. He was bleeding, holding his chest with one arm to prevent blood loss.

Nick noticed that this was the cowardly one from before. But, he appeared hopeless and depressed rather than scared like before.

Nick jumped across the train track gaps with surprising ease thanks to the armour and made it to the central platform. The soldier just looked up at Nick and didn't so much as budge.

"Oh. He lost. Haha... Well, I guess it's pretty obvious now. You're the one we were sent to search for, aren't you?" He said.

"So what if I am?" Nick replied swiftly afterwards. The soldier just laughed and looked downwards, his voice completely soulless.

"It'd be hilarious. You're not even half his age, and you made the boss so angry that he rushed us here early. You're a unit if I've ever seen one."

Nick could tell he was being genuine, as he was so close to the brink of death and so hopeless too. But being told by someone other than himself that the central city's annihilation was all his fault tore him apart from the inside.

"Wha... W-what do I do anymore..." He mumbled, beginning to shake and tear up once again. Bitter sadness and anxiety piled up so fast that his throat sealed up tight.

"Hey. Hear me out for a second." The soldier raised his voice but coughed up blood a second later. "I heard you. And i've got a good idea for what you can go do now. Go kill that fucking asshole Ian."

Nick quickly darted his gaze back to him, shocked at the soldier who had just cursed the man he works for.

“H-huh?” He muttered.

“You heard me. I don’t care if I die down here in a cold dirty ditch, because I deserve it. I had to shoot a mourning father before I came down here, and for what? I was a scientist before this, for fucks sake. I just got told one day that I would be helping out with a good friend of my old boss, but it turns out he’s a rotten and hollow monster. You’ve hit him in the heart once, and I want you to do that again.” The soldier monologued, coughing deeply afterwards.

Nick was utterly speechless.

“Don’t let that all go to your head, either. You’re a kid about to grow up fast. Good isn’t going to win here. The only one who wins is the one who lives, and I’m afraid we’re all going to lose.” He continued.

“What’s your... name?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know. They took it from me, so now all I’ve got is this godforsaken tag with a code on it.” The soldier groaned, pulling at a golden army tag wrapped around his neck.

“I’m not going to forget you. I’ll beat Ian again and finish the job this time.” Nick confidently remarked, crouched down in front of the soldier with one hand out.

The soldier looked up at him again, shocked at his virtue. Chuckling, he snapped the tag off of his neck and handed it to Nick.

“You’re an idiot if you want to remember me of all people. I’m not exactly anybody worth space in a kind mind like yours.” He sighed.

“There are worse people out there. But I guess I’m gonna lower that number sometime soon.” Nick smiled.

The soldier then chuckled. Shortly after, his eyes closed, and his head flopped forward. He died with a small smile on his face.

Nick held the tag tightly, angry at himself once again. That was another death on his mark for the rest of time. He put the tag in his upper right jacket pocket and zipped it up.

Next to the now deceased soldier was a costly-looking rifle with a slight glow to it. Nick slowly went to pick it up, inspecting it for a moment. He then placed it on his back, and another one of the armour’s magnets held it in place.

Standing up and walking to the exit of the underground railroad station, Nick realised he probably wasn’t ever going to come back here. Despite having no real home to his name, the salvaged den he called his bedroom felt like one.

But nobody would have a home on his world anymore if he didn’t stop the destruction at its source.

With a new purpose to fulfil, he began to ascend the stairs leading out of the train station.

“Ian. I’m going to kill you.” He grimaced.