

# 1

## Where it all begins

I can't go on like this. I just can't.

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Jennifer, a teenage girl, had been living a harsh life. For as long as she could remember, she lived her life among men. How the world reached this state was a mystery to her and all of humankind, as far as she knew. Nobody would tell her how she was brought up on this planet everyone seemed to call 'Earth', or to what purpose. All she knew was that she had to move on and get used to it.

*Ask no questions, ask no questions,* she would tell herself. *Asking useless questions makes you weak, and that's the last thing I need.* Living under stressful circumstances, she never expected to see the light of another day. *Always expect the worst.*

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*If you're prepared for that, you're prepared for anything.*

Being the only girl in the world may seem abnormal, but Jennifer was used to this lifestyle of living among men only. Training every day so that none could exploit her weaknesses has made her almost invulnerable.

The world had been suffering a horrible war against alien invaders who were trying to take over their planet, putting everybody's life in peril. The war continued for decades and all women had been mysteriously disappearing ever since. That is, until Jennifer. All men treated her as a weak and useless child, simply because she was not a man herself.

She had to prove them wrong somehow, and this war was the perfect opportunity... unless it killed her.

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'Don't let them get in, or else we're doomed! Fortify all entry ways so they don't infiltrate through our numbers, and push their assault from the main hall and out of our settlement. Make sure none of them reach the laboratory. We need no spies lurking all over the place and discovering our advanced technology. Now go, sergeant!'

'Sir, yes sir!'

The noise was getting louder, and the danger was increasing by the second. They were approaching. Alien forces were marching towards their well-secured settlement which was looking more like army grounds. Advanced technology had led them to this; as wonderful and as incredible as technology may be, it comes with a price. One which could leave a grave scar

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on the history of the world. This was war.

‘What will you have me do, commander?’ asked someone, with a softer voice compared to all others. It couldn’t be one of the soldiers, yet the person was seeking to help in the war.

‘I already told you, Jen, stay in your room. You’ll be safe there.’

‘Why can’t I help to? I’m as good a fighter as anyone here. I’m fearless, I’m strong enough to carry whatever weapon you lend me. My aim is perfect, and need I remind you that I have more practice than most around here?’

‘Jen, it’s an order. Go to your room right this instant!’

‘Give me a good reason and I will.’

‘Stubborn kid. Fine, I’ll give you your reason. You are a girl. Now move along, go!’

‘If that’s what you think, then fine! When the world starts falling apart because you wouldn’t let me help you, you’ll find me in my headquarters.’ And with those words she left, slamming the door shut behind her.

She quickened her pace until she started running like mad. *Don’t cry, just don’t cry, or they’ll say you’re weak again.* Tears were flooding her eyes, but she wouldn’t let it show no matter what.

In a couple of minutes, she reached her headquarters, slammed the door shut like she did earlier and threw herself head first on the bed.

*Why won’t he let me help? So, what if I’m a girl? Why would that matter?* He said it as if he only meant to mock her; calling her a kid and reminding her that she’s not a man, something she’ll never be. *I wish they wouldn’t see me like that.* The words

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the commander had just said echoed in Jennifer's head over and over again, until she eventually fell asleep to the sound of explosions and gun shots outside.

*You are a girl... a girl... a girl... But don't worry Jen, you'll show them one day that you're more than that, and they'll regret all the pain they put you through. One day they're going to pay.*

# 2

## Fight to your last breath

Everything went silent. The war wasn't over yet, but the alien forces must have fled.

The silence was deafening now. Everybody was used to the loud noise and the adrenaline of fighting for one's life.

Jennifer was still sleeping, and sleeping heavily too. Eventually she woke up, though with a bit of help from her trainer.

'Late for class again! Wake up, kid!' he muttered as he threw a bucket of ice-cold water over her face to wake her up. Instantly, she rose to her feet, shivering. Was it the cold water or the fear of her trainer?

'Next time I find you late for training, I won't even bother to come and wake you up from your slumber. Now on your feet and to the training grounds!'

'You needn't throw that bucket you know! I would've

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woken up by other means as well.'

'Other means you say? I'll ask the colonel whether I can borrow some of his venomous snakes. Or maybe scorpions would do?'

'That's not what I had in mind...'

'Silence! To the training grounds with you.'

*Gee, why do they have to be so mean? They could at least once be reasonable.*

Jennifer kept walking, her trainer right behind her, watching her every move. *Stay straight, don't trip, keep your head high, watch everyone and everything closely and be ready for anything.* Poor Jennifer's mind was a mess, as she thought of everything at once. She was struggling to survive among men crippled by war.

Her trainer was so close that she could hear his breath, slow and steady... and mad. He was so tall and rigid that she always thought he might just get hold of her and swallow her whole at any second.

Something wasn't right though. He never used to walk along so close to her. He must've been really mad this morning, or maybe she was just walking too slow. She started moving faster, almost at a jogging pace, and she heard her trainer close behind give out a sigh of relief.

A couple of minutes later, they reached the training grounds. A part of the training grounds anyway. They sat in a huge room which was full of machinery, exercise mats, all sorts of accessories you could possibly need, and even training for duels, whether be they with weapons or your own body. For someone who enjoyed working out, this place was heaven, but

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for Jennifer this felt like hell.

*Torture time*, she thought, just like every morning at 7 a.m. 'So, what's on the list first?'

'Jen, just start with a warm-up. Make sure to make it right and thorough this time, we don't need you going to hospital again because you didn't warm up well.' It was true. She *did* end up in hospital with a strain because she hurried with her warm-up. 'I'll put you in a fist fight against Peter later, so you'd better be careful.'

*Oh no! I'm so dead this time!* Peter was one of the strongest guys she trained with. He was a couple of years older than her. His shoulders were wide, and his muscles were so worked out that you'd cower just at the sight of him. He rarely had mercy, even for her as a girl. Even so, when they weren't training, he was a true friend to her; one of the few people she could rely on.

*I bet that Trainer Blockhead picked Peter on purpose to fist fight me. He really loves to see me lose.* That's what Jennifer called her trainer, 'Blockhead', even though his actual name was Breightad. Everyone he was close to -meaning important people, like the commander- called him Tad. Jennifer would never get to call him that without being severely punished. Luckily for her, she didn't even want to.

Warmed-up and ready for a tough fight, Jennifer stepped in the fighting circle where Peter was already waiting, looking doubtful at her. His look almost said 'I'll take you as easy as Blockhead is gonna let me.'

'Three...' Blockhead started counting. 'Two...' He would be watching them. 'One...' Watching intently. 'Fight!'

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Jennifer let Peter make the first move. As he rushed to hit her, she was able to dodge him by a millimetre, and pushed him from behind, making him fall. *If you aren't as strong as them, use their own strength against them.* He got up quickly, and neared her slowly. *What's he up to?*

Before she knew it, Peter hit her in the stomach, and she fell to her knees. *He hits hard.* Trying to ignore the pain, she grabbed both his feet, pushing them together so that he'd lose his balance. As much as she tried, his position wouldn't allow it because his feet were a good distance away from each other. That's when she tried raising just one of them, and it worked.

His heavy body fell to the ground again, but this time, he fell over Jennifer. The poor girl felt squashed between the floor and Peter. *Why does he have to be so heavy?* As much as she struggled, she couldn't break free. For a couple of seconds, she just stayed there because Peter wouldn't budge. *He must be enjoying his time on top of me, I guess.*

While stuck there, she caught a glimpse of Blockhead watching from the side, rolling his eyes. Further away, there was a group of guys who were watching the fight, and giggling as one of them said something. Obviously, they were talking about how silly they looked fighting.

'This is supposed to be a fist fight, so get up and stop playing!' roared Blockhead, obviously mad at the unexpected outcome of the fight. Still, it wasn't over.

As soon as Blockhead finished his sentence, Peter jumped on his feet, and quickly grabbed Jennifer by the waist, throwing her to the other side of the circle. By the time she could react, he was already next to her on one knee, ready to



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punch her in the face. *Don't, just don't!* But he couldn't hear her, and even if he could, he wouldn't have faltered anyway. Immediately, Jennifer turned to her side and was surprised to find that she was still whole. Instead of punching her in the face, Peter grabbed hold of her brown-reddish hair, which was slightly longer than shoulder length, making it a great weakness for her in combat.

Jennifer tried to rise up, but Peter pulled her hair downwards and she fell back on the ground, banging her head. Peter was looking right at her from above, still holding the edges of her hair. His expression was of a brute, so mean and merciless you would've run away if you could, but his eyes were pleading for forgiveness. Jennifer saw that crystal clear.

'Stop playing and fight, kids!' Blockhead was raging again, but then he let out a sigh and spoke again. 'Who am I kidding? You're worthless. Stop the fight immediately,' he said, disappointed. He then muttered under his breath, 'You can't even put up a fight. You can't even hit a girl.'

Jennifer and Peter were relieved that the fight ended so easily this time.

'Thanks, Peter,' she said. 'I really thought I'd end up in hospital again.' Her words made him giggle a little.

'Couldn't let that happen again. You're bruised enough as it is. Still, I didn't let you off *that* easy though. You put up a great fight. I liked your first dodge by the way. Didn't see that coming.'

'Really? I mean, are you serious?' *Don't blush, girl. Don't. Blush!*

'Alright, alright,' Blockhead joined in. *Oh no! I can bet on the*

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*whole alien army that we're in trouble.* 'What was that, kids? Jen, you did better than I expected, but still worse than you should have,' he took a break and let out another sigh. *Better than he expected? How low are his expectations anyway?!* 'Peter, about you... I'll just tell you this, try to be *real* next time.' He turned his back to us as he finished talking, and I could sense him rolling his eyes. From a bigger distance, he shouted at them. 'Don't forget to keep training, I have got more coming up for you today.'

Jennifer and Peter suddenly started laughing loudly, trying to make sure that Blockhead wouldn't hear.

'Thanks again, Peter. I really owe you this one!'

'It's nothing. I didn't want to fight anyway. Blockhead's been forcing me all morning. I may not show it, but I'm exhausted.'

'He hates us.'

'He does, indeed.'

'Especially me,' quickly added the girl.

'I hate to admit it Jenny, but I think you're right. He hates everyone, but you're the first on his list.' As he said those words, Jennifer looked down, once more upset that she was treated differently only because she was a girl. Instead of apologising, Peter just hugged her sympathetically. She let her head fall on his shoulder, and stayed like that for a minute before realising they had work to do.

*Don't cry. Whatever you do, just don't cry, even though it hurts.*

'Better get back to work, before Blockhead sees we're wasting his precious time.'

'I agree.'

# 3

## Fighting your brother is never a good idea

The rest of the day went on as slowly as possible. *I thought it would never end.*

After her fight with Peter, they went to practice their swordsmanship. When Blockhead noticed how well Jennifer was doing, he immediately put her up against Mark. Mark was the most experienced swordsman in her year.

He was a year older than Jennifer. Everybody made fun of him, that his cute face and skinny body weren't fit for a fighter, therefore he worked harder than everyone to prove them all wrong. *I'll one day do exactly what he did; I'll prove them all wrong about what I can do.* However, once he started a duel, nothing else mattered. His cute face faded, and he did whatever was possible to thrive. That's how he won all duels for the last few months.

Jennifer had no chance against him, even though she

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handled the sword quite well, she lost. Like expected, he always had the upper hand. Still, she focused on staying safe, parrying and dodging most of his attacks, not attacking herself. Even so, she ended up having a little cut on her right cheek and a few even smaller scratches on her left hand and back. Luckily, the one on the cheek was the deepest, and it didn't bleed much, saving Jennifer a lot of trouble... and blood.

After that, she continued to practice on her own and with her friends - who were few - avoiding duels and fist fights for the rest of the day. Blockhead must've got bored of her always losing, so he practically ignored her for the rest of the day. *What a relief.*

Once they could leave the training grounds at noon, they could do whatever they wanted, including staying there a little more - something nobody sane did. Normally she would've gone directly to her headquarters, but this time she changed destination.

'Hey Jenny, wait up!' called Peter behind her, running to catch up. 'Wanna go for a walk with Mark, Nico and I?' Nico was Mark's older brother, by three years. He was a very good swordsman too. Unlike his brother, Nico's mind often drifted away when least expected, making him lose his concentration and get in trouble. Or end up in hospital.

'Sure, why not,' she said smiling. 'Where are the MN brothers?' That's what she called them as a group.

'They're still behind. I ran as fast as I could to catch up with you. You left quicker than Mark's reflexes in a duel.' That made both of them laugh because everybody knows that Mark's reflexes were incredible, better than anyone's, and being told

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that you moved faster than that really meant something.

‘Alright,’ she said while placing herself on the floor with crossed legs. ‘Let’s wait for them.’

Peter did the same, staying next to her, almost touching her. Whether he did or not, Jennifer wouldn’t have noticed because she was paying attention to when the boys were going to arrive, looking away from Peter.

‘How much longer do you think they’re gonna take getting here?’ she asked.

‘A couple of minutes maybe. They seemed exhausted when I came running for you earlier. Anyway, you put up a great fight earlier.’

‘You told me already,’ she quickly answered, still not looking his way.

‘Eh... I meant the swordfight. You’re a great swordsman... swordswoman, excuse me,’ he said half laughing, but Jennifer didn’t even smile.

‘You saw that?! I was horrible!’ she said obviously disappointed by her performance, looking now at the floor. Peter then put a hand around her, trying to comfort her. Whether it worked or not remained a mystery, as the girl didn’t even flinch.

‘Hey Jen!’ someone shouted from a distance. It was Mark’s voice for sure. ‘Look, I’m sorry for the scratches from earlier...’ then he noticed Peter next to her, his hand around her still. Mark immediately gave him the what-do-you-think-you-are-doing look, making Peter take his hand back, and stand up. The girl faltered for a second until she realised what happened while she was still looking down. Finally, she looked up, and

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saw Mark lend her a hand to help her stand. In the corner of her eye, Jennifer noticed that Peter frowned when he saw Mark acting so generous, but his face went back to normal quickly.

'Nico is still on his way, typical him. He's so lazy... oh wait, here he comes,' Mark said, astonished.

'Hi...Jen...I heard that...you've had a tough day...' he said between breaths. He must've been exhausted.

'Nico, are you OK? Your face is red.'

'He's OK, don't worry about him,' intervened Mark. 'He doesn't belong in a gym, like us. He's something of a lab rat,' taunted Mark, trying to annoy his brother. Unfortunately for him, Nico was too busy gasping for air to mind his words.

'Alright, so where do you guys want to go?' asked Jennifer.

'Anywhere you want to, Jen.' They all seemed to agree to that.

'Well... where could we go?'

'What place haven't you seen in like forever?' asked Peter, very eager to get this little piece of information out of her.

'Let's see... other than the gym, everywhere! No, wait, I know where I really want to go,' she said, taking a long break to make the three boys more and more curious.

'Tell us!' demanded Mark.

'Outside.'

They all fell silent.

'You mean...you...you haven't been outside for a long time? How long exactly?' asked Mark, obviously shocked.

'A couple of weeks, maybe a month... I never keep track of time, you know that!'

Returning to reality, Peter added, 'OK then, outside it is.'

We're going outside!

'Lead the way Peter! You seem most anxious about it,' said Jennifer letting out a small giggle. *Why are they all looking at me like that?*

Mark seemed disappointed that Jennifer didn't pick him to lead the way, but then he suddenly became happy when he noticed he was walking alongside her. He couldn't just keep his happiness to himself, and looked her way and smiled. When she turned to look, he pretended like nothing happened. *What's wrong with these two freaks? They're acting so strange today*, she thought.

Trying to hide her confusion, she added with a half laughing, half joking tone, 'why are you smiling like that?' and immediately Peter looked back, frowning.

'Erm... because we're going outside? I'm happy. Am I not allowed to be happy?'

'Taking in to consideration we're at war with aliens, I don't think there's much to be happy about right now,' added Nico.

'You saddo, you really belong in a lab. Sometimes I wonder how you manage to even get to the gym. It's a very long way. How come your legs didn't break yet?' Mark went on insulting his brother in the most creative ways he could muster, until Jennifer broke in.

'Enough Mark! I get it that you're brothers and that you sometimes joke like this, but you're going too far now!' When Jennifer was annoyed with someone, it was never a good sign. Mark preferred to stay safe, not confront her wrath. He lowered his head in defeat, and was sorry for making her mad.

'Jenny's right, you shouldn't have...'

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'He got it, Peter!'

'I'm sorry.' He lowered his head too.

'Gee, Jen. Sometimes I'm starting to think you're worse than Blockhead!' said Nico.

Mark's eyes were burning upon hearing those words, and he immediately turned to look at his brother. If looks could kill, Nico would've been ashes by now. 'What did you say?' It was almost like time stopped. Mark was shooting killing looks at his brother so bad that you could almost imagine a circle of fire around him, and he was ready to jump on his prey like a human-devouring monster.

'I...I was just joking.'

But it was too late to make him understand, for Mark was already charging at Nico. Mark grabbed him by the neck, and pushed him against the wall, creating a loud thud. Before anything worse happened, Jennifer put a hand on Mark's shoulder and pulled him back so he'd let Nico go, and maybe even fall. It turned out he didn't fall, but he loosened his grip on his brother's neck, and eventually let go of him.

'I...I'm so sorry, Jen. I'm really, really sorry,' he said, trying to hide the tears that were coming. No tears fell, but his eyes were sparkling and begging for mercy. 'I...I don't know what happened. I just got mad and over-reacted.'

Jennifer didn't say a word, but it was obvious that she was disappointed, and shocked. Before any of them could say another word, she just started running down the hallway, trying to get away. *Something's been seriously wrong with these guys lately.*

'Look what you did!' screamed Peter.



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‘It wasn’t my fault! Nico said she’s worse than Blockhead. I couldn’t just ignore that!’

‘Neither could I, but I wouldn’t have killed him for saying that! I recognise a joke when I hear it, unlike you.’

As the two of them continued fighting, Nico was laying on the floor, gasping for air. His hands were around his neck trying to protect it, doing everything he could to ease the pain. Eventually the two of them stopped arguing when Mark said, ‘This is pointless. We’d better go find Jen quickly and apologise for everything.’

‘Trying to catch up with her is useless. We all know she’s the fastest runner around here. Plus, she’s got a huge head start.’

‘We could still try. And besides, we know where she went.’

‘Where, smarty?’ said Peter mockingly. In return Mark just shot him a look, and ignored his comment.

‘Outside.’

And off they went, running as fast as possible to find Jennifer. Poor Nico was still lying on the ground, gasping for air, so he couldn’t join the two boys’ endeavour to find the girl.

She was the only girl around; how hard could it be to find her?