

The thing that pissed Vi off the most about ruining her life and dishonoring her family was the absurd amount of work she'd put into her own downfall.

Like most people who fucked themselves over, Vi had not actually woken up one morning and said to herself, "Ah, today's the day: commence Operation Fuck-Over!" She had, instead, very modestly planned on making her childhood dream come true. At no point was said childhood dream supposed to morph into a nightmare, much less one largely of her own making.

Later, much later, people would ask why she did it. Did she think she could get away with it? Did she ever wonder if she'd get caught? Did she even understand that what she did was wrong at all?

"It could have been avoided," some would cluck, or "How stupid, not to see how much trouble you'd create for yourself," or worst of all, "You should have known better." And Vi, with the benefit of hindsight, no matter how she turned the words over in her head, never came up with a satisfactory answer, except this: in the grand, toiling, earnestly misguided process of ruining her own life, she hadn't ever once considered what would happen next.

ANDREA TANG

That was the thing about nightmares, after all. The worst were always the ones you never saw coming.

Dear Miss Viola Elizabeth Jiyeon Park,

It has been brought to the attention of the admissions committee of the Global Alliance of Nations Academy for Combat and Cybernetic Arts that you have been found guilty of improper tampering with the Tenth Annual Entrance Exams. Given the seriousness of this violation, you are hereby denied entry to the Academy and, furthermore, barred from additional attempts to sit any future entrance exam.

Appropriate representatives of the GAN Council and the GAN Academy, and members of the North American Barricade Coalition Board for Mech Pilot Certification, will convene in two weeks' time to determine the status of your current piloting license. Depending on the findings of our collective efforts, consequences of your misconduct may include the termination of your license.

With regards,

Karolyn Winchester, Headmaster, GAN Academy

Nolan Goldstein-Davies, Examiner

Fernando Diaz, Examiner

Jacinda Rogers, Examiner



**ONCE UPON A TIME,** Viola Park had dreamed of ending wars and taming dragons. It wasn't such a farfetched goal, so far as childhood dreams went. After all, ending wars and taming dragons was a bit of a family business. People called the Parks a lot of things—defenders of democracy, if you loved them; Machiavellian assholes, if you hated them—but no one could deny that they were big fat overachievers when it came to warfare and politics. Theirs was an old, canny family of soldiers and politicians alike, as stalwart and seemingly indestructible as the North American cities where they'd made their home—or built their empire, depending on your perspective. Without the Parks, there would be no Global Alliance of Nations, and without the GAN, unscrupulous arms dealers—hand-selling their rogue battle bots and dangerously experimental AI—would have blown every last functioning government on Earth to smithereens by now.

Vi couldn't remember a point in her life when she couldn't name at least one family member serving in the GAN Peacekeeper Corps, and another sitting on the GAN Council. Parks protected what was theirs, whether it was a city, a continent, or the entire world. Vi's parents, both of them Peacekeeper pilots, had died for it. The aunts who'd taken her in afterward, one a GAN politician and the other a GAN mech engineer, had made it abundantly clear that it was the way of things in their clan: you lived to uphold GAN creed, or died trying. So the year Viola turned eighteen, it went without saying that she'd be sitting the entrance exams for the GAN Academy for Combat and Cybernetic Arts. She'd never really doubted she'd pass.

After all, that was the road map she'd been following her entire life, the GAN her eternal true north: attend New Columbia Prep for three years, earn straight As, turn eighteen, sit the GAN entrance exam, pass with flying colors on the first try, transfer to the Academy before senior year, graduate in another three, and go directly into a plum job among the Peacekeepers. It was easy to be certain of your destiny when no one had ever called it into question.

The Sunday morning before the exam was really when all that began to change.

Few things more obviously announced the arrival of certain individuals than the dramatic crescendo of a Tchaikovsky arrangement on the baby grand in the foyer. Vi, limbs akimbo beneath her duvet, smothered a few choice obscenities into a pillow before fumbling for her phone.

"Time," she croaked.

"It is currently eight o'clock a.m., Miss Park," replied her phone, obnoxiously crisp.

"It's Sunday," protested Vi.

"It is currently eight o'clock," agreed her phone. "a.m."

"A day of rest!"

"It is currently—"

Vi hurled the phone across her bed, along with the duvet, just as the dulcet sounds of the *Nutcracker* pas de deux swelled anew. "All right!" she yelled at the offending pianist. "You win! Goddammit! You win!"

The adagio, if anything, grew louder still, each note perfectly, delicately placed. "Fucker," muttered Vi. She threw a dressing gown

over her shoulders, barely sliding into a pair of slippers, before slamming out of the bedroom. “You know one of my uncles was a former chief of intelligence for the North American Barricade Coalition, right?” she called, as she descended the swirling mahogany staircase. “If I wrote to him and promised to up my Christmas chocolates game, I bet I could have you murdered in your sleep.”

“What a terrible stressor that would be for poor Jay,” said the pianist over the final notes of the adagio. “Your slippers are mismatched, by the way.”

“Your fault for dragging me out of bed! On a day of rest!” Vi tapped one red-slipped foot against her ankle, ignoring for the moment the hideous print of giggling cartoon dragons embroidered over the opposite foot. “I don’t exactly have many of those right now, Alex. It’s crunch time.”

Alex played a little flourish across the keyboard. “Indeed.”

“Crunch time for the GAN Academy entrance exams, I mean.”

“I’m aware.”

“The Academy for Combat and Cybernetic Arts!”

“I don’t believe there’s another GAN Academy, no.”

“So why are you waking me up before noon on a Sunday!”

Alex’s hands stilled, along with the music. At last, he looked up the staircase to where Vi stood. Vi, fuming at the railing in her dressing gown and hideous mismatched slippers, glared at him. They froze for a moment like that.

Then Alex burst into peals of laughter.

“Oh, fuck you very much,” groused Vi. Her hair was probably a disaster. “If my idiot classmates knew what a troll you were under

your whole sensitive musician act, they'd scrap all their tacky 3-D pinup posters of your stupid face faster than I can shoot a plasma rifle."

"Why on earth does a pinup poster of all things need a 3-D edition?" asked Alex. Between all his dumbass cackles, he sounded genuinely puzzled.

"I love that *that's* your takeaway question about all this. Aren't you, like, thirty now?" Vi leaned over the railing, stretching out the cracks in her spine with a wince. That's what she got for five hours of sleep after three hours of mech fighting practice. "Isn't that a little old for the whole teen heartthrob schtick?"

"I'm twenty-nine, thank you, chiquitita, and still younger than the actors they've got playing your fellow sixteen-year-olds on those wireless dramas you love so much."

"I'm eighteen!" Vi hugged her dressing gown over her chest, cheeks flaming. "And I watch those ironically!"

"I wasn't judging." Her uninvited houseguest raised his hands in surrender, a smile creasing the corners of twinkling dark eyes. "Watch anything you like, so long as you remember to practice your scales. Speaking of which, Academy exams or no, you have a piano lesson."

"Today? Now?" Vi raked a hand through her bedhead, irritation warring with a horrifyingly tender nostalgia she didn't care to examine too closely. Alex wasn't a Park by blood or marriage, but he was probably the closest thing she had to consistently present family. He'd been her music teacher since she was too small to reach the piano pedals, a tutor for hire on paper but, in reality, something halfway between doting older brother and mischievous young uncle. "How am I supposed to deal with piano scales when I still don't

have a battle mech simulation picked out to perform?”

Alex shrugged. “To quote your esteemed aunt Anabel, ‘That sounds like a you problem.’” He tapped his chin, contemplative. “What was it exactly she said again? Oh yes, ‘Cutthroat fights between giant robots may be stupidly important to geopolitics right now, but they are no excuse to neglect culture.’” He actually did a pretty credible imitation of Aunt Anabel’s voice.

Vi scowled, shifting from one foot to the other. The looming entrance exam had left a small but steadily growing knot in her belly from the day the dates were announced. The reminder of Aunt Anabel’s general existence did not loosen it. “Where is she, anyway?”

“Anabel?” Alex’s handsome face did something complicated. “The usual, I suppose. On top secret state business for the GAN Council.”

“Surprise,” muttered Vi.

“Hey, chiquitita,” said Alex. His voice had gone all gentle and knowing, in that way it always did whenever Vi hit a mood. “You know Anabel loves you, right? Your aunt took you under her wing for a reason.”

“Yeah.” Vi stared at the dragons on the one slipper. “I needed to be someone’s ward on paper, I guess, and any of my cousins would kill to be Aunt Anabel’s. And I—she knows I’m a good pilot. I’d be a credit to her, as a Peacekeeper-to-be. It’s a fair exchange.”

Alex sighed. “One day, you and I are going to have words about what literal children do and don’t owe their legal guardians.”

“I’m eighteen!” protested Vi.

“Barely. And you’re Anabel’s niece, not a weapon or a political pawn.” Alex stood and stretched his fingers. “Now, how’s your Debussy piece coming along?”

“Um,” said Vi.

The music teacher’s brows arched. “Have you practiced this week?”

“Yes.”

“How many hours?”

Vi tried, frantically, to think of a number he would buy. “Six!”

The eyebrows only climbed higher.

“Three?”

“Vi.”

“Okay, so I’m lying; I practiced exactly zero hours, but could you blame me? It’s crunch time for—”

“The Academy entrance exams. I’m aware.” Alex gave her a long, inscrutable look. “There’s more to life than mech piloting, you know. Even the chance at piloting a dragon for the Peacekeeper Corps.”

Vi snorted. “Like what, becoming some bohemian singer-songwriter with a niche following of teen girls and a side hustle as a really annoying piano teacher? Is that why you quit the Peacekeeper Corps?”

She regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth. Alex’s face, always so expressive, shuttered as he fell silent. He never talked about it, and the gossip columns had eventually piped down, but back in the day, Alex quitting the Peacekeepers had been a big deal. You couldn’t really tell now, with his rumpled hair and big lumpy grandpa sweaters, but Vi’s music teacher had been destined for greater things, once upon a time. He’d been nephew to the first Head Representative of the North American Barricade Coalition, a top-notch student at one of the best prep schools on the continent—and by all reports, the finest mech pilot of his generation. No one knew



exactly why he'd thrown that all away before the age of thirty to pen semi-obscure love songs and teach music theory to teenagers, but it had been a slap in the face to the GAN. Some called it selfishness. Others called it madness.

Vi wondered, sometimes, in her more shameful moments, if Alex had quit simply because he was a coward. Then she'd remember every time he'd ever fixed her a plate of chilaquiles after a recital, or tucked her into bed when her aunts were away, or simply existed in her life, all careworn smile and dancing fingers at a piano bench, his warmth steadfast and dependable.

She always hated herself so much for thinking that Alex might deserve her disdain.

"It's not just the piano. I also teach guitar lessons sometimes," he said at last, voice mild. If she'd offended him, he gave no sign. "But since your mind is clearly more wrapped up in mechs than music for the moment, why don't we switch gears?"

Vi blinked, surprised, straightening her spine. "You want to do a round of mech sparring?" She'd never seen her music teacher in action, but she'd heard the stories, and seen some of his old combat simulation reels. She could learn a lot more from him than how to play Debussy, but he'd never once offered to train with her, and every time she'd asked, he'd always had an excuse ready. By her midteens, she'd given up on ever getting his help.

"Lord, no." The corner of Alex's mouth tipped upward. "I'm going to make hot cocoa." He laughed at the look on her face. "You're welcome to go beat up giant robots instead, of course, but there will be an extra mug of my mother's old Mexican recipe waiting on the counter." His eyebrows wagged. "With marshmallows."

“I like marshmallows,” Vi allowed grudgingly. They were, at any rate, immensely preferable to Debussy. “Can I still pick your brain about the giant robots?”

She wasn’t sure if she imagined the pause before his almost too-casual reply: “If you insist.”

She followed him to the kitchen. “What was your exam like, when you joined the Peacekeepers?”

“What exam?” Alex chortled, as he poured milk into a saucepan. “We’d barely just figured out that sentient mechs were even possible to engineer, and all the governments of the world were in a panic over how to put the genie back in the bottle. You can’t, of course. Once one engineer proves it can be done, it’s not long before everyone else is doing it too, for good or ill.”

Vi squinted at him, thoughtful. “Is it true that you helped fly the first sentient? The one dragon that became the prototype for the whole GAN fleet?”

The stirring paused, for just a beat. “Rebelwing. Yes.” Another pause. “I wasn’t the primary pilot, though.”

“Prudence Wu,” Vi acknowledged, very carefully. The name carried a heady sort of reverence when spoken aloud. The first of the dragon pilots. The first human who’d known how it felt to meld her own mind with a sentient’s and to take flight. It didn’t really matter how many other pilots would go on to do the same, and do it better: Prudence Wu would always be revered, because Prudence Wu had been first. It was kind of unfair, if you really thought about it.

A lot of the details around the Battle of Jellicoe’s Giant were fuzzy. It had been a covert op, one of many in the endless North American skirmishes between the continent’s fragile surviving

government—the Barricade Coalition, smallest but oldest member nation of the GAN—and an encroaching megacorporation. The names of the operatives supporting Wu had been struck from public record—even Alex’s. The simulation pared the battle down to its barest, most brutal bones: a weakened dragon, fending off a surprise attack from a stronger, battle-tested opponent.

But if Vi knew anything, it was tactical context, and she’d studied enough reports of the battle to read between the lines. Wu and Rebelwing had been leading a raid on a corporate compound, which had gone tits up well before Jellicoe’s Giant arrived on the scene. Vi didn’t know the details, but she knew there’d been an explosion, and dead operatives: good soldiers ostensibly there to support Wu. Her inexperience had gotten them killed, and forced Rebelwing into a fight she wasn’t ready for.

Vi didn’t think she imagined the movements of the saucepan slowing. When Alex spoke, though, his voice was light and neutral. “Why the interest in Rebelwing and her . . . pilots?”

“I’m thinking about using it. For my simulation piece.”

Alex blinked. Very slowly, he looked up from the saucepan. “You mean—”

“I’m ready for the written exam,” Vi blurted out, avoiding his eyes. “And I know I can nail the physical. But plenty of would-be cadets score fine on the written and physical, and still get rejected from the Academy because they fail the simulation. I can’t let that happen.” Of the three components of the Academy entrance exam, the simulation was notorious. Aunt Anabel called it the audition piece. Every prospective cadet picked from an inventory of approved dragon-flight simulations plucked from history. With the twitch of

a button, you could sit in the cockpit of Storm's Fury—who had led a GAN squad against one of the early cyborg pirate attacks on the ports of Shanghai—or Firebird, during the defense of Paris.

Or, if you were either especially arrogant or especially nuts, you could choose to pilot Rebelwing. The first of the dragons. The one that had perished on her maiden flight into battle against Jellicoe's Giant.

"I need to make a statement with this piece," said Vi. "Any idiot with the slightest proficiency for sentient AI bonding can pilot a speed cruiser like Firebird, or a high-tech bruiser like Storm's Fury. But no one ever auditions in Rebelwing's cockpit."

"Because successfully piloting a simulation of the Battle of Jellicoe's Giant is astronomically hard."

"But not impossible," countered Vi.

"Most students who pilot the Jellicoe's Giant sim—which, mind you, is already a slim number—die," said Alex bluntly. "Only virtually, of course, but virtual reality deaths have sent plenty of cadets to the therapist's office, and for good reason."

"You and Prudence Wu both survived the real thing."

"Barely. Be careful, that's hot," warned Alex, as he passed her a steaming mug. "And you, Viola Park, are many extraordinary things, but you are not Prudence Wu." He grinned. "Nor are you me."

"Yeah, thank god for that." Vi scoffed. "Still, at least you have real skills. Wu is only lauded because she was the first pilot to bond a sentient mech, and crashed it spectacularly on her first go, I might add. What's she done since?"

"Held the GAN record for number of successfully flown covert rescue ops for the past five years," said Alex mildly. "We were all

rookies once. Anyway, students avoid using the Battle of Jellicoe's Giant for the simulation piece because it's an unfair fight that forces you to showcase your weaknesses when you're meant to be showcasing your strengths. Not the best audition material. How's your cocoa?"

Vi breathed in the steam wafting from the mug, and took a sip. "Mmm." As ever, the chocolate, rich and warm and slightly spiced, was just sweet enough for Vi's taste. "Better than your pep-talking skills, at any rate. I know that the Battle of Jellicoe's Giant is rigged against Rebelwing's pilot. But what if I evened the odds?"

Alex's brow furrowed. "Evened the odds?"

"It's not against the rules," said Vi, "to know how to tweak a sim."

"But it is against the rules to act on that knowledge," said Alex.

"No, it's against the rules to manipulate the final results of a simulation to pull a miracle victory out of your ass," retorted Vi. "Chill, Alex. I'm not going to hack a code to, like, magically revive my mech if I get shot down or something. Just to let me prep for the Battle of Jellicoe's Giant the way Wu should have. The way *I* would have. That means approaching Jellicoe's Giant with a plan—anticipating the problems that took Wu by surprise. Being ready for them. Being prepared, god, just being better prepared; that alone would have saved lives." Vi paused for breath. "Whatever happens after that . . . happens."

"That's a slippery slope, and you know it," said Alex. "If the board of examiners catches you, they still might—"

Vi shrugged. "So I won't get caught. No big."

"Viola." Alex's voice had taken on a teacher's warning tone. "That's not—"

"Students who get rejected from the Academy usually get

rejected on the basis of their simulation scores—not because they don't do well on the sim, but because they don't take enough risks. There's nothing about piloting the Firebirds or Storm's Furies of the world that lets you *stand out*. What if I happen to miss one of the written-exam questions? What if I'm injured in a freak accident on the physical and fuck up one of the obstacles? I'll need my audition to make up for the lost points, and putting on a competent, respectable, but frankly *boring* show in the combat sim won't give me the insurance I need." Vi's fingers tightened on the mug. "I can't take the risk of *not* taking a risk. Do you understand that? I have to get into the Academy, Alex. I have to prove I'm—it's what I've wanted since I was little. It's all I've ever wanted."

Alex was already shaking his head, as he collected empty cookware for the sink. Vi didn't know why he bothered, when the Park family manor was equipped with maids of both the organic and AI variety, but a domestic chore habit was probably the least of his eccentricities. "You don't need to pick the Academy's most tactically difficult and psychologically harrowing simulation to make your case to the examiners." The side of his mouth curled upward. It wasn't quite a grimace, but it wasn't a smile either. "Take it from someone who lived through the real thing."

That, at least, guilted Vi into shutting up for a few seconds. But only a few. "I'm not trying to discount what you survived," she said. "But what kind of Academy candidate would I be if I weren't willing to take on the stuff that scares everyone else? What kind of Peacekeeper?"

Alex sighed. "Being a Peacekeeper isn't about always flying the flashiest fight, or bonding the biggest, baddest dragon. In fact, it rarely

is. It's easy to romanticize, because so much of being a Peacekeeper is about thinking—and acting—outside the box to do what might otherwise seem impossible.”

“So you agree,” said Vi triumphantly. “Peacekeepers have to be willing to innovate. To face their fears.”

“Yes,” said Alex guardedly. “But always with an eye toward the why. It's not about guts and glory for the sake of guts and glory. At the end of the day, it's about . . .” He trailed off, twisting a dish towel between his hands.

“What?”

“Protecting people,” said Alex. “When no one else can.”

The back of Vi's throat knotted up. Laypeople and netizens had a nickname for Peacekeepers, sometimes spoken with awe, sometimes spoken with ironic derision, depending on your political feelings about the GAN, but either way, it stuck: the knights of the Alliance. Vi had always found it kind of hokey, but she got why the name caught on. Plain old fighter mech pilots were a dime a dozen these days, but the blueprints for building dragons had always remained exclusive to the GAN's engineers. Only those who could bond sentient mechs could become Peacekeepers—and only Peacekeepers could fly dragons. The chosen steeds of the GAN's mighty, painstakingly assembled fighting force, tasked with protecting the world from its own worst nature.

No matter what the cost.

With an effort, Vi swallowed the knot. “Is that what you did when you threw your lot in with Prudence Wu all those years ago?”

Alex's head bowed. It shaded his face for a moment, hiding his expression. “It's what we tried to do.”

Vi didn't miss the pronoun shift. *We*, not *I*. It annoyed her, probably a little irrationally. Prudence Wu had always been larger than life: the girl who'd been a hero at seventeen, the girl who'd first flown a dragon, the girl who'd stopped a war. So much was said about Prudence Wu—or speculated, or rumored, or mythologized—that it was difficult to imagine her as an actual flesh-and-blood human being. Even Vi, with all her family's connections to the GAN's knights, had never really met the woman, recluse that Wu was. It cemented the first of the dragon pilots in Vi's head less as a person and more as a concept, like one of those propaganda figures that authoritarian regimes liked trotting out to hold normal citizens to impossible standards. *Be more like Prudence Wu: work hard, be brave, do right by your government.* A measuring stick against which anyone would be found wanting.

Alex, though. Alex was real. Alex was constant. And Alex, for better or worse, had been a steady block in the foundations of Vi's life for as long as she could remember. She'd known, intellectually, that he had been a part of the Rebelwing mission, and must have met Wu. But something about mixing her dumb music teacher up with a person who felt as distant and fantastical as Wu in Vi's head just didn't sit right.

"Would you do things differently now?" Vi asked Alex abruptly. "If you were to fly Rebelwing again. If you got another chance."

His answering smile was wry and immediate. "I know better than to go down that road. Hindsight is always twenty-twenty. Peacekeepers have to look forward, yeah? Even the retired ones. You know what they say—pilots stop living for themselves when they step into the cockpit of a GAN dragon, and start living for the world."



Or dying for the world. Like Vi's parents had.

"I know Peacekeeper creed," said Vi, more defensively than she meant to. Her voice was a little hoarse. "Better than most." The last of the cocoa scalded her throat on the way down, but Vi swallowed it anyway. "Thanks for the chocolate. I'm going to go study."

She left Alex standing alone in the kitchen with their empty mugs, the dish towel tossed over one of his shoulders. Something unfathomable lurked behind those kind dark eyes.

Vi thought it might have been regret.



**IN THE SAFETY OF HER** bedroom, Vi stared, for the hundredth time, at the sample simulation she'd pulled up on the 3-D holo-monitor. The pieces were simple enough: a metal beast, valiantly beating its wings despite failing fuel and dwindling plasma fire reserves. A hulking war mech several times its size, tailored for mindless destruction. The makings of a tragedy, or at least a bittersweet ending.

The thing was, Vi had a plan to turn the tide of the Battle of Jellicoe's Giant.

She'd studied it from every possible angle. Alex was right: the simulation forced you to fight at a horrific disadvantage. That Prudence Wu had taken out the real Jellicoe's Giant—that she'd survived at all—was nothing short of a minor miracle, a real David and Goliath story. Wu had lost her mech, but she'd saved the day.

Vi was going to do Prudence Wu one better.

People liked talking to Vi about her dead parents. It was a whole thing. It was always easier to call people heroes after they were already dead, and Vi's parents were no exception. Prudence Wu had

been just like them—a pilot who'd been forced to make sacrifices for the sake of some amorphous greater good.

Sacrifice was a cheat, so far as Vi was concerned. Vi was better than that, and she'd prove it, for all the GAN to see. Her audition would show the truth plain and simple: that Vi wasn't some half-trained schoolgirl, like Wu had been. She was a Park. She didn't lose, and she didn't let people die. All she had to do was tweak the sim settings just a touch. Messing with the sim settings was usually a pretty big no-no—most people looking to do it were trying to rewrite the sim entirely, to get the system to do all their work for them. Vi would never dream of anything so egregious. Vi's tweak was only that: a tweak, nothing more. Just enough to equip herself with the resources Wu had been too impulsive and thoughtless to leverage.

Was it entirely legal, even so? Maybe not on a technicality, but no one ever got in trouble on technicalities, so long as the final result was worth it. And this would be worth it, to create the audition piece of a lifetime. The Academy wouldn't be able to say no, not to the girl who'd figured out how to make the Battle of Jellicoe's Giant winnable. How to save every life that had been lost that day. How to do what even the legendary Wu couldn't, and put an end to the GAN's cold, hard creed of martyred sacrifice.

Vi's fingers paused over the simulation codes. *Are you sure?* The gentle prod of doubt in her head sounded suspiciously like Alex's voice. *It's like you said. You'll score enough points on the written and physical—probably. You've been literally groomed for this all your life. You could coast through the audition on another flawless, boring little antipiracy simulation without losing another wink of sleep, and you'd still*

*have a decent shot at getting in. Probably. Is this really worth the risk?*

*Yes, Vi wanted to hiss back. "Probably" isn't good enough. And the only way to turn "probably" into "definitely" is by delivering an extraordinary audition.*

Vi stared at the hovering figure of Wu's dragon. Rebelwing's design looked comparatively clunky now, next to the sleek new upgrades of the modern-day GAN fleet, yet the beast remained strangely lovely, all chrome-plated scales and intelligent reptilian eyes.

Vi thought of Wu's dead operatives, their names lost to history, and for one jarring moment, she was nine, and eleven, and fourteen, feasting in honor of cousins trickling their way dutifully through the Academy doors, while the ghosts of Vi's parents sat on her shoulders, half-expectant, half-accusatory.

"Yes," she whispered aloud now to Wu's doomed, beautiful, obsolete mech. "Yes, it's worth it."

It was really such a small tweak. Vi's fingers pulled the simulation codes apart like one of her piano concertos, and prepared to rewrite history.