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Strength Beneath the Surface
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1 - The Hostile Takeover

Her name was Jackie Kickback and she was houndin' for a fight.

As she waited for the silver doors to open, she tapped her foot to the song playing in her head. A distraction from the orb-shaped cameras hovering behind her, watching her. Everyone was watching her. An eighteen-year-old girl taking on the President's Spire. Another refugee fighting for control of the nation that gave her everything.

Nobody ever talked about what it took away.

A trickle of blood streaked down from her headband. She wiped it with her wrist, smearing red across her sand-colored cheek. In the door's reflection, she knew what they saw. Her wispy chestnut bob was singed at the ends from laser fire. Purpling bruises covered her arms. The shadows of fingers lingered around her throat.

They saw the Spire's next victim.

She saw their next President.

Ding. The doors opened to a glass luxovator. Far below was the nation of Suichūnansho, cast in neon lights and screens. In the distance, the eco-dome surrounding the underwater nation displayed a twilight horizon. As the doors shut behind her the cameras stopped recording. Finally, she was alone. Until his voice broke the silence.

"Jackie Delgado."

Behind her, on the vid-com, a terrible face appeared. "Alabaster Futigawa."

"That's *President-CEO* Futigawa, to you."

"Call me Kickback if we're using stage names."

Futigawa laughed. "Your Hostile Takeover is going quickly. Eight floors down, one remains. We might have a new record."

She wasn't here for a record. She was here for him.

From her khaki cargo pants she drew a needle and glowing black thread. She nipped her tank top strap with her teeth before sewing together a tear with one hand.

Futigawa continued. "Funny. The last ascendant to face me was also 'Delgado.' Yet his first name eludes me. Tupper... Toaster?"

"*Tucker*," Jackie growled, snapping off the end of thread. Her tank top shimmered a luminous black, now restored.

"That's right. How could I forget?"

Liar.

Her brother was the only person on the planet that threatened Futigawa's thirty-year reign. Thousands had attempted Hostile Takeovers in hopes of becoming the nation's ruler. But only Tucker made it to the top. Only Tucker faced Futigawa one-on-one.

Until today.

She adjusted her Stonewall headband, glad she'd brought it along. Per combatant rules, she wore six articles of Genome-Latching Intraneural Material attire.

GLIMa.

She'd chosen hers diligently. A hand-made black tank top with ballistic protection; tan cargo pants with limitless storage; fingerless gloves, capable of producing blinding light; energy absorption kneepads coupled with regenerative elbow-pads, and her Stonewall headband, with its fiery topaz atop her forehead. Capable of turning her skin to stone, it was one-of-a-kind.

And illegal.

"You don't want the presidency," Futigawa mocked. "You want *revenge*."

He would know soon enough just what she wanted.

Ding. As the luxovator opened and new cameras descended from the ceiling, he taunted, "Looks like you've got a little *blood* on your face."

She smirked. "It's not mine."

Below the President's Spire, a hundred stories beneath Futigawa Corporation headquarters, sat Suichūnansho's Capital City, a dazzling metropolis carved beneath the icy Pacific. The Capital was the bullseye of the target-shaped nation, with several ring-shaped districts encircling it, divided by canals. Today, 8 August 2096, the Capital streets were quiet, as if another apocalypse was nigh.

In the outermost residential district, Onoshun, people crowded the streets. Nervous excitement echoed through the main strip as laborers and shopkeepers shared updates on Jackie's Hostile Takeover. Groups listened on radios, others around the dives that could afford to broadcast it.

Nestled in the labyrinthine backstreets, there was no greater excitement—or nervousness—than from the Delgado family's cramped apartment above Chang's Ramen & Syntho-Burger Diner.

Four Delgados had gathered on the floor surrounding the digi-cast, a glowing cube that visually transformed the apartment into the ninth floor of the Spire. They watched as a holographic Jackie stepped off the luxovator into the center of their living room. Across from her stood a Soldier Series Mech. A relic from before the Climate Wars that towered over her, with blades for arms and shoulder-mounted turrets.

Jackie, with that smirk on her face, rushed in.

"Ahh! She's back on!" squealed Jolene, the fifth Delgado sibling. Though Jolene was eleven months older than Jackie, her colorful dresses and naivety meant that most regarded her as the baby of the family.

As Jackie dodged swinging blades and countered with a stone-covered shin-strike, Jolene cheered, "Wow! Jackie! You're such a bad—"

"Jolene!" snapped a pale-faced Mama Delgado. "Watch that mouth of yours." Only two things set off the former Texan: a lack of hospitality and cussing.

"Sorryyyy, mama. Look at her though! She looks like she's been training her whole life for this."

"In many ways, she has," said Arnold, pressing his thick-rimmed GLIMa goggles to his face. Though he was twenty-five and the second oldest Delgado sibling, he was frailer—and more intuitive—than the rest. He continued, "Her impressive speed, her ability to weave GLIMa into Muay Thai maneuvers. It's clear her many nights away from home were spent training."

Marshall, the eldest Delgado sibling, at twenty-eight, said, "I still can't believe she didn't tell us." He stood beneath the 'Happy Birthday Jackie' banner in the kitchenette, wiping frosting out of his beard. "Anyone ever realize you can see the Spire from the window here? Looming over Onoshun?"

"We all have looked out the window before, yes," Arnold replied.

"Must've never seen it, since I'm so much taller than you."

"Boys," Mama said, as Jackie stunned the mech with a blast of light from her glove.

Jolene gasped. "Woah! She tore off its arm!"

"I'm glad she learned *something* from Tucker's mistakes." The rest of the family sobered at the mention of their brother. Two photos hung on the red brick wall of their apartment. One, was a portrait of their entire family, all eight of them. Jackie was an infant in her father's arm. Without her they were at half strength. Half a family.

In the quiet, fear burbled up. The Delgados winced with each blow, grimaced as Jackie narrowly avoided lethal strikes and fatal cleaves. The weight of life and death pressed upon all them.

Until there was a quick rap on the door. Before anyone could say, "*We ain't buyin'!*" two Japanese teens on the edge of manhood entered.

"Konnichiwa, Delgados!" yelled Taro, the larger of the two. The descendant of sumo-wrestlers, he had the build of a bulldozer, donning a big belly and a sash around his buzzed head.

"Taro, you can't go barging into people's apartments like that," said Danuja, the smaller one. He had hard eyes and a sharp jaw, but his smile was warm and friendly.

"We're fine, Dan. The Delgados are family!" Taro cheered. "Hi fam!"

"Hi, Taro," the Delgados muttered.

Mama Delgado looked away from the digi-cast for the first time since the fight started. "Grab yourself some cake, hun, it's on the counter."

"Mama Delgado, you are a saint," Taro replied. As he skirted around the family, the Soldier Series Mech fired a hail of bullets. Jackie tucked in her arms. Thread-like tendrils emerged from her tank top, swatting away hundreds of bullets like flies. One whizzed past, sliced across her bicep. She didn't finch.

Dan did. "Yikes. Looks like she's getting chunked out there."

"After wearing GLIMa for four hours, she's holding up remarkably well," Arnold said.

Marshall added, "Yeah our GLIMa designers can hardly wear a full kit for more than thirty minutes. Jackie... She's something else."

"She's Jackie Kickback!" Jolene cheered. The diner below roared as Jackie tore free another limb. "Wait a second. Taro? Dan? Won't Chang be mad you two aren't downstairs taking orders?"

Taro finished the cake in one bite. "Chang said I take up *'precious space for customers.'*"

"That checks out," Arnold said. "What's your excuse, Dan?"

"Today's my last day, actually."

"*Today!*? On Jackie's birthday?" Jolene gasped.

Before Dan replied, a rocket shot between them, aimed directly at Jackie. With gravitas, she stepped to the side, opened up her cargo pocket, and let the rocket fly inside.

Taro screamed, "Yo! She just sucked that rocket right up!"

"Where'd it go?"

"Wait for it," Arnold said, beginning a countdown.

Mama chewed her nails. Jolene covered her mouth. Dan said, with a wry smile on his face, "I remember this, Tucker did this move. By the way, where—"

"Two... One. Now!" On Arnold's count, Jackie opened her other pocket. The rocket fired out, straight into the mech's chest and breaching its hull. Cheers echoed in from the diner below.

"Ooo, Jackie!" Jolene squealed. "You're such a bad—"

"Jolene!" Mama Delgado snapped. "Just 'cuz it's true don't mean you can say it with these old ears around."

The Soldier Series Mech staggered with the explosion. Jackie leapt into the air with a flying knee aimed towards its breached hull.

KA-BOOM.

The explosion shook the room. Jackie shot backwards into a plume of smoke, then crashed to the floor.

Agh! Thoughts louder and faster than gunfire rattled through her mind. Can't be weak. Get up! Can't let them see you're weak. Strong. Gotta look strong.

As the ventilation system cleared the smoke, the orb-cams found her. She rose, threw a fist in the air. She could practically hear Jolene's cheers. *Jackie! You're such a bad —*

His voice interrupted the thought. *"Well done, Jackie."* From the vid-com, Futigawa spoke to her and to the entire city. *"You have beaten the President's Spire. Your Hostile Takeover is nearly complete. Ascend to my office and face me. The fate of Suichūnansho, and the world, rests on this fight."*

Hidden from the cameras, a text display read:

Prepare to lose. Just like Tugger.

"Count these seconds, Futigawa!" Jackie pointed to an orb-cam. "They'll be your last." With gravitas, she leapt over the mech and marched aboard the final luxovator. Her broadcast cut away. She could see through the glass. Distant billboards played a commercial for Steel Toe Stilletos. *For the Fashionable Laborer.* Of course it was Futigawa Brand GLIMa.

Alone in the luxovator, her regenerative elbow pads glowed white. Cuts closed and bruises faded. *Do your work, GLIMa*, she thought. Only her thoughts spiraled. *You wouldn't need it if you were faster. If you weren't so weak. Weren't so powerless, so sloppy!* She clutched her head and fell to her knees. For GLIMa was more than clothing. Each piece connected to the brain and operated like a new limb, controlled individually and with a single impulse. But the longer someone wore GLIMa, the more the connection frayed, creating in the mind hallucinations, voices, dangerous thoughts.

Futigawa trapped you. He'll drop the luxovator. You can't stop him. You're helpless.

Jackie gritted her teeth, squeezed her fists to temper her nerves. On the vid-com, the commercial cut to a documentary of Futigawa's life. Propaganda. Something to humanize a tyrant. Jackie knew what it really meant. *He's scared he'll lose.* She listened intently.

"President Futigawa was the oldest child of a Japanese potter. At eighteen, Futigawa sewed the first piece of GLIMa. He knew it would change the world.

"But the world was dying. Futigawa watched as democratically elected leaders voted on policies that destroyed the earth's climate. So he acted. With several other businessmen, he created the Allegiance of Corporate Executives, called the ACE. Pooling

their resources together, they manufactured tremendous GLIMa in hopes to build a city beneath the sea, a new nation to save humanity.

“As the surface froze over, millions sought refuge in the city. Futigawa welcomed them with his first address as President-CEO.”

A young Futigawa, with fuller hair and a dark goatee, said, *“Democracy failed. The world’s leaders watched our planet die, for they were chosen through popularity. Not by strength. Anyone who believes I am unfit to lead may challenge me for the right.”* The footage cut to the Spire’s tip as it finished construction.

Futigawa continued, *“Those who ascend to the tenth floor of my Presidential Spire will earn the right to face me in GLIMa combat at the top. All are welcome to take on the Spire. However. Only the strongest will lead.”*

Jackie scoffed. *What a joke.*

It was different for people in the inner districts. Elites with money, status, power. They had the resources to train, to buy the best GLIMa and lay claim to Futigawa’s nation. But those given everything seldom risk their lives for more. Only people like her were desperate enough to try. For the Spire was merciless. In thirty years, it slayed thousands like her. Only Tucker had ever made it to the top.

Somehow, you did too.

Then, her elbow pads darkened. Her thoughts reshaped, her anxiety lessened. To kill her off-screen would show weakness, would prove his leadership was fake.

Yes, he would give her her fight. Jackie crossed her legs and pressed her palms together. *This is it.*

“I’m waiting, Jackie,” said Futigawa from the vid-com. *“The whole city is waiting. Hit. The Button.”*

“Shut it.”

He scoffed. *“Are you centering yourself before our fight? It’s foolish, Jackie. You do not know what power I hold. Your brother glimpsed a fraction of it. You? You seem stronger, smarter. How many times have you rewatched our duel? How many times have you seen me break him? You think you know my tricks, yet you’ve seen so little of what I can achieve. Look outside, child.”*

The dome sky flashed a sunny blue, then a dismal black. Stars showered down, then the sun began to rise. It was a ruse. Projection technology on the eco-dome was impressive. Outside, beneath the waves, it was dark.

Everyone knew it was dark.

"I am the sun rising, Jackie. For Suichūnansho! For Futigawa Corporation! And for the world. You cannot defeat me."

Jackie squeezed her eyes shut. *Nobody else is gonna avenge them. No one else could do this. You've earned this moment. You've earned this fight.*

She opened her eyes to Futigawa's wicked smile before the vid-com went black. Then, she stood, took two deep breaths, and tapped the button.

The doors opened. Two orb-cams descended. She pushed them aside to enter a round room with traditional tatami floors and a ceiling that spiraled up into the Spire's tip. The reinforced glass walls gave perfect visibility of the entire city. For the first time since she was a child, she could see past the illusions, for the Spire lingered near the ocean's surface.

Outside. After fifteen years trapped down here, she'd hoped to see the sun, the real sun. But out there, darkness remained.

Across from the luxovator, a hulking man in a black GLIMa suit awaited patiently at his desk. His chin rested on his knuckles. A showman's smile bore into her.

"Futigawa."

"Delgado." The man stood, paused. "I'm unfamiliar with your tank top's brand."

"My sister made it."

"Impressive. Though you wear nothing from Futigawa Corporation? A shame you will be using inferior GLIMa against me." His desk mechanically split in two, sliding against the far wall, as he kicked open a mini-fridge disguised as a cabinet. "Care for a drink before we begin? It may be your last."

"So that's how you survive up here."

"Pardon?"

"Unless—no. Do you beat the Spire every day to get to work?"

His eyes narrowed.

She knew that was ridiculous, knew he was a fraud. "Have you *ever* beaten it?"

His showman's smile returned. "Of course. How else would I know I was strong enough to lead?" He cracked open a sparkling water. "I take it that's a 'no' for the drink. Fine. Let's begin."

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

He sneered. "You request a fight against the most powerful GLIMa ever created?"

"If that means a fair fight, yes."

Futigawa pressed a button and a podium emerged from the floor. Atop it was The Gauntlet of Champions.

Jackie pointed at him. Her voice wavered for only a moment. "Alabaster Futigawa. Today I reclaim Suichūnansho for its people. You've taken the lives of many. Today I will take—"

"Hah! You are a refugee. I am a *dynasty*. You cannot reclaim a city that was never yours." He put on the Gauntlet. The metal tightened around his fist. Golden waves rippled up from the gauntlet, covering his arm and shoulder. He gritted his teeth, squeezed his eyes shut as veins protruded on his forehead.

"Enough, Futigawa, accept my challenge."

"Child, you shall refer to me with respect!" He opened his eyes. They were lightning. "I am President-CEO Futigawa-sama and you shall know the entirety of my *wrath*!" He thrust his fist forward, launching a gale-force wind that blasted Jackie back into the luxovator with a *thunk*.

She scrambled to her feet, bumped the luxovator button. It chimed, but did not open.

"There is no escape, Jackie! The bypass switch is on my desk. Only the victor will have the privilege to use it. Now *fight*!" Futigawa leapt into the air, his fist aimed at Jackie's head.

She leapt out of the way, but as the gauntlet struck the floor, it shook the tatami with tremor-like force, tripping her. Before she could stand, a fist struck her abdomen. She careened across the room, slammed into the wooden desk. Splinters of pain coursed up her spine.

Agh! How is he so fast?!

"Jackie, Jackie, Jackie!" Futigawa called, refastening his tie. "Many men have sought my life. Never have I fought a girl... And never has it been so *easy*."

That did it. Her eyes scanned his GLIMa. Time slowed as a fire roared inside her belly.

He's wearing all Futigawa Corp gear. His strong-arm suitcoat easily costs two billion. Fusion-flex endurance trousers, onyx Loafers of Speed... Pretty basic. A blazing-red silk tie. Sharp as a dagger. Then there's the Gauntlet. That's five. What's his sixth piece? Socks? Shirt?

Even limiting the last piece of gear between those two options left hundreds of possibilities. The shirt could make him bullet-proof, socks could let him static-cling to walls.

Futigawa approached. He reached to pluck her off the ground. She was quicker. She spun her leg out, striking the back of his knee.

He didn't budge. His belt buckle sparkled

A Belt of Fortitude. Of course.

"Nice try, Delgado." He threw her like a skipping stone, only this time, she skidded to a halt on her kneepads.

Gotta get rid of that belt... His entire kit is made to make him feel strong... Maybe...

"Ah—oww!" Jackie slipped as she tried to stand.

He groaned. "What are you doing?"

"I-I'm so tired."

"Get up."

She steadied her breath, biding her time as her elbow pads performed their regenerative work. "Maybe... Maybe I should've taken you up on that drink?" Jackie whimpered.

Futigawa's face darkened. "Have you no honor, child? Requesting a break after you initiated our duel? Even I was not so easily bested at your age."

Jackie flashed a smile, before wincing again.

"Hmph. *Children*," Futigawa said with contempt. He walked to the mini-fridge. "This is why I never had any. Too fickle, too impulsive. Tucker claimed to be the sixth. Does that make you the seventh? Imagine..." Futigawa took a

sparkling water from the fridge when—

POP!

Brilliant light flashed from Jackie's glove. He was blinded; swung high. She ducked low and grabbed his belt. Her headband glowed as it turned her hand to stone. In one smooth tear she ripped the belt clean off. She avoided another swipe before donkey-kicking Futigawa's chest, knocking him backwards over his desk.

Jackie caught the water bottle before it landed.

"Have you no *respect*? Have you no *honor*?" Futigawa screamed. His tattered pants sagged.

"Guess it's been a while since you've had a real fight." Jackie took a sip. "Mmm. Better than the stuff we get in Onoshun."

Futigawa tore off the destroyed pants. Beneath was his GLIMa guard, the protective under suit all GLIMa warriors wore to dampen the static-filled noise that each piece produced. Without one, GLIMa could ravage a person's mind, could kill them. Most GLIMa guards looked like full-body scuba diving suits, but Futigawa's was perfectly tailored, light and flexible, yet refined, like steel.

The CEO shoved off his desk. "I shall rain hellfire upon you."

Jackie ducked, blocked, and dodged his oncoming assault. For a moment, they went hit-for-hit. She, with her shin strikes and kicks, a master of kickboxing and Muay Thai. He was a brawler, intermixing punches and strikes from Wing Chun and Kung Fu. An opportunity arose. She slid and spun beneath him with another low kick at his shin.

He groaned and toppled.

"No belt this time." Jackie towered over him. "There used to be eight of us Delgados. I'm youngest and scrappiest of 'em all. And I'm taking this." She grabbed the Gauntlet of Champions. Her fingers quivered against the cool metal. Like all GLIMa it howled, the sound whirring through her mind. Only it did not quiet. Rather, it spoke, clearly, viciously. *Seize her!*

The gold material molded around her hand, crawled up her arm like locusts. Her hand tightened to a fist, her muscles clenched and knotted. She couldn't control her movements.

“Ah—*agh!*”

With his spare hand, Futigawa sucker-punched Jackie, toppling her. The metal unfurled around her shoulders. The noise was unbearable, unbreakable as it tightened around her neck. She was paralyzed.

“Eight. A lucky number where I come from,” Futigawa mused, using his free hand to dust himself off. “Some luck. You are the first to experience firsthand the true potential of GLIMa. *Nanotechnology.*”

Return! yelled the voice in Jackie’s mind. Instantly, the creeping gold swarmed down her arm and reformed with Futigawa’s gauntlet.

Jackie gasped for breath. “H-how did you do that?”

Futigawa removed his shoes, his socks, then unlaced his tie. “A single Nano-GLIMa is more powerful than an entire kit.” He removed his suit coat and shirt. Golden strands rippled through the GLIMa guard, like veins, seemingly connected to the Gauntlet. It was unlike anything she’d ever seen. “We tested it, thought we could mass produce them like other GLIMa. But the burden on the wielder is more than you could ever imagine. Only I was strong enough to survive the tests.”

Showman. Liar! Must — get — up!

Jackie strained to control her body, even her thoughts as the President-CEO spread his arms wide. From the gauntlet, the golden nanites rippled over his shoulder, his chest. Horrified, she watched as Futigawa’s entire body was encased in riveted, golden armor. The nanites trickled off his feet, onto the ground, as if trying to escape him. Like a sponge, he reabsorbed them back into place. His face was tense, his demeanor no longer amused but hardened, stone-like.

Jackie hobbled to her feet and brushed the hair from her eyes. Her headband went askew. It felt off. Everything felt off.

Still, she raised her fists.

“To control nanotechnology, a wearer must be resolute in their convictions.” A swarm of gold poured onto the floor, swam across its surface, locking Jackie’s feet in place.

“No!”

Futigawa raised his gauntleted hand. The nanites followed, flowing up Jackie's legs, crawling up her body. Then, she was airborne in a spire of gold.

"Either nanites bend to the will of their wielder. Or the wielder bends to the nanites' wrath. To control them, one must have a will of steel, the might of stone. I never knew your father, but I assure you he was a nanite, obedient to my will. Your brother was a nanite. *You* are a nanite. No one has this strength, but me." He tapped the window. Nanites rippled outwards in a metallic pool, devouring the thick glass. A hole formed.

Jackie's ears popped from the pressure shift. Her hair flung wildly in the wind. Her fingernails clawed at the golden nanites. She desperately scanned the room for something, anything to aid her. All she saw were the cameras over Futigawa's shoulder.

They're watching you die.

The thought registered, but the internal voice wasn't her own.

Futigawa waved the cameras away. "A good time for a word from our sponsors, yes?" he chuckled. "Perhaps it is Makkataka Medical, promoting the very elbow pads you've been using to heal yourself. You think I haven't noticed? I spoke the truth before. That tank top is impressive. Your sister could've gotten a deal with my corporation. If only she wasn't born from a family of rebels and failures. Ooo. Are they watching? Another Delgado defeated—"

Jackie lashed out. Goatee hair ripped free beneath her nails. A hit that would scar. Through gasps, she said, "You've got—a little—blood on your face!"

He grimaced, squeezed tighter. The orb-cams resumed recording. "I alone am capable of wielding this power. I was chosen to lead this nation to greatness, to save this dying world. And you shall not hinder my destiny."

Jackie tore at the nanites with bloodied fingertips. It was no use. The nanites only reshaped, clenching tighter than before. Her vision narrowed as she desperately fought for air.

Futigawa carried her out over the ledge. "This is goodbye, Delgado. But before we go—" The nanites wrapped around her body, consumed her kneepads, gloves, tank top, cargo pants.

They flowed back into Futigawa's free hand, leaving her dressed only in her

dated and loose-fitting GLIMa guard.

“These clothes must have cost you millions. I’m impressed an urchin like you managed to buy them. More likely they’re stolen, yes? Well. We can’t have someone taking such fine pieces of GLIMa off a corpse, can we?”

Jackie’s eyes darkened. Her arms went limp. *It’s over.*

“Goodbye, Jackie.” Futigawa opened his fist and a voice flashed through her mind: *Return to me.*

The nanites released her.

“GYAH!” Jackie gasped as consciousness returned. She reached for the ledge too late. “FUTIGAWAAAAAAA!”

Her screams were lost in the descent. The spire passed her by. Hours up, seconds down. She clanged off the angular Futigawa Corporation roof and fell faster and faster towards the neon-lit streets below.

You lost—you died—they watched you die.

Venomous thoughts clouded her mind. Tears streaked into the sky above. Futigawa’s voice bore into her.

‘My destiny!’

Her focus sharpened. She needed to take control, despite the pressure change, the rapid speed. She spun to face the ground.

‘A will of steel.’

Her hair whipped back, her headband began to slip. The ground was imminent. She squeezed her fists, clenched her teeth—

‘The might of stone.’

Through wind and screams came a single, deafening CRACK.

Jackie met the ground head-first.

And all was quiet.