Creative Writing Manuscript:
Water Wall
Book I: The Union

José R. Rivera Belaval

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University of Puerto Rico

Approved by:

____________________  ____________________
Dr. Maritza Stanchich  Dr. Dannabang Kuwabong
Reader                    Reader

____________________
Dr. Loretta Collins
Thesis Director
ABSTRACT

The young adult novel prequel presents the scenario of a high-tech futuristic population living in the crisis-survival situation and hostile environment of space travel, human-enhancement, hybrid monsters, sentient AI, mystical overlords, and ethically dubious superiors. Societal structures have developed based on elements from civilizations that existed before a climate cataclysm. In the Union different social strata are defined according to a ranking system in a neo-feudal military state. The story begins when a batch of Cadets descend from sky colonies to the ground to meet Academy mentor, trainer, and warrior Knight Vega.

She and numerous characters serve as narrators who provide shifting perspectives about the Union’s goings-on. The inciting incident is the discovery that one of the children under Knight Vega’s supervision might have gone missing. The child’s ‘ghost profile’ catches the attention of higher-brass officers, who have covert agendas that Vega and her cadets must confront.
Water Wall

Book I. The Union.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a palpable collective anxiety bubbling up in the younger generations in Puerto Rico. Climate crisis, natural disasters of increasing magnitude, and the recent pandemic are the looming disasters, replacing the doom’s day clock of past generations. Without dismissing the old fears of doom, these current events place young individuals in an even more precarious position. Whereas before there was a threat or a possibility of nuclear destruction, now there is a feeling of impending catastrophe brought on by being ‘too late’ to fix the climate crisis and related occurrences at hand. This generation does not have hope of peace talks; there’s no chance of negotiation amongst nations at war to calm the populace when natural disasters are the threat. Natural events create a very different reality for the current generation. This scenario coupled with a detrimental social-economic reality on an island in near bankruptcy, on top of the cultural and social impact of a colonial history and all the trauma that entails, makes for gloomy prospects of self-determination.

Coping tools must be provided for the population entering this vulnerable state of adulthood. This was how my idea to write a young adult science fiction novel about ‘living under the circumstances of survival’ was born. A post-climate apocalypse era was the setting to re-imagine alternate ways of survival and explore the possibilities and troubles that could ensue. This allowed me a space through fiction for criticism and reworking of structures of power and telling an imagined history, in an attempt to create awareness in young readers of the urgency and importance of our pivotal moment and its fictional corollaries.

My approach to this project took into consideration the elements that first made me fall in love with reading. Resonance came to mind, moments in a story that allow the reader to feel a
sense of familiarity. I remembered one of the first books that turned me into an avid reader, *Lautaro*, the story of a young Arawak warrior fighting the colonial powers. This was the closest I had ever felt to a part of my lost cultural identity. Since identity is such an important factor in coming-of-age stories, this became my first topic of analysis when taking on this project.

Focused on the social mechanisms that craft an individual or group identity, rather than on the fictional creation of idiosyncratic personalities of an array of distinct characters, *per se*, I took special notice of the literary techniques used to represent the forces of societal structures that partially determine and mark a character’s developmental progressions in the novels and short stories by established authors that I studied while planning my novel. I analyzed how each writer used stylistic innovations to work on creating societal systems and the place of the characters within such systems. In a review, Adilifu Nama, professor of African American Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, wrote about the anthology of Latinx SciFi and speculative short stories *Latin@ Rising*, (ed. Matthew D. Goodwin), that he enjoyed how the included writers ‘pushed and pulled at the conventional tropes of style and content concerning magical realism, mythology and technology.’ His words fit perfectly my intentions with this project, and this collection of short stories is one of the texts that informed my project. I wanted to stretch limits of established fiction-writing techniques, engage with the marvelous and a technologically-driven, chaotic but regimented future world, and create interactions between genres, literary traditions, and diverse themes. My goal was to use narrative storytelling to reflect upon future societies in the midst of overwhelming crises, shifting societal configurations and strictures that determine human cultures’ viability and life experiences, and individual or communal identity formation.
My influences include Sci-Fi books by Caribbean and non-Caribbean authors. Barbadian writer Karen Lord’s novel *The Galaxy Game* is one model text. It is a futuristic space narrative that includes world building of an interplanetary conflictual community comprised of various societies and cultures. I studied how her novel follows the story of a troubled pre-teen escape artist, turned athletic coaches’ pet, and then questionable courier. As a young adult rising to the position of a historical transit pilot and finally to a ‘Patron’, protagonist Rafi goes on a journey that allows the reader to glimpse all the major galactic troubles, even though he, himself, is not at first in any position of power. In that sense, he is a naïve narrator, still very much in formation and impacted by the societal conflicts and structures of his multiverse. Things happen to Rafi, and he navigates as best as he can through them. The two supporting characters he became friends with at the Lyceum, a prison-like school for the troublesome gifted, seemed to know a lot more than Rafi about the world around him, serving as informants for the reader. They came from different social positions and had a ‘slightly’ easier life by comparison. This trio gets assimilated into the fabric of a larger story as it progresses.

For my project, while there is a main character and a set of multiple characters, a ‘Union,’ the social state the characters live in, serves as an equally important component of the story. The Union is comprised of ground, sky, and space-based colonies of different peoples and professions; a military-like training school for cadets and a warrior-class; elite “Lords” who have arcane knowledge and powers; and the “Wasted”, a place of hybrid monsters and dangerous terrains. This fictional societal system provides for an examination of the social structure and disparities, collective identity and struggles within the collective, and the repercussions that everyone’s actions in the Union have on everyone else’s lives.
Karen Lord’s creation of a futuristic, outer-space multiverse and the rules, determined roles, and hierarchies that govern the separate political entities and societies within her narrative served as one model for my project, especially in the way that she reveals these interlinked worlds, chapter-by-chapter, through multiple narrators. Likewise, in my novel, readers gain access the realms of the story and perceive the societal dynamics through a multiplicity of perspectives, as each named character is featured in a chapter. His or her narrative is specific to the character, but also moves the overall plot forward and builds the concepts, ideologies, and daily operating principles of the imagined futuristic, space-based world.

Another non-Caribbean novel that I studied and drew upon while conceptualizing my project was Neil Gaiman’s The Graveyard Book. While analyzing character construction in this coming-of-age narrative, I took note of how Nobody Owens, the main character, is a youth stuck in-between worlds and spaces due to an attempt on his life when he was a child, which resulted in the loss of his whole family. Being raised in a graveyard, the main character occupies a unique place in relation to both the spirit world and the human world. His environment is fantastical instead of SciFi-related, but his narrative is structured in an alternative “survival” setting. He is being raised by the spirits of the graveyard and by a guardian called Silas, who lives in the fringes as an undead. The different genre-context in which this unique character acts allows for Gaiman to create a setting for alternate social-living development and scrutiny of the relationships between individuals, given that the protagonist is, as his name states, ‘No body’, an invisible character for the living half of the world. Invisibility is often a result of oppression. While Gaiman’s work has different cultural references, this slant of the novel is a curious and informative model for examination of social invisibility. His writing encompasses universal
emotions portrayed in the relationships built up by his characters, between both the living and the dead.

The Owens, the character’s stepparents, are unable to physically assist the protagonist; they can give him knowledge and care, but he must undertake his quest alone. The character follows a development narrative arc in which, through various trials, he must fend for himself during key points of his life but relies on the foundation given to him by his alternative family. Family relationships, especially troubled ones, are universal themes, but they are of increased importance in the social context of the Caribbean, in which family ties are of great cultural importance to the identity of people. The presence of a spiritual realm is also an element that one finds in many Caribbean works of fiction. The complexity of the character’s thought process evolves as his narrative moves in temporal space, tracing his transition from being a victim and losing his real family, to taking charge of his life. Nobody Owens defeats his fears, his enemies, and grows up to the point of leaving behind the graveyard and his new family. What I gained from reading and considering Gaiman’s book was the possibility of combining realistic human characters with non-human or superhuman, as well as the imaginative search for alternate modes and representations of socialization and childhood-development to those that we generally associate with the post-Victorian Bildungsroman.

Since the long-term idea for the project was to write a SciFi trilogy, in my preliminary phase, I also analyzed another space trilogy, *The Illuminae Files*. This young adult space opera trilogy written by two authors, Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff, uses the epistolary form to interweave alternative narrative sequences and sets of various characters who narrate action, which gives the books a metatheatrical atmosphere. It ultimately would become the most
important resource and influence for me as a writer, as it suggested and modelled several of the literary strategies and themes that I had been interested in exploring in my own trilogy.

*Illuminae,* the first book, follows the records left by a young couple Kady and Ezra, who broke up the morning of an enemy attack on their illegal mining colony. By pure luck a patrol ship from the military galactic authority was close enough to intervene and engage the attackers. They get on board two different spaceships on their escape and are chased by the attackers, a plot that delineates two spaces where the action takes place. The narrative progresses through an alternation between the telling of two simultaneously occurring storylines. The motives of the antagonist Bey-tech are standard: ambition and lust for power. The limits of human reach might be extended, but the society remains an under evolved social species.

The storyline narrative proceeds through a series of records presented by a group of hackers who have gathered data on the events. They follow the chase, unearthing secret transmissions and salvaging erased recordings, reconstructing the actions of the enemy ship going after the three surviving ships. The narrative reads as a bricolage of these fragmentary and partially recoverable texts. The protagonists alternate first person narrative points-of-view in the different chapters. During the main event, all available civilian personnel is conscripted to serve the military while on the escape. The structural hierarchy is established as a means to survive the attack. On one ship, Ezra, the jock, begins training as a pilot; on another Kady, the computer wizard, begins technical training. The chase is not the only problem they have, as there has been damage to the AI called AIDEN, integrated into the military ship Alexander, that is carrying one third of the colony’s survivors. The character progression of the AI called AIDEN as it becomes self-aware and ultimately ‘descends into madness’ is revealed through portraying his reasoning process, providing a superb character evolution that goes on throughout the whole series,
beginning with his destruction of one of the surviving ships. The characterization of the ‘mad AI’ is presented in a flawless manner. I was always interested in including AI in my own novel, especially thinking through how a technology meant to make human society more logical, efficient and less labor-intensive for humans might develop a logic and identity of its own, quite beyond the control of its creators. This trilogy sustains the progression of the character arc of AIDEN and portrays his impact on human social structures despite a complex narrative structure. I tried to learn literary techniques which could be useful to my own storyline and approach from the authors of the trilogy.

In The Illuminae Files, one of the surviving ships had rescued people sick from a biological weapon used by Bey-tech during the colony’s assault. This sickness spreads inside the ship and prompts the evacuation of some of the people who have not yet succumbed to the symptoms. Kady’s mom was on that ship. The story turns from intergalactic pursuit to a horror thriller of infected rabid murderers. AIDEN’s attack on the infected ship through overwriting the orders of the human captain on the Alexander further seals all their fate. The captain orders AIDEN ‘unplugged’, which did not bode well for him the next time they had to plug him back into the ship. AIDEN’s resurrection leaves him with a new-found fear of ‘death’ or of ‘not-being’, which forces the AI to take control, for the good of everyone since only he can save them. Unfortunately, while he was unplugged some of the escape pods from the infected ship made it on board the battleship Alexander. The infection spreads parallel to the rate AIDEN’s madness grows. The narrative combines biological disasters of contagion, corporate lust for power, technological malfunctions or AI assertions of selfhood, a crisis-survival situation for the human populace, a scrutiny of societal structures, and narration through multiple characters and
textual modes. I wanted to write a novel as ambitious in literary approach and scope as *The Illuminae Files*.

*On Gemina*, the second book of Kaufman and Kristoff’s trilogy, also impacted the preliminary design of my own novel. The story follows the lives of the people on the space station nearest to the first book’s mining colony Kerenza. Key elements that I took notice of in this second book are social context themes, especially in regard to the difference in social stratification between the two main characters and how this plays out in the confined spaces of the space station. The ‘princess-like’ daughter of the Space Station’s commander, Hanna Donnelly, who belongs to the semi-perfect high social stratum eventually falls in love with the ‘bad boy’ Nik Malikov, a young stud from a family of criminals. Her connection with the criminal element works around her recreational drug use. The military-operated structure of the Space Station was supposed to ensure these cross-social strata associations would not be possible, but with the help of her actual boyfriend, they are. The boyfriend turns out to be an undercover agent for Bey-tech, with a mission to allow a cleanup crew to come and eliminate everyone in the Space Station, taking teenage drama to another level.

The theme of narcotics abuse, background and production and its effects on trained military personnel is developed through a dialogue. The authors’ description of the effects, written in a ‘poetical’ style breaks with conventional tropes and literary styles and exposes a reality of stigmas and social connotation associated with drugs. These themes also correlate with the different symbolic meanings of tattoos and other markings as a type of language in the “underworld”. I was interested in the narrative innovations, the examination of a highly structured militaristic society that can’t control the populace, ultimately, and the development of alternative “language codes” within the subcultures. Moreover, the creation and variations of
slang and regional dialectical differences employed throughout the whole series is also one of the elements that I have drawn from for my novel project.

The inclusion of character archetypes that are rarely given justice in literature is one of the biggest finds in this trilogy. Ella Malikova, Nik’s cousin is a character living with a disability due to a space illness. Her whole arc is constructed with dignity and importance, giving her depth and action, not placing her as a token character. From hacker in the crime family to being responsible for saving the lives of people trapped in the Space Station when Bey-tech’s clean-up crew arrives, Ella is one of the best characters in the books. This modelled for me how to write an inclusive YA novel without simply relying on one-dimensional stereotypes. This is something that I had wanted to do and have not always found in literature. Women characters play leading roles in my novel, and it features differently-abled and scientifically-enhanced characters, as well.

*On Obsidio*, the third instalment of Kaufman and Kristoff’s trilogy, portrays war and its effects on young soldiers and even younger civilians. Although the first two novels contained aspects that I could learn from, my main focus of analysis was on this third novel. The styles of verbal and non-verbal communications used while under surveillance in a technologically-mediated world, and how human nature plays a part in deceiving said surveillance was of great interest. The novel establishes a ‘here and there’, Us and Them relationship of the protagonists’ society and an invading force from orbit, outside the direct field of vision of the reality of the invaded, as well as two distinct realities for those involved. I also wanted the challenge of trying to write alternate story lines told from multiple perspectives. Reading this trilogy, I took special notice of the action happening within different spaces simultaneously as the plot progresses until at the end, when the narratives merge, creating a picture out of the whole puzzle.
One of the defining non-Sci-Fi Caribbean books read in preparation for this project is *Curfew Chronicles* by Trinidadian writer Jennifer Rahim, a collection of inter-related short stories set during a curfew established by the government of Trinidad and Tobago in 2011. Declaring a state of emergency on the islands as an attempt to control a criminal wave of drug-related murders, the government extended the curfew from fifteen days to four months. *Curfew Chronicles* illustrates within a 24-hour time frame, what that experience entails for several characters. The question that arose during my reading of this book was connected to my own world-design and thoughts about governance and the just will of the people. I wanted to pose the question, *what if a curfew of that nature never ended, simply evolving from a temporary curfew into a control state?*

Analyzing the dynamics of control and unequal distribution of power during times of crisis in Rahim’s stories helped me to think about how to incorporate into my own writing project a depiction of state control and its impact on the collective and individual. Each short story follows a different person’s storyline or perspective. Sometimes other characters who have been featured as protagonists in one of the stories, end up in the story of another character. The stories do take place during a set passage of time, but they are not strictly presented in a linear fashion. This gives the book a de-centralized overall narrative that allows it to encompass the entirety of the community exposed. The opportunity to analyze different subthemes from a multi-social perspective is provided by this approach, enabling Rahim to give readers examples of who really suffers the impact of this type of unbalanced government control. Rahim’s stories create a full scenic description of the characters and their own sectors of the community that helps us analyze the socio-political situation of Trinidad and Tobago during the 2011 government curfew. The character archetypes of this collection range from the highest level of government to street
dwellers, fishermen, professional women and those in domestic settings and all those citizens in between, allowing for a critical comparison between social strata.

My novel project evolved from the original idea of interconnected short stories, like Rahim’s, to a full-blown SciFi space opera. The first book sets the stage for the story by including the perspectives of principal and minor characters, who narrate according to their own particular knowledge of the situations they are involved in, creating a decentralized narrative puzzle with which the readers can actively engage in order to fill in gaps and connect fragments. Every citizen of the Union is a puzzle piece, introduced to the reader in a speculative fiction manner that, at times, might seem to digress from the plotline, but only in so much as to give new pieces of information, alternative reportage of events, and multiple perspectives on the invented world in crisis.

The novel frame is a crisis-survival situation for humans in a decaying hostile environment, combined with a scrutiny of societal structures, based on a mixture of elements from the civilizations before the climate cataclysm. The story begins in a first-day-of-class setting, with a new batch of Union Shield Cadets descending from the colonies, ‘Castle cities in the sky’, to meet their new mentor trainer. Knight Vega, an up-and-coming young warrior, eager to prove she deserves her knighthood and the respect of her peers, sets the world parameter for the reader in her harsh introduction to the Ground level. The different social stratum defined during the novel’s development of the geographical and historical backdrop of the world are as important and as convoluted as the rank system of the neo-feudal military state.

Vega, the sometimes-absent protagonist, gives the reader a flash introduction to how this world works. The first clue to the plot’s mystery arrives by ‘sky-lane ship’; the new unit’s pilot alerts Vega to a problem, something that should not happen. A previously unmentioned Cadet
seems to be missing from their unit and an empty name blank in a Union Profile ID roster. The missing child, denominated ‘Ghost profile’, catches the attention of higher-brass officers, who hold their own hidden agendas. The plot moves along from the perspective of everyone around Vega, while she investigates this problem, which officially gets dismissed as a computer glitch. This ends up being part of a larger and ancient problem that links Vega to events from before the birth of the Union.

The novel is divided into three parts, each expanding beyond the limits of the characters’ spatial barriers. The first part takes place inside the Ground Academy Island, the Union’s HQ on Ground level. In this setting, we have one of the few pieces of land that the Union has managed to repopulate and fights fiercely to retain from the random mutations and other dangers that roam the ‘Wasted lands’, where humans used to live. The maze-like structure of the fortress academy is observed by the young Cadets, who, oblivious to the ongoing action, intrigue, and power struggles happening, traverse through the corridors and pathways trying to get acquainted with their new home.

The second part follows higher ranking officers outside the Academy’s wall to events that introduce the reader to larger conspiracies and to a different face of the Union. The second part not only informs the reader with details of backstory but prompts the events that will unfold in the next instalment of the trilogy. During this part the narrative style changes, and the story dips its toes in the waters of horror fiction. This part of the story is when the villain’s grandiose entrance occurs. A gory show of force follows and changes the pace of the rest of the story.

The third part of the novel divides the action further as three simultaneous, simmering storylines edge towards a boiling point at which the characters are forced to suspend their disbelief of what they had previously thought impossible. Unexpected turns of the tide make for
eggshell-strength alliances and tension filled escapes and attacks, ending the first novel of a planned trilogy in a relatively serene interlude of revelations that returns to the first chapter’s ‘calm before the storm’ pace.
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First Private A. Vega stood quietly looking over her unit, a confident smile and expectation in her eyes. She savored the moment. Her first five brown uniforms, all of them crisp out of the oven from helm to boots. Trained in the outer academies and fresh off the sky-lane ship ‘Snake’, they were colony produced, like almost everything consumed at ground level. Her only fear, as she had stated to her supervisor, was that they might get on her nerves before she could manage to make them really worthy of the uniforms they were wearing. That was just her usual playful boast, though, as she recanted later to her Staff Sergeant. Vega yearned for rank.

Five young cadets, two girls and three boys, stood in silence and amazement waiting for her instructions, an unforgiving sun scorching them in their meshed flexy armor. No wind, the sweat on their faces and backs was evidence of the heat. And, yet, none of them would ever dream of being out on the ground level without their armored uniform, especially after what they had just witnessed. Before the ship had landed, they watched from the windows as a Gator-whale attempted to climb from the reef, jumping with agility from rock to rock, climbing the cliffside coastline to the Island. In the floating colonies, the cadets had watched videos of these ‘mutation-monsters,’ but seeing one up close was completely different. No one knew what they were or where they came from. Most theories had to do with nuclear power plants that were lost in the first waves of floods from the melted polar caps. They knew they were vicious, and now they saw it was faster than they had anticipated. From a shadow looming in the dark water, a green fin the size of a human child had emerged, followed by a huge, greenish-gray-scaled armored killer with a long jawed asymmetrical mess of endless rows of serrated fangs. Its dead black eyes had a fire-colored ring reflected wildly in their irises, making it look crazed. These ‘mutations’ usually
smelled rotten; this one had a spear tip broken in its right hind leg. It had survived an encounter before.

Three fully-armored knights jumped on it and stabbed it mercilessly as it landed on a clearing. The Gator-whale slammed one of them into a rock wall with a tail wag. The spikes on the tail were almost as strong as iron, and drops of blood fell where the knight’s armor was pierced. It jumped towards him as the knight attempted to stand up. The two companion knights ran after him. One got in the path of the beast and the injured, holding a large shield between them. The other knight went for the neck in an upwards slash, beheading the ‘monster’ in one critical hit. The shield carrier quickly went to pick up the knocked down ally. The headless beast’s body fell back down to the deep, green waters. While they helped the injured knight stand up, the ship bringing the cadets landed on the wall. The ship didn’t even power down. They hurried down, and the pilot left for another pick up without stepping down.

Walking with pride around the still bleeding head, the champion ‘high-jumped’ from the reef’s edge to the roof of the wall where the cadets were watching. That was their introduction to their new team leader. She took off her helmet and watched them for a few seconds before joining them, walking without hurry. Standing on top of the ‘Fence’, the main path of the walled Ground Academy Island, they had a strategic vantage point. On the inside, the forests lead to the ‘Central Building’ and its spiderweb connections to the rest of the towers and castles in the Academy. On the outside, complete lack of cover. All earth and rock. The only green that could be found was in the polluted waves that crashed against the western end of the Island.

They waited on her orders, nervousness growing as she paced. An enhancement implant on her right eye gave her all of their Union-Profile information. A small rectangle on the lower
right corner of her eyesight held the information only she saw. These implants were not standard. This information was normally in the Academic Officer’s tech-helm. She had it for as long as she could remember and rarely talked about it.

“Very well, let’s begin. You are the luckiest squad of this whole season.” Those were the first words they heard her say. “I welcome you to the Island and your first day in the Ground Academy. My name is First Private, Academic Officer, Vega, Ayzan, Knight of the Union's Shield and your new mentor.” She bowed lightly; they did the same in return. “I expect my orders to be followed.” Vega leered, enjoying their increasingly nervous faces.

Her Knight’s cape was splattered with dark blood from the slain beast, and the cadets could not stop looking at it. She enjoyed their fascination immensely and moved her helm from one arm to the next, watching their eyes follow the action as if hypnotized. Her curly hair bounced as she walked.

They had just arrived at ground level, and she knew it would take some time for the ‘Grav-shock’ to claim its victims. It was usual for Academic Officers to bet on the order of who would fall first to the illness that overtook 93% of colony-raised people the first time they touched ground. It was a passing event and a ceremonial joke to some. It included a series of side effects that ranged from mild to severe: headaches, tremors, vomiting. On some rare occasions some experienced hallucinations or worse. Mostly these happened to cadets descending from the classified Mesospheric Colonies, the highest in the atmosphere of the floating castles.

“Things on the ground are different than what you would be accustomed to as protectors up in the colonies. Here we are not going against petty unadjusted civis, or being vigilant of the safety of protesting workers asking for more bread or better tech. Here, in the Fringe, we are
fighting for our lives.” Vega paused, reading another profile as she talked. “Also, the lives of
every single citizen, ours and every other human nation that still exists on and off this planet.”
She stopped and looked into each of their eyes, slowly hunting for the fear she was sure she had
placed there.

Her slaying of the beast with one swing of her sword replayed in their minds.

“It’s my duty to make sure you do your best and to keep you five alive. I hope you
understand the ancient responsibility placed on us, as we keep everyone in the sky safe.”

She waited to see their anxiety increase before continuing her speech. “Take care of
yourself mentally and physically, and your companions. Down here, that is very important.
Always remember the goal is to provide for the next generations, like the Union always does.”
Knight Vega paused and adjusted the yellow rank band she had tied into a ribbon on her left
forearm.

“Don’t neglect your areas of focus either. You are all now junior scholars. Think about
the specialization you want, and what you want to be training others to do in four to five years.
To determine your rank ascension, you must have a career plan.” Vega saw their eagerness at her
last words.

Rank was achieved in two ways, with Fighting Class, and with their Scholar Field grade.
In both ways there were different levels within the same status. “Most importantly, don’t do
anything to spoil your luck in being here.” She ended her speech with a sentencing stare, her
point visible in the faces behind the transparent visors on their helms. Their hands almost
twitching in angst, she began to categorize them according to the information on their U-profiles.
They stood at attention with unflinching determination. She felt proud. She couldn’t help but remember herself in their place, freshly fifteen years old and ambitious. Her supervisor had tried to break her down hard as she climbed ranks. That only made it her sole mission to surpass him in every way possible. In doing so, she got noticed by her unit's Staff Sergeant. He then took her on for advanced mentorship training.

In her second year, she had broken most of the records that lower rank academics had set, achieving the rank of Knight in her military class profile on her third year, outranking her first trainer. This was in no small part thanks to her Staff Sergeant’s training regime of getting up daily before sunrise to train, no excuses. Her battle skills earned her reputation on the regular training schedules quickly, and the duels began.

Some of Vega’s superiors were not happy with her rank advancement, for they believed that this ‘fomented an already existing elitist, cocky attitude. She had laughed it off as jealousy. The ‘Knight’ fighter's class was an unusual rank by itself for junior academic officers to achieve, who for the most part preferred the staff to the sword. It being awarded to a second-year scholar without previous experience in the field was practically unheard of. This made her Union profile get a lot of attention, and it led her to an assignment in the Fence’s guard, a true honor in the Union’s Shield. A year after, she was standing on the Fence with a new unit of her own to train.

“While you study historic events and tactics with me you will need to hone your Kalenda to its sharpest. You must, -and this part is mandatory-, accept a simple truth. If you live on the ground, you are in danger.” She saw one of the boys shiver as she spoke and felt pleased. “I will not be wasting my time teaching you if you’re just going to die and not pass on that knowledge.” She waited until the other cadets looked as worried as she wanted them to. “Hand in hand you
will learn to craft Bokutos and different staff types in our weapons garden, both for yourselves, and for the Union,” she said, standing proudly, curls and cape floating in a sudden gust of wind that died as quickly as it had come, helm in hand, and a mixture of pride and anger on her face.

“I bet that’s one thing you never even dreamed of doing up in the sky lanes, huh?”, she laughed at her own joke and waited until they had eased some of their tension before continuing.

“Ma’am?” One of the cadets raised a hand, the tallest one of the five. Her brown rank band spelled L. Nara, and she wore it diagonally as a sash across her chest, from her right shoulder to her left ribcage. She looked to Knight Vega as if she were properly trained, her muscles toned and her eyes sharp. She hesitated before continuing, and Vega doubted it was shyness. This was the one cadet who had kept her cool during Vega’s speech. She had noticed and enjoyed this.

“Yes, Squire?” Vega relished saying the words for the first time. She felt she had been a Knight only in name until she had her own squires. The Union worked on a mentoring system, and rank was supposed to be followed with respect. While other junior AOs respected her strength, she knew older AOs had their reservations as to her leadership skills. Even though she worked extremely hard to surpass other knights, with no one to lead, she had been a knight only in title.

“Isn’t it illegal to cut down trees?” Cadet L. Nara asked, her sweat dripping down her forehead inside the helm. It was not smart to challenge a mentor’s word on the first day.

Knight Vega had done just that as a cadet, she reminisced before answering.
“Good catch, Squire. Yes, mostly, except those we grow specifically for weapons. The rules on the ground are not ‘exactly’ the same as in the colonies.” She winked at the squire and saw all the tension leave her body. “Your staffs and swords are going to protect you from all manner of creatures that come crawling up the coast.”

Vega then proceeded to draw her weapon from a black scabbard on her left hip, a medium range wooden black sword. She showed it to her students after tossing it in the air and catching it with dexterity. She swung it hard in a high left to low right slash. Drops of blood from the felled monster fell to the ground, some right in front of the cadets’ boots.

Cadet Nara’s eyes were bright with emotion.

Vega was practically glowing.

“Why is it black and yet so shiny?” Cadet G. Radzel blurted out as Knight Vega handed her the sword. She had her brown rank band tied around her forehead, in the style of many Stratosphere colony field worker clans. There were more Stratosphere colonies than any other kind, and it was usual to receive many clan workers, most very ambitious. They advanced on the ground and then went back home to lead the others.

“Good eye, Radzel, it’s covered in moon dust, so it doesn’t break.” Vega smiled proudly at her new cadet.

“Whoa, the real deal? Isn’t that extremely expensive?” Radzel asked again, looking closer at the sword. She touched the tip of the sword and saw the fabric of her glove ripped instantly.
“It is today, after the Satellite-Bridge station disaster. But for a long time, Moon mining was the big thing in the Union. The Ground Academic Island you see now was something else entirely. It was a huge castle, used to store great amounts of Moon minerals.” She saw their eyes widened with the information. She understood that they were not the strongest batch of history students, which was not surprising to her.

“I’m surprised you don’t know this about the place you’re coming to train in,” Vega explained looking very pleased. The cadets looked slightly embarrassed. “No wonder they gave you a History Expert AO.” She winked at them easing their stress. She had practiced these topics in her head.

Vega’s field was filled with ‘a big cloud of useless knowledge’ she had once said, but it allowed her an infinite pool to search for answers to questions that most people didn’t have. She was as strict with her research as with her training. She had aced module tests that some of her superiors had not even taken.

“That was before the Water Wall, right?” Cadet O. Mavi asked, ranking band around his thigh, holding a small empty sheath in place. Vega’s attention had been caught earlier by this. Her eyes inevitably went back to the empty sheath when he spoke. This was the cadet who had shivered at her words earlier.

“That is correct, Mavi. The Union’s headquarters were not here in those days, they were located in what is now known as the Wasted Lands, the area closest to the Wall. Is this also something that you weren’t taught in the colonies?” Vega asked as she began to walk the giant stone wall. They all followed instinctively.

“No, ma’am,” Nara admitted with a little shame.
This is a classic example of colonial training, Vega thought angrily. They were functional, but lacked key historical information.

“Do you know what it was that kept humans from being completely wiped out during the Water Wall incident?” She paused and looked at the surroundings, as they followed with their eyes. The horizon looked orange, announcing that mid-day was approaching. “The one thing that made it possible for us to be standing here today?” Vega asked as they approached a stone sentry garrison that overlooked the water.

They all looked at their new teacher in complete terror. None could think of a suitable answer. Commonly the Water Wall incident was not discussed much in the colonies. It was a phenomenon that’s just accepted as is, a giant wall of water rising to the sky in the center of the world, dividing it in half. What made it rise or how it stands is a query that eludes hundreds of Union philosophers and scientists. It stood, defying all human logic, changing all the landscapes as it drained and cycled the deepest oceanic liquid in its reach for heaven. The timeline between the melting of the polar caps and the walls’ rising was not clear in most documents that Vega had read. She had studied it fervently and often doubted their authenticity. Many times, she cursed the earlier historians for oversimplifying these and other matters.

Some look at its freakish beauty in awe, but most people in the Union either fear or have a vigilant attitude towards it. All colonies are linked to ground gravitation far from it, as to not be hit by a distending tsunamic wall piece. Nothing survives close to the wall, so they stay far away. Teams investigate and track changes in the closest bases, but those are amongst the most dangerous job postings in the Union. And they offer little compensation in terms of effective utility, and more important to some, rank advancement. In fact, a posting in a Water Wall
observation unit is often seen as an unofficial reprimand among junior AOs. Vega’s Staff Sergeant had told her once he did not like that idea. According to him, every single AO should observe the Wall for a season and contemplate their place in the world in relation to nature.

They stood in silence looking at Vega. She in turn looked outside to the sea beyond the ragged land, the waves beating against the giant rocks that were long ago covered by the water. “Well?” Vega pushed.

“The Union?” Cadet V. Koller spoke, rank band tied around his right wrist like an armband. He tried to look tough as he spoke. Vega had picked him as the first Grav-shock victim.


_Some cadets are not cut out for the ground, they come and go the same year,_ she thought. “Not entirely right. While the sky castles were instrumental in sheltering the displaced, they would have starved. They were hardly prepared to house so many people indefinitely.”

Cadet Sûai’s face revealed understanding.

“Back then the Colonies were ‘Technology Citadels in the clouds’, not where we grow our food and train our young like it is today,” Knight Vega answered patiently as she began to walk again.

The cadets were lost in thought, and Knight Vega enjoyed studying their faces as they searched for answers.
“What was it?” Cadet Radzel asked bluntly.

Knight Vega laughed a natural laugh of one who finds innocence amusing. She stared at the bright lights reflected in the offshore waters and snapped a picture with her cybernetic eye, saved it in her inner armband data pad memory, and started recording her assignment. “That will be your first research assignment. I want a theoretical, argumentative presentation on your answer for the day after tomorrow.” Vega stopped the recording after speaking.

“But what about the event, per se?” Cadet Koller raised his hand.

After he spoke, Vega almost chuckled. “What about it?” She held her smile.

Koller looked around, all the attention on him. Vega’s look made him lose his voice, and he cleared his throat before continuing. “Well, I apologize for this question, if I should know, but how, exactly, did the Water Wall happen?” Koller asked, his eyes sharp.

She could tell he had never been satisfied with any answer.

Knight Vega herself had never been satisfied with an answer, and that’s why she studied historical events as her focus, along with tactical battle styles and strategies from pre-Union military leaders around the world. She found the balance kept her sanity in check. She had her own theory. She had reworked it often but now had no answer for her squire. The Water Wall was a field of inquiry by itself, and AOs spent their entire lives studying it without fruition. It defied all laws that humans knew in its ragingly deafening existence. A common saying in reference to it was: ‘To understand the why’s of the Wall, is to understand the why’s of life and death’.
“I believe there’s nobody alive who could correctly answer that. There are endless theories and stories, of course, but no one can be sure. We can only guess.” She smiled at his disappointment before continuing. “The only thing that is clear is that the planet’s gravitational pull changed; the melted polar caps that had started to flood the world simply switched directions and shot to heaven.” She nodded as Koller’s face looked more intrigued. “If you believe the old tales, it happened during the most active storm season on record, on a day when the cosmological bodies aligned with the bodies of eight cyclones circling the globe. If you have a more faith-based approach, it was all because the daughter of a nameless deity decided to have mercy on the lives of humans.” She waited a minute looking at their reactions to her words. Nara seemed to smirk, and Radzel looked slightly upset. Mavi and Koller looked confused, and Sūai, had his eyes closed. “But everyone who was in an actual position to keep records drowned centuries ago.” She shrugged. Koller’s gaze was far away, trying to make sense of her words.

“What do you believe, ma’am?” Cadet Mavi asked, bug-eyed and with a mouth that wouldn’t close.

“I believe that what caused the event and our survival are not necessarily linked. More importantly, my opinion on its cause is irrelevant to its actual cause. Thus, you are asking the wrong question, Squire.” Vega tried to keep a grin from appearing on her face.

“What if… information about the event is key to answering your question?” Koller asked, interceding.

“It’s not.” Knight Vega almost skipped as she walked. Had they heard of her in the colonies? she wondered.

“But what if…” Mavi was about to argue again.
“No.” Knight Vega cut him off as she walked towards a ship clearing pad.

“Understood, ma’am.” Koller stepped next to Mavi.

Vega observed the instantaneous development of the first clique as they simultaneously went silent. She had already guessed at their personalities, and she was now sure that she hadn’t made any mistakes. Interesting mix of cadets, a balanced squad of brains and brawn.

“Ma’am…,” Radzel raised her hand. She began trembling. She had been the last to reach the group as they walked.

“Yes, Squire?” Vega asked turning around.

“I feel a strange tingle.” Radzel put her hand over her heart. Cadet Nara quickly went and held her arm, helping her stand straight.

“Ah, it begins. I imagine you have all heard of ground sickness, or Grav-shock correct?”

Suddenly they all looked very afraid.

“Walk with me towards this circle.” Knight Vega walked and took Cadet Radzel’s hand. Cadet Nara stayed still.

“Yes, ma’am!” They began answering, overlapping each other as they followed.

She quickened her pace towards the landing pad.“First real tactical lesson of the day—let’s do some grounding exercises. Follow along as I do them.” Vega put her black gloved hands on Radzel’s shoulder and looking her in the eyes said: “Listen to me and believe me right now. You will be fine after the experience.” She tilted her head sideways and smiled tenderly.
The cadet seemed calmer after Vega’s words. Her heart rate had accelerated, and she was having trouble breathing, but the touch and words of her mentor were soothing.

Vega summoned all her tenderness into a single smile, and her squires looked to it like a light post in a storm. The sky had turned darker, even though the storm wasn’t there yet. The wind picked up, from nothing to violent gusts, hitting them hard.

Vega sat down crossed legged, and the five cadets followed. She took off her gloves, and placed her open palms on the floor. The five cadets silently followed her actions again. The spirals of her hair lifted in the sandy winds around them. ‘Three deep breaths’ she instructed.

Cadet J. Sōai fell sideways towards the floor before the first one. He made a soft ‘tut’ noise as his helm hit the ground. It made Vega look back. She told the others to repeat the ‘reset breathing’ exercises as she got up and went to check on Sōai. She caught Nara smirking as she walked towards the fallen cadet. *Tough girl*, she thought. On Knight Vega’s first day, one of her teammates had suddenly started vomiting. She had felt no sympathy for him, either.

“You’re fine.”

Vega’s voice echoed inside of Sōai’s recovering senses. She was holding him. “Ma’?” Sōai tried weakly.

“You’re a High-Mesosphere colony cadet, aren’t you?” Vega reached for a pocket and took out a small crystal vial and began shaking it in front of his eyes.

He nodded.

She inserted the vial cartridge under the air-distiller mechanism of his helm.
“Yes, ma’am.” He answered and then closed his eyes again in her arms.

“Keep breathing. If you need to lie down, do so,” she instructed him. Poor kid, Knight Vega thought as she cradled him. She certainly had sympathy for this one. He would have a tougher time on the ground than the rest of her unit. The High-Mesospheric Colony were amongst the fewest of cadets recruited for the ground.

“You know the theory behind this sickness, correct?” Knight Vega spoke louder than before.

“Yes, ma’am.” Koller put his elbow on the ground and leaned a bit as he spoke.

“Hear it’s because of the difference in the air and the Pull.” Radzel said, now worriedly checking on Koller.

“You heard correctly, in a way. What you’re feeling is nothing short of electromagnetic impulses in your cortex, riddling your nervous system with an unexplainable anxiety. Not unlike a sudden withdrawal of chemicals in your brain,” Vega explained calmly.

“It’s worse than I thought.” Koller announced, removing his helm. He took deep breaths and closed his eyes.

“The further away from ground level your body is accustomed to, the harder it will hit. The older you are when you first touch ground level, the harder it hits. I’ve seen it bad. Fortunately, it’s a one-time deal.” Vega looked them over. Sãai began snoring softly in her arms.

The two knights that had fought the Gator-Shark with Knight Vega earlier seemed to have appeared out of nowhere when they had started feeling ill. They were silently watching everything from afar. One of them nudged the other in the ribs, and then they walked away. Vega
put on a fake smile, they would be talking about her pampering them, but she didn’t care. The traditional islander way was letting them fight through the shock and congratulating the toughest.

“My heart,” Mavi yelled out before quickly taking off his helm and throwing up.

Radzel left Koller’s side and grabbed Mavi’s arm so he wouldn’t fall over on top of his own vomit. “There, there, its fine.” Radzel patted Mavi’s back as he hurled.

Nara looked boorishly to the sky. Vega found her quite curious. “Nara, you’ve been on the ground before?” She asked perplexed.

“No, ma’am.” Nara answered simply, walking towards Radzel and helping her with Mavi.

“You don’t say,” Vega said softly as she kept cradling Søai. She wondered if this one would survive the ground. She had her work cut out for her. But it all depended on what he was made of. She could only do so much for him. She had known some amazing Mesos knights, and some dead ones.

“Ma’am?” Koller cried out as he crouched on his stomach.


Nara took Koller’s hand and pulled on him hard. “Come on, Vic!” Nara pulled towards Vega.

“Vic huh?” Vega continued talking under her breath.

“Apology, ma’am. Get up, Koller.” She pulled harder, visibly unconcerned at Koller’s coughing.
“No apology necessary, Nara. We’ll talk later.” Vega softly placed Sûai on the ground.

He did not wake. She got up and walked towards Nara and Koller.

“Ma’am, is he okay?” Radzel looked at Sûai with concern.

“Let him sleep it off. It’s exhaustion.” Vega patted her.

“I’m better ma’am, honest.” Mavi began standing up straighter as Vega observed the pupils of his eyes.

“Sit and breathe. Our ship is nearly here.” She had an annoyed face.

Silence reigned for a few minutes. At one-point Radzel looked at Vega, puzzled, but said nothing. Koller and Mavi, who had become increasingly pale, began to regain their color. Nara just looked angry, and Sûai kept on snoring softly.

Vega watched the gray ship, codenamed ‘Snake’, arrive with silent elegance, setting down in the clearing pad next to them. She could not hide her mixed feelings. Her Grav-shocked cadets would go to Central-Building’s med-bay and then off to their quarters. Lunch, and rest, followed by her choice of assignment or leisure. She had planned for assignments.

Her first class was almost over. She had already begun typing her report on her inner armband data pad. None of the cadets had noticed it. Her implant allowed her to see what she was typing and send and receive messages on a keyboard in front of her fingers that only she saw. She typed and watched the same ship that had brought them down from their colonies in the morning. Vega had not wanted to walk out to meet them until the ship left. A bit out of spite, a bit to make them wait. This played out well since it allowed her to demonstrate her work first-hand. Now there was no way to avoid the awkwardness she had come to dread. She silently
wished for another Gator-Whale to pop up from the reef. She had said to her Staff Sergeant once before that she preferred fighting monsters than talking to people. It’s easier to kill than to care.

The pilot stepped down with a proud remnant of a grin. He was visibly strong from extra training hours. He walked out without his helm on, just like Vega knew he would. “Hello, First Private, how goes life?” the pilot asked with a nonchalant attitude.

_Tall Bear-Wolf,_ Vega thought instantaneously, like she always did after he had made the comparison once.

His dark, forest green band wrapped around thick dreadlocks spelled Sp. A. Piye.

“It’s been a long time, Specialist.” Vega stood up and shook his hand with strong and defiant smile.

“Whose fault is that?” he asked with his patented fox smile. He was massively taller than her.

“Fate’s perhaps, Destiny’s for certain,” she answered tauntingly as they began to help Koller up. Radzel looked at the interaction in mesmerizing curiosity and giggled.

“So, let out, who went down first?” Piye asked grinning, silver capped fangs and molars shining from the right side of his mouth.

“I have a High Mesos on my unit. It really wasn’t fair.” Vega signaled to the sleeping Satăi.

“Ahh, this was your unit?” Piye realized when he saw the cadet. “Poor sprout, hope you didn’t give him any assignments.” Piye joked loudly.
“Actually…” Vega began tentatively.

“You monster.” Piye broke out in a booming laughter, picking up Sŏai over his shoulder like he weighed as much as paper. They moved among laughs towards the ship.

“Follow us, Cadets. You already met Specialist Piye in the morning. Let’s get you to your new home.” Vega walked them slowly towards the ship while Piye went ahead and strapped Sŏai to a chair’s harness. She was taken aback for a moment, thinking she saw the reflection of a face inside the ship’s window.

“So, there’s a little glitch somewhere,” Piye said softly to Vega as she caught up.

“Oh? Do tell, Specialist,” Vega replied absentmindedly as the cadets entered the ship. She looked at the window again from the inside. She did a double take while the cadets sat down and began putting on their harnesses. She heard a faint buzz in her ears but saw nothing when she looked around. Dizziness strobed in her head for a second. She held to the door frame without revealing it.

“Outside,” Piye insisted.

“Acceptable. Cadets, get fastened,” Knight Vega ordered and closed the door to the ship, staying outside with the Specialist. She recovered quickly, looking around without vertigo.

“This morning I had five passengers on the log. Now, including you, I should have six. I have seven.” He paused for effect. “Any idea what’s going on?” Piye stood looking puzzled, showing her the ship’s data logs. “That’s not right, are we missing a kid?”
“What’s the extra name?” Vega watched from the window panel on the door to make sure everyone had their harness on and were ready for the trip. Piye waited for her with the ship’s data pad in his hands.

Vega checked her orders on her armband data pad. ‘Introductions’ and a list of her unit. No seventh on her orders.

“That’s the extra not right part. The trace comes back empty. I’m supposed to have an extra passenger, but the background link of registry comes back unknown. An empty file. I’ve never seen this happen before, not even on upgrade bugs.” Piye scratched his beard, looking at her as if she had a secret.

Vega looked back at the window distractedly.

Piye began impatiently tapping his feet.

She looked down at his feet, then back at his impatient face.

“This… it shouldn’t happen,” Vega replied.

“You only get a seat assigned with a profile upload. I know this shouldn’t happen, Ayzan. I’m the one piloting, even if you are the ‘Knight’.” Piye put his hands in the air mockingly.

“Still sore, Cupcake? I’d say sorry for breaking your record, but I’m not. That fight got me where I am today. Besides, you’re already a Specialist. What do you need to be a Knight for?” she asked, but he ignored the question completely. “I’ve seen you with Bo, Kali and Quarterstaff, Ami. Your Kalenda’s skills are way above your swordsmanship any day. I don’t know why you even challenged me.” Vega patted his shoulder as if he was a child.
“Don’t go off track. I’m asking you a serious question, Ayzan.” Piye rolled his eyes.

“As am I. Why did you ever challenge me to begin with? You knew I wasn’t about to lose.” Vega smiled and shrugged her shoulders as the Specialist’s face began to redden.

“You really are just the worst sometimes, kid.” Specialist Piye rolled his eyes.

“Rank, Specialist. You call me ma’am or sir always, remember?” Vega grinned playfully after scolding him.

“Oh, curse off, ma’am. What are we going to do about the log?” Piye asked, making a face. She considered the situation for a moment before speaking. It was a strange one, but they had no control over the data logs. The Union had AI’s designed just for that. Human error was taken out of the equation ages ago. If it was a glitch, it was something for the ‘techies’ up in the Colonies to deal with and worry about.

“With the logs? Nothing. Give S. S. Masters your brief. Say what happened. Sounds above us. I should, however, report your tone, Specialist. Or just beat you up in ceremony again.” Her smile was beaming.

“Right, right, like I should report you for giving the kid some sap.” Piye continued scratching his beard.

She finally understood what was bothering him. “Specialist, you know better than anyone what the ground does to a Mesos child. He had already passed out. The tremors would have taken him, and not gently. I wasn’t about to watch him get traumatized.” Vega put her hands in the air in a manner that said, ‘tough luck’.

“Did you ask him?” Piye asked with a doubtful tone.
“Did you miss the part where he passed out in seconds?” Vega’s tone didn’t hide her annoyance.

“Did you ask?” Piye repeated.

She stared him down before continuing. “I don’t need to. It’s my call.” Vega remained unmoved.

“You know you should have asked.” Piye shrugged and turned around. “Hey, you know what? let’s make a deal, you teach me how to pilot, and I’ll teach you how to knight, not the other way around. Agreed, little bird?”

Vega went for the door.

“Off you pop then, Ayzan.” Piye followed, grumbling.

They each went for their seats in the ship, avoiding looking at each other. Vega hated the humid smell of the ship. She felt trapped in it. In contrast, Piye never seemed more comfortable in her eyes than when he was sitting between the control orbs.

“Alright… Cadets, question time. When you were briefed about joining the G. A. Island, what information was given to you about your unit?” Vega asked them loudly.

Sūai no longer snored, but was not moving. “Nothing, ma’am. My acceptance message had no information on the unit, just a brief on the courses and responsibilities. A part about our new quarters and things like that.”

Radzel spoke and waved her hands around, “Same.”

Koller added, “I got the same message, ma’am.”
Mavi followed. “Nothing in the acceptance message, ma’am.”

Nara leered at Vega suggestively. Vega typed a private message to her cadet, her fingers typing fast in the invisible keyboard. She was sure Nara wanted to say something to her, without explaining how she knew it. Or at least without telling the rest of the unit, which was fine by her.

“I see, well, we’ll discuss this further in the next few days. For now, we are going to med-bay for your evaluations. Then you’ll rest a bit before lunch. I will see you all afterwards in the 8th level Archives.” Knight Vega smiled as Piye put his helm on.

He began a soft lift off. They felt as if floating on a metal cloud. Vega knew he had levitated slowly just for her benefit. She hated going straight into the sky without warning. Her sharp eyes watched as Piye started all of the different calculations on three separate little screens. These calculations would create the magnetism sequence to keep the ship even as they maneuvered through the ever-changing gravitational spikes on the planet’s atmosphere. She had learned the mathematical part already, but Piye made it look like a puzzle rather than an equation. He solved it in an abstract way, by illogical pulls, something most pilots did not have the skills to do.

‘Think of it as being like riding a wave on a serpent’s back, while counting backwards,’ Piye had told her the first time she asked him about flying. She had always assumed he was only trying to sound clever, but liked the sentiment, nonetheless. Vega had always enjoyed the idea of piloting a ship herself. She thought she’d learn to like flying that way. Her Staff Sergeant had pushed her towards Piye in order to learn.

‘If you are learning something new, always try to learn it from the best,’ he had told her. Since then, she had bugged Piye relentlessly. Until one day he said, ‘Fine, beat me in a duel and
I'll teach you. Lose, and you don’t ask me again.’ Knight Vega did not miss her chance. She smiled to herself remembering all this.

As the trip back began, the Cadets were silent. Their introduction to the ground had taken a lot out of them, and it was just the beginning of their journey. She looked at them over Piye’s monitor. They seemed exhausted. Having been born on the ground, she never experienced the sickness herself but couldn’t rightly remember how bad it had been for her first unit’s squad-mates.

She began adjusting her preliminary class schedule in her head. In a week she had to find out what side work her Cadets were suitable for. Being a Trainer would be half her work as she could still be requested for extra missions, and she still had to fit in rotation time at the Fringe.

Silently elevating further, the ship hovered in the ground’s shifting magnetic pull. These ships did not consume fuel which was the first scarcity of the new world. The tradeoff was their difficulty to control as they soared the sky. Being made of recycled metals, they weren’t strong enough for fighting, and the bigger the ship, the slower it went. Usually the smaller the ship, the more difficult maneuvering, but Piye, a class A pilot, made it look easy.

Vega shifted in her seat looking over her new unit contently. They would be her trial by fire. She had to make something great out of them. She was one of the youngest knights in the Academy’s history, and she had to prove her right to be a leader. Having a Mesospheric colonial on her unit would be a challenge, but she considered the possibility he might be her best asset. Piye had shown her that Mesospheric colonials were more than the myths that surrounded them. It was rare for Mesos to come to the ground academy. Many Union Shield Island-born AOs never really interacted with them. Often, Mesos were described by ground AOs as weak, geeky
and lazy, but Piye broke all those stereotypes. She looked at Piye and then back at her sleeping cadet, wondering if she had gotten a genius or a dud. She also wondered if they thought of her as a bully, a brute, or a savage.