

## Chapter 1: Takeoff

Planet: Earth

Date: June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2456 – 3:03 AM

United Territories of Western Asia (Utowa)

Mirage sighed and leaned back in the chair. Just then her stomach growled, and the girl crossed her arms instinctually to muffle the noise.

“What a bother,” she grumbled to herself, looking up at the airport ceiling. A man seated nearby gazed up from his tablet at Mirage, scratched behind an ear, and then resumed reading.

Mirage opened her own tablet and pulled up a communications screen, the words “Big Brother” alit in green letters at the top of the device. A slight smile escaped her lips as she subtly chewed on a fingernail.

It was finally summer – A few years ago this season meant that graduates like Mirage could register at the Gredan, the greatest military branch of Utowa. Everyone Mirage’s age wanted to work there; it was considered an honor to defend your home against the evil outside Utowa’s perimeter.

The Gredan was Utowa’s defense system and a great one at that, lasting over a century through global and intergalactic conflict. It had massive impenetrable walls, a vast array of skilled pilots, and some of the most committed soldiers on earth; nothing could cross Utowa’s borders without proper clearance. Both Mirage’s father and mother had been employed at the Gredan, along with a third of the others living in Utowa. In a time of war, it was all or nothing.

And now there was nothing.

Mirage greedily scanned over the message her brother had sent minutes earlier.

**“Hey Mirage, Jabel is doing much better today. I look forward to seeing you! Really sorry I didn’t get back to you sooner, with the Lunar Maize about my life has been nothing short of crazy. Love you, so proud, and safe travels!”**

*Short, simple, to the point. Micah hasn’t changed one bit.*

Mirage turned off her tablet and stared into the blank screen glimpsing her reflection. Dark, tired brown eyes looked back at the dirty face of 18-year old Mirage. She brushed some of her matted red hair back into her hoodie as she attempted to scrape a fleck of dirt from her eye. As the grime was dislodged she felt a warm, single tear cascade down her cheek.

*Tears.*

“Shuttle 207F departing in thirty minutes. Boarding now. Shuttle 207F departing in thirty minutes. Boarding now.” The loudspeaker rang out monotonously.

Mirage sat up and counted her belongings: a beaten-up backpack, a yellow duffle bag and an empty bird cage. She stretched out her back and arms; the sheer exhaustion and soreness she felt now was nothing like last week.

Standing up slowly she shifted her weight onto her healthy right leg, her left knee making an unpleasant snapping and popping sound as she did so. A news monitor nearby revealed a pile of distorted figures ablaze in a trash pit. A small human hand slowly came into focus amidst the mound of black. Mirage swung her backpack over her shoulder and picked up her duffle bag and cage.

*Now is not the time for mourning...*

The Gen Swing airport wasn't large by any means, but it was functional, something a lot of public services were not. Trash littered the floor creating a pungent smell, and bits of roofing lay sprawled about admitting to leaks that had been uncared for who knows how long. A squirrel dashed across the empty airport with something stuffed in its cheeks.

*Probably spoiled... food.*

*\*GROWL\**

*Oh, shut up already.*

Mirage continued her steady limping walk towards the loading bay, stepping over debris as she went. Upon her arrival at the gate, a middle-aged woman smiled at her from behind a damaged desk. Mirage quickly noticed the fresh cut on the woman's chin.

“Are you here for shuttle 207?”

Mirage set down her belongings to grab the ticket from her coat pocket. “Yes ma'am, that's the one. Private plane leaving for Toshimori?”

The receptionist chuckled. “All we have are private planes dear. We don't have the resources required for commercial flights at this location.” The woman held out her hand and Mirage handed the blue receipt over. The woman looked at the ticket and then back to Mirage. “You must have an interesting story. Saw your limp as you rounded that corner – care to tell me about yourself while I contact your pilot?”

Mirage sighed. “Just a girl trying to survive.”

The woman nodded her head and typed away at the terminal. “That makes two of us,” she said with a wink.

Mirage propped herself against the desk. “Do you believe in karma?”

The woman stiffened. “I... I'm not sure.”

“Well I don't. I think you can live a great and honest life and then suddenly get crushed, destroyed, discarded. On the flip side, I also believe someone could live a treacherous life and get away with it, only reaping the benefits from their actions.”

Mirage winced as she heard herself. *Where was the equality? Where was the law in this?*

The receptionist paused, then reached up to brush away some hair which had lodged itself in the cut on her face. “Balance was thrown out when the wall fell. We won’t be the same country again, probably ever, but if we have hope we can...”

“Hope? Really?” Mirage grabbed the bridge of her nose and tried to restrain herself from losing control. “I mean, I have hope... but that word, isn’t it like... seriously overused?”

“I don’t doubt it’s tossed around these days. But what would you choose: to think things will get better or to accept your current, crummy situation?”

Mirage focused her breathing. These last six months had been a living hell. “I’m sorry. I don’t have many friends, or family, anyone to talk to really. Ever since The Breach I’ve just been making it by. Thanks for uh, listening.”

The woman smiled again. “I’ll be here if you need me. Please, have a seat and get some pressure off that leg of yours. I’ll gesture for you when the pilot is ready.”

Mirage picked up her things and moved to a nearby chair. Upon sitting down, she reached over and unzipped the yellow bag that was now on her lap. Looking at one of the contents brought a brief smile to her face: twelve throwing knives all properly aligned in their case. She had made it this far south on mad luck and determination; the wilderness was no place for someone her age or experience.

A photo fell out of the bag and tumbled to the ground. Mirage moved fast but her battered leg limited her movements.

*Uhg.*

She bent over and snagged the photo off the tile floor. “Hey mom... dad, now why would you decide to fall out of my bag huh?” Her lip quivered ever so slightly. It had been almost four years to the day that everything happened.

Looking up at her from the picture were six smiling faces: Father, Mother, her two older brothers Geoff and Micah, herself and her younger sister Elyse. *Why can’t things just go back to how they were? Everyone was so happy...*

The woman behind the desk waved towards Mirage.

*Well that was fast.*

Gathering her belongings she again stood up, painfully, and walked towards the airship’s gateway.

Suddenly a man wearing an orange button-up shirt strode through the opening gate, a small monkey clinging to his shoulder.

“Good day Miss!”

Taken off guard by the eccentric person and the small animal Mirage stopped in place to observe the newcomers.

“Uh, hello...” Before she could say anything else the stranger had grabbed her duffle bag and bird cage from her hands and was walking towards the gate. “Now wait a minute!” She hollered after him as she picked up her pace to match his. “Just what do you think you’re...”

“I’m helping the Miss with her luggage.” He paused and held up his hands. “I mean, by the looks of it.”

“But I, but I never asked for your...”

“Help? Yes this is true, but I’m a professional Miss, and you shouldn’t question a professional.” The strange man led Mirage down a short walkway to a small hangar. The two stopped before a small orange and white aircraft with the word “EVEREST” painted in bold letters on the side. The shuttle appeared poorly maintained and had seen quite a few flights. Mirage looked from the shuttle to the man and back again.

*There’s an ironic resemblance between those two.*

“And here she is, my Everest... yours as well for a couple hours I reckon.” The man beamed as the monkey squawked at the man’s delight.

Mirage put down her hood. “So does this mean I’m your only passenger?”

“No Miss, there is another who will be joining us outside of Gen Swing. A lad not much older than yourself.”

“Great, well thanks for helping with the luggage. I would have appreciated it if you asked first but...”

“No need to thank me Miss, just doing a professional’s work is all.”

*Again, with the ‘professionalism’.*

The man opened the luggage compartment and gently placed Mirage’s bag and cage into storage. “Now I’d be darned if introductions haven’t been made!” He quickly put out his hand. “Name’s Barnabo, but you can call me Captain Barns.”

Mirage hesitantly shook his hand. “Mirage. You can call me Mirage”.

“That’s a pretty name Miss, nice to meet you!”

“Thanks?” Mirage felt a little uncomfortable with the Captain’s personable personality. At the same time, however, she felt like she could trust him, but couldn’t figure out why exactly that was.

As they climbed into Everest to buckle in, Mirage began admiring all the gadgets and pictures throughout the cockpit. One specific thing that caught her eye was a photo of a younger Barns on a hoverbike. A young woman was pictured grabbing on to him from behind as they sped off down a winding road. Mirage let curiosity get the better of her. “Who’s that?” she asked, pointing.

“Haven’t even left the hangar and already asking questions eh? Hmm, not much different than the Miss who rode yesterday.”

“You gave someone a lift yesterday?”

“One question at a time please Miss,” he said smiling, though a hint of irritation bled through. “To the first question; that’s my late wife Topi. She died shortly after The Breach. In reply to your second question, yes.”

Mirage sagged her shoulders. "I’m... sorry about your wife.”

“Everyone lost someone that day Miss, I’m no exception. That doesn’t in any way make her death less painful, but life has a way.”

The cockpit went silent aside from Barns pushing away at buttons to start the shuttle. The Captain’s monkey was nowhere to be seen, but that didn’t bother Mirage as much as a symbol engrossed in the overhead panel. The all-too-familiar icon of a wasp made her swallow and clench her fists. “What’s that doing there?”

Barns paused his work to acknowledge what Mirage was concerned about. “Oh, that? That’s a Vespalli Logo, it’s known for...”

“I know WHAT it is Captain, I want to know WHY you have one!”

“Calm down Miss, I’ll be the first to tell you I hate the Vespalli. Those thieving, murdering monsters can go die out for all I care – but that’s the thing Miss, this here Everest wasn’t always my Everest.”

“You stole a Class D shuttle from the most dangerous criminal organization in the Milky Way.”

“Well, kinda. Yeah, sure.”

Mirage scratched her head. “Wait, I’m sorry. How do you ‘kinda’ steal from the Vespalli?”

“We’ll be in the air long enough to tell that story and then some, alright Miss?”

Mirage crossed her arms and slouched down in her seat. This was a lot to take in, but Barns seemed reasonable enough thus far. A low rumble started underneath the craft, and the hull began to buzz with energy.

“Alright Miss, up in the air momentarily.”

Barns’ monkey reappeared holding a purple fruit in its tiny monkey hands.

*Fruit? Food... that’s right!*

Everest spurred to life and jolted upwards.

“Whoa!”

“Hang on Miss, this beauty has a lot of bite for its bark.” With a burst of speed, the orange and white shuttle peeled out of the hangar and took to the air.

“Setting coordinates for Japyro. Fuel levels at ninety percent. All systems go, and...” Captain Barns nudged two levers into the forward position. "Smooth sailing Miss, smooth sailing.”

Mirage loosened her grip on the armrests, fingernails leaving their impression on the antique leather. She sighed deeply and covered her face with her hands to hide any residue from the earlier heart attack. “Do you... do you always take off like that?” she sputtered through shaking hands.

“There are two types of flyers Miss: those who fly out of duty and those who fly because they were born to. I was born to fly Miss, and no trip should be routine.”

“You do know I’m a paying customer!” She looked at Barns for some confirmation, empathy... anything. Her arms fell to her sides. “Ah forget it, I’ve been through worse.”

Barns grinned. “That’s the spirit Miss. Why don’t you go to the back and grab that blue cooler of mine, we’ll split some grub I got from the airport.”

“On it!” Mirage stood up quickly and started to walk toward the back of the shuttle. “Wait, they serve food at that airport? I checked everywhere and couldn’t find a single stall.”

“Ah Missy, I assume you didn’t check the basement.”

“The basement. What basement? How was I supposed to know there was a basement!”

“Secret sellers live in the maintenance floor. They have a system worked out with the farmers up north. You see Miss, when us regulars come through we like to exchange information and skills with the marketers for fresh produce. Gen Swing Airport is well known throughout Utowa as a goods exchange center, among us pilots at least. You have to be careful though, contraband is trafficked heavily down there as well.”

Mirage, still listening, rummaged around the back half of the shuttle. After a good minute she pulled back a tarp concealing the glorified container.

*At last!*

The cooler was much heavier than she anticipated, but after a bit of moving things about she managed to drag the case up to the cockpit.

“There you go Miss! Now let’s see here...” Barns entered his security code into the mini-fridge, allowing the metallic clasp to snap open.

“Oh my!” As Mirage uttered her praise Barnes revealed the cooler’s interior. The case was packed full of sandwiches, fruits, vegetables and a vast assortment of drinks... it was everything Mirage could have asked for.

Captain Barns grabbed a cold beer and pushed his seat back before kicking off his weathered boots. “Sorry for the smell Miss, but the feet are hurting some. Think it’s because of that infected...”

“Nope, no need to disclose. Quite happy with my sandwich and fruit thank you very much. Wouldn’t want to ruin these precious moments.” Mirage scarfed down the sandwich in the most delicate way possible, which wasn’t all that delicate. She swallowed a mouthful and sighed. “So tell me Barns, how did you come by this ship?”

## Chapter 2: New Faces

“Well Miss, how much would you like to know?”

Mirage crossed her legs and sat back in the plush seat. “We’re heading for Japyro you said, so we have ten minutes. Is that enough time?”

“I be darned, she’s a pusher she is... let’s see.” Barns cracked his knuckles before pulling out a bandana that matched his button-up, orange and wrinkly. He began folding the cloth as he pondered. “My folks and I lived in a small village called Chinchill, a place known for its casinos and hooligans. I was an only child and we didn’t have much, but we were happy nonetheless ‘cause we had each other.

“One day pap got drafted into the war, leaving mum to struggle with keeping the place together. When we got news that pap’s division was wiped out, mum lost her mind the poor thing.” Barns unfolded the bandana before taking a swig of his beer.

“She started using this drug called Mite, really popular back then, but it’s after that when things went from bad to worse. Mite is like most drugs, putting the user in a state of complete bliss, however when that effect wears off you become a lot moodier and stronger than before. So mum starts throwing things, and I happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Kersmash! I get knocked out cold by a chair they say. Authorities came in and sent me off to the shelter.”

The monkey from earlier climbed back onto the Captain, this time sitting in the man’s lap. Barns looked out the window over the early-morning sky and began to stroke the monkey’s fur. “The shelter was an all-boys residence and housekeeping was mighty lousy, not to mention the food. It wasn’t long before we started to scheme, us boys that is, and we agreed to make a mass exodus.”

“How old were you at the time?” Mirage was sitting up now, quite curious. She didn’t expect him to tell her his life story, but she didn’t mind in the slightest.

“Err, let’s see... I was thirteen at the time. Yeah, my fourteenth birthday was coming up I ‘member. So, we cause a ruckus and me and a few buddies fled the shelter. It wasn’t more than a couple days until we realized how nice we had it. Stomachs paining us and nowhere safe to sleep, we continued to wander throughout some of the nearby villages, begging.

Outside a random bar, name escapes me, a big fella comes flying out of this window and crashes in front of us boys. That was the first time I saw the face of death, cold eyes lookin’ up at us. Still see that face in my head some nights, never could shake it. Well as it turns out Miss, two Vespalli officers stepped out of the bar and began to spit on the dead man, laughing to each other. Many of the boys I was with must have ran at that moment, cause when I looked back only me and my bud Casdal were left standing there.

Casdal and I locked eyes and began to make a break for it, but then two pairs of

arms grabbed us and tossed us to the ground. I about died Miss, one of the scariest days of my life.” Barns had folded the bandana into a nice little triangle, then crushed it in his hand. “I don’t care for what happened next, but for some reason Casdal and myself decided those goons could support us. I know it sounds crazy Miss, someone must live under a rock to not know the Vespalli’s reputation. Well I was desperate and learned to get along with the crew. A few years later…”

“Excuse me? You work for those terrorists!”

“No, my single biggest regret in life Miss. Just, please let me finish.”

Mirage felt her hip to check for her sidearm.

*Still there.*

“Sorry, I just wasn’t expecting that is all. Please do continue.”

Barns grabbed a grape from the cooler and fed it to his companion snuggled on his lap. “I quickly moved up in ranks, and by the time I was twenty-two I had my own squadron.

A few years later, the Queen ordered my squad and a few others to exterminate this village over in the Emerald District. Since it’s unthinkable to question the Queen, we deployed our shuttles and stormed the peaceful town.” Lips trembling, Barns finished his beer and tossed the can backwards over his seat.

Time stopped for Mirage. She could feel his pain so terribly well and had just met the man. Wiping some crumbs off her face with the sleeve of her sweater, she joined Barns in staring into the dark sky.

“I… I never enjoyed raids like my buddies, never once was the killing enjoyable. I hated it Miss, I hated everything about it. But they were the only family I had, and Casdal ended up being one of my men all those years later. My friend from the shelter stuck by me, even after I got my promotion.” Barns shook his head in disbelief. “It was at the raid in the Emerald District that I finally snapped; when I watched Casdal get shot down by a villager right before my eyes. I lost all hope. The one thing keeping me there was no longer around Miss, Casdal was dead, and so was my drive to work for the Vespalli. So… I did the only thing that made sense, I ran away.”

Mirage didn’t know what to say; she wanted to console this stranger but was at a loss. “Um, wow, I’m really sorry.”

Barns smiled. “So that’s how I got this here ship. It’s stolen; however it was my squadron’s ship so basically mine to begin with.” The monkey yawned and rolled over as the cockpit went quiet again. “Well, we’re almost over Japyro. Told you Miss, she sure flies when she wants to.”

Mirage smiled. “My life story isn’t near as interesting, but I might tell you some of it after we pick up passenger number two. I really don’t like repeating myself.”



“Part of the reason I chose this gig was because I get to meet new people, and that would be lovely Miss! For now, you might want to grab on to something.”

“No way we’re here already!”

“Miss...” Barns winked. "I’m a professional.”

Seconds later Mirage was buckled in, just in time too, as the shuttle began its plummet towards the surface.

“Aren’t we moving a little fast!” Mirage yelled over the sounds of Everest cutting the air.

“It’s free falling, it’s supposed to be fast!” Barns hollered back with a big grin.

Mirage felt her sandwich from before reaching her throat. She pulled her hood overhead and tried to think happy thoughts as the crazy pilot laughed, mashing buttons here and there.

Moments later everything stopped. Barns popped a grape into his mouth and nudged the sleeping monkey. “Hey Karat, we’re here. Now you can go do your business.” The monkey looked up angrily and jumped out of the open door to find some vegetation to soil.

“Karat?”

“Yep! Karat’s been with me for about three years, he’s a bright one.”

Mirage opened her door and stepped down out of the shuttle.

It was still a few hours before the sun would come up, so the air was brisk. Toppled buildings stood around an empty airstrip. Small plants sprung up from the cracked concrete, giving the appearance of ruins.

*The ground is wet, must have rained not more than an hour ago.*

Mirage stretched, then walked around to the back of the ship to inspect the luggage hold.

*Pain.*

She stopped mid-stride and leaned against Everest’s trunk to adjust her left pant leg. She rolled up the baggy material to inspect the wound, placing the other hand over her mouth in disgust.

“What do you have there, Miss? Oh!”

A deep gash ran down the front of the leg. A large purple scab was doing its best to protect the opening from contagions, however it was failing miserably. White and yellow skin laced around the wound; an obvious amount of infection and puss had already taken root.

“Dear me, Miss! Why did you not mention that? What happened?”

“It’s nothing, ran into some bad people is all.”

“Bad people? I say!” Barns quickly returned to the cockpit to grab his First Aid. “You really should have told me earlier. I’m no doctor but I know my way around meds; this should have been fixed a while ago!”

Mirage touched the cut with her finger and winced. "Well, how... how bad is it?"

Barns returned with a small white box. "Not bad enough to amputate, no need to worry 'bout that Miss. What I must do next however will hurt, maybe a little."

"I don't like this." Mirage quickly pulled down her pant leg. "Why should I trust you? These days, you could be a killer for all I know!"

Barns' face saddened. "You don't have to trust nobody Miss. I do things now because I want to, not because someone tells me to. I like to think I'm a respectable person, but you be the judge of that Miss. I ain't gonna do something against your wishes."

Mirage rolled up her pant leg again to inspect the wound. "I mean, I guess you can try to clean it out and whatever. I have trust issues."

*And for good reason.*

"Hey Captain, who's that?"

Barns spun around to see where Mirage was pointing, a silhouette of a man was looking down on the Everest crew from atop some crates not more than fifty feet away.

"You two beautiful humans don't happen to be heading to Toshimori do you?"

"Aha!" Barns hollered back. "And you must be that lad I talked to over coms yesterday. Come on over!"

The figure leapt down and walked into the light. "Owen Minks, at your service," he said with a bow.

The man appeared to be in his early twenties and was sporting a navy business suit. With briefcase in one hand and pistol in the other, it wasn't difficult to assume the man belonged to some underground network. "And on time too Barns, you're quite the professional."

Barns looked over towards Mirage and stroked his beard proudly. Mirage returned the gesture with a crossing of her arms and an eye roll.

Owen placed his firearm in its holster and walked up to Mirage. "And to whom do I have the pleasure of meeting?" he inquired with outstretched hand.

"Mirage." She shook his hand and was surprised to feel it slightly chilled.

Owen smiled as he turned to face Barns. "Well, I do have a tight schedule, shall we load the shuttle and be off?"

"Just waitin' for Karat to return, should be back any moment now."

"Ah yes, the animal."

Barns raised an eyebrow. "Karat's my friend, but yes, he's an animal too. He's actually more civilized than some people I know." An awkward pause ensued. "I guess I'll be taking your luggage sir."

Owen willingly tossed his briefcase to Barns. "Don't open it, and do be careful."

As Owen and Barns loaded Everest, Mirage used the First Aid kit to cleanse and

disinfect the wound. Whimpering as she cut away the contaminated flesh, she squeezed out as much of the infection as she could, tossing the puss-covered cloth into a nearby bush. After having bandaged the wound in a timely fashion, Mirage proceeded to wash her hands using water from her bottle. "Ready to go!"

"Climb on in!" Barns hollered. "Minks said you can keep front."

*As if it's his choice.*

Mirage opened the passenger door and hopped into her seat. She looked back at the newcomer and gave a half-hearted smile. "So, what's the suit for?"

Owen looked up from his tablet. "I'm an important representative from Doshlomborg. I'm meeting a world-renown doctor concerning a policy change, so, I want to look my best when I acquire his signature for the... fixes." Owen shrugged. "And I guess you could say I look rather amazing in one."

"Interesting."

*And most humble.*

"Alrighty Miss, Minks, you both ready for lift off?"

Owen adjusted his suit collar. "What is there to be ready for?"

Everest rumbled to life. Captain Barns grinned as he hit a few more buttons and knobs. "To Toshimori!"

The rustic shuttle launched off the ground and into the air. Within seconds the shuttle was back on autopilot and Barns was kicking off his boots... again.

Mirage looked back at Owen to see how he handled take off, a genuine smile painted across her face. The young man was sprawled about, whimpering in the corner.

*Must not have been buckled and was tossed about.*

Mirage giggled. "Hey man, when you're done saying your prayers could you grab that cooler behind you? It slid back during takeoff."

"You people... you're all crazy!" Owen cried.

"Hey, the Captain warned you did he not?"

Owen regained his composure, mostly, and clenched his fists. "I'll get your blasted cooler... just... give me a moment to get the feeling back in my legs." He shook his head in frustration and walked towards the rear of the shuttle. Stumbling around in the dark he began searching for a light switch. "How the blazes am I supposed to find a cooler back here? This place is a mess!" After a few more stubbed toes he reached out in the dark and grabbed something soft.

"Hey! Let go of me!"