

Baby Steps

Abigail sat back in the chair and gripping the arms tightly as the operator slid the neural jack into the back of her head. Her experience aboard the Cerberus was still fresh in her mind.

Her eyelids closed slowly, and for a moment everything was black, quiet, peaceful.

The moment passed quickly. The bright white void of the construct enveloped her for a moment, then a forced reality accelerated to meet her like a runaway express train.

I wonder if you ever get used to that, she wondered to herself.

She stood in a large open area, covered in snow that crunched satisfyingly when she moved. A warm sun drifted lazily in the sky, causing light to bounce and refract off the snowy landscape. Gentle birdsong sounded from the trees surrounding the area.

Beautiful, she thought.

The snow crunched behind her. Every sinew in her body tensed, her senses finely attuned like a hawk's after weeks of training.

She felt the gentle movement of the wind changing direction on her skin. Almost heard the blade cut through the crisp air.

Abigail jumped.

The sword sliced through the area she had stood a second ago. Abi gracefully spun herself around in the air. Saw PBlade standing below, dressed in a pure black Gi. Her eyes scanned the surrounding area; there was no other sword.

Interesting, she smiled to herself as she began the descent, hurtling downwards.

She hit the ground a few meters behind PBlade. His arms lay at his side, shoulders dropped, the sword in his right hand pointed down.

"Remember your training, Abigail," he called, "Sometimes the fight is unbalanced. Your opponent may have the advantage, but you can still be the victor. Understand?"

"Yes." she replied, beginning to run. She got close, so close she thought she had him. At the last second he tensed, and the sword swung round to meet her in a vicious arc. But she was smarter now. She leapt over his head as he went down almost on one knee, carrying the momentum of the strike. Landing, she spun around just as he stood up, and delivered a sharp kick to the small of his back.

PBlade lurched forward, but regained his footing a step later and span to face her. "Good," he smiled, "I hear last time Organo cut you in two. And you had a blade." She smirked at him, "News travels fast. Now come here and let me kick your ass, tattoo boy."

They faced off - Abigail in a Kung Fu stance, PBlade with his sword held close to his chest, both hands gripping firmly, ready to strike.

PBlade moved first. He swung the blade in a high arc as he ran. Abigail stood her ground.

He closed in, scanning her body to pinpoint the exact location for a killing blow.

She's still inexperienced, he thought to himself, Maybe LostProphet was wrong in wanting her in the field.

At the last possible moment, Abi dropped and rolled. The blade missed her by a fraction and she brought a foot up hard into PBlade's midriff from her position on the ground. He faltered as he regained his footing - or tried to - as Abi kicked out hard and took his right leg from under him.

She scabbled inelegantly to a standing position as PBlade smartly arched his back and flipped back up onto his feet.

They both eyed the sword on the ground. PBlade knew that if he dived for it so would she, and there was a 50/50 chance. He fancied his chances on his feet. He closed in, adopting a defensive boxing stance which she mimiced.

Abi threw a couple of wary shots which he blocked effortlessly, then reeled backwards as he landed a stunning right hook on her. She stumbled, seeing stars and feeling hot pain searing through her face.

You're dead, her inner voice shrieked, He's a man, he's more powerful than you.

She shook her head and gasped at the cold air. The words of her first sparring session with LostProphet echoed around her head, quelling the doubting inner voice. She knew it wasn't real. Muscles had nothing to do with strength in this place.

Pain was an illusion.

She shot at PBlade with a warcry, crashing her fist into his jaw. He stepped backwards, shocked, and she planted another shot, hitting him square in the eye. She grinned, feeling cocky and powerful.

"Yeah, not so tough now eh? Nobody smacks Abigail and gets away with it." she taunted.

PBlade turned away, rubbed his eyes, then span round in a half-jump, his leg kicking outwards. It caught her square in the ribs and she was lifted off her feet. Abi sailed backwards, landing in a heap in the snow.

She crawled upright, feeling very sore and humiliated. PBlade sat in the snow, as if recovering. She stood, bristling with anger, and began to run.

Jump him. Pin him down, knock him out. Show him who's boss.

She leapt at him, didn't realise her error until it was too late. PBlade smiled, withdrew the sword from behind him and held it in his lap, pointing upright. She landed on it, the metal crunching through her ribcage and splitting her spine. Her eyes clouded with blood.

"Stay calm always. Once your blood boils, your fight is over." PBlade whispered into her ear.

She coughed blood, and closed her eyes. The next sound she heard was the neural jack being removed. PBlade stood over her.

"That was good," he said kindly, "Really, it was. But you have to learn to calm your mind. It will make the difference between life and death."