

The Quiet Admiral

The admiral hovered at the boy's door like a wraith, his face barely illuminated by the setting sun.

The boy only noticed when the man cleared his throat. "Yes?" He resisted the urge to look up from the book he was reading.

"We *need* to go for a walk." The gruff voice had more urgency than usual.

"I'm busy." The boy was halfway through a chapter on the cold war.

The man peered at him with narrowed eyes. "What seem to us bitter trials are often gifts in disguise." As usual, the admiral was being cryptic.

"What is that, Lao Tzu? Confucius? Maybe if you left me alone to read I would learn some quotes myself."

The man crossed his arms as the frown lines on his face deepened. "Let's go. *Now.*"

The boy rose from his desk, shoved the book into his khaki knapsack, and grabbed his headlamp. Outside, the sky was darkening like overdone creme brulee, and he knew it would probably be a long walk, along with an accompanying lecture. For that's what the walks were really about. Something he had done wrong.

Incense was still wafting between the rice paper walls as he entered the living room, confirming his suspicions that the old man had been meditating on something, but was taken aback by the supplies splayed out on the tatami: batteries, canteens, a water filter, dried beans and rice, tarps, and hammocks. The admiral was already packing some of it into his own trekking bag.

"Wait - we're camping? Up on the ridge?"

No answer. The man simply strode behind him and added some of the supplies to the boy's pack.

"You're being weird," he said as he felt the weight on his back growing.

The old man had nothing to say, apparently.

They left shortly afterward, their footsteps crunching up the gravel path, past the rows of their vegetable garden, the coy pond, and the shrine at the back of their property.

As they headed for the back of the valley, the boy thought back on their first *walk*.

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"Ichi. Ni. San." With each count by the admiral, the two of them practiced their roundhouse kicks.

There had been a time when he enjoyed the karate, when he imagined using such skills to show off at the Fleet Academy. But now they had moved to the back of a valley where the admiral had bought a farm was home-schooling him.

"I'm tired." He left his fighting stance and walked to stare out the window.

"Look," the admiral started, then cleared his throat. "I know you didn't want to move here. I should have gotten you off the islands entirely."

The boy crossed his arms and kept his mouth shut.

"Come, let's go for a walk." The old man walked outside and the boy followed. "I know you wanted... other things."

"I want to explore the solar system. I want to defend the planet."

The admiral looked like he was fighting a smile, trying not to laugh at the ridiculousness of the statement. As he shook his head, his grey ponytail bobbed back and forth. "There are too many things you don't understand. My time in the fleet was my great mistake."

"This is *my* life," the boy growled. "You should be happy that I want to follow in your footsteps."

"Never say that." The man's eyes narrowed. "It's not safe out there. The war gets worse by the day. Last week we lost three cruisers. Did you know that? Three ships full of young men."

"They need me - and you - more than ever."

His voice was like a rusted machine: "No."

"Once I turn eighteen, you can't stop me."

"We'll see."

The boy clenched his fists so hard that his fingers hurt. None of it made sense. While people were out there dying, he was reading history books, meditating, practicing karate, and studying literature. While moons were being colonized and new species discovered, he was farming carrots, potatoes, and lettuce. While cities were going up on Mars and Europa, he was fixing up an old piece of property in some forgotten valley in Hawaii.

There, walking with the old man, the boy could see the ships rising and falling from the spaceport at Diamond Head. Some lights were ascending toward the stars, others descending back to Earth. When was his ship going to leave?

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Their property was bordered in the back by a green tangle of vines. In the deepening twilight, it would have been hard to find the path that wound through it, but he and the admiral knew it well. The back of the valley and the ridge above were a refuge for the boy when he needed some time away from home.

That night, however, the admiral was leading the way, charging through the greenery and pushing stray branches aside like the arms of admirers he had no time to talk to.

"Why are we in such a hurry?" the boy called.

"The idle man risks wasting everything," the old man said.

"Aphorisms aren't answers, you know. It's not like it's about to rain."

"Not that you know of." The admiral grunted. The boy could see sweat pooling on the man's neck beneath his ponytail, but he was still moving up the trail in a great hurry.

"Are you afraid of more riots? Things have been quiet in town."

"No."

The boy took several more steps up the path, his legs burning, before trying again. "You're trying to teach me something, then? Is this some martial arts exercise?"

"In a manner of speaking." His voice was coarse, his breath coming out in puffs.

The boy was sweating too now. His shirt was sticking to his chest, his pack was digging into his shoulders, and his lower back was aching. "I'd get trained just as well, or better, in the fleet. But you know that."

“And you know I won’t allow that.” The man turned and glared at him. His eyes were dark wells in a somber face.

Of course the boy knew. How could he forget?

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His plan to join the fleet had been simple. He had turned twelve and was more than old enough to transfer to the boy’s academy down in the city. If he could get the paper’s signed, it would be all but official. From there, it would be an easy transfer to officer school when he was of age. And with an admiral for a father - even an ex-admiral - his admittance was not only guaranteed, but free.

So he did what he had to do. He stuck his finger down his throat until bile came up, then vomited as loudly as he could until the old man left for the farmer’s market without him. Then, he grabbed his pack and ran to the bus stop.

The bus ride was long, but the glowing storefronts and buildings of the city had always excited him. With their edifices looming overhead, he imagine he was living in one of the great fortress-cities on Mars, carved from red stone like ancient castles. If his plan succeeded he might even walk the halls of one someday.

The boy managed to get to the school’s recruitment office before morning classes started. There, a uniformed man waited inside, looking archaic surrounded by posters of faraway moons and exotic cities. Here in Hawaii, perhaps more than others places, the old and the new were inextricably tangled. Even the office looked old, and not in a good way. It’s shabby walls had peeling paint and chipped woodwork, but this was where the boy wanted to be.

“I’m here to transfer,” he said, setting his knapsack on the floor as he took a seat. “Well, not really. Right now, I’m homeschooled.”

The man raised his eyebrows. “You don’t have an appointment, but that’s just fine.” The officer extended his hand. “I’m Lieutenant Matsumoto.”

“Brian Akimoto. Pleased to meet you sir.”

The Lieutenant’s face froze like a paused video just as he was about to speak, but then he smiled and folded his hands. “Just a moment. I have to get some paperwork for you to fill out, then we’ll talk about what this really means.”

He stood and left the office while the boy waited.

The boy’s mouth seemed to grow drier as the minutes passed. He looked over his shoulder, listened carefully for anyone approaching the office, and checked the clock every twenty seconds. Where had the man gone?

He gave a sigh of relief when he heard the footsteps approaching, but then he realized there were multiple sets. As he turned around, he saw two unfamiliar guards stride into the room. Without a word, they grabbed his under the arms, lifted him from the chair, and dragged him out of the office.

The boy didn’t even know what to say. He had never heard of anything like this happening. It was only when he saw the car waiting that his heart began to pound. They were

taking him home. That night was the first and only time his father had hit him outside of martial arts practice. The welt on his face had lasted a week.

"Dad..." he had started before the blow knocked him to the floor.

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The misty air felt cold on his face and damp in his lungs, but he was dragging in more and more of it with every step. The trail had steepened but their pace hadn't slowed one bit. Here, the guava trees were giving way to pines and a thick carpet of needles lay underfoot.

"It's going to be fun setting up camp in the dark," the boy complained.

The old man grunted, grabbing trees to his left and right to pull himself faster up the trail.

As the boy watched the man's bag rise in front of him, he imagined he was one of those ancient explorers who had first climbed these hills. In those days, it was life or death, a journey through a jungle you didn't know, full of birds and insects and strange plants that might poison them. It had been a better life.

That moment, while his mind wandered, was when the branch snapped. The admiral came tumbling backward like a boulder and nearly toppled over him. The boy was slammed into a tree, his elbow smacking hard against the trunk. Pain shot up his arm and when he looked down there was blood, but not so much that he had to worry.

"What are you doing? Are you trying to get yourself killed up here?" He lowered a hand to help the old man up. The admiral, his father, gazed up at him with wide eyes and a wrinkled forehead.

"We've got to keep going," he said.

Something was wrong. Well, more wrong than unusual. The admiral got up and began climbing up the trail again, this time with a limp.

At least their pace had slowed.

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BzzzzHssssss "Foxtrot 1 heading for East harbor." The crackle of radio static gave way finally to human voices.

The boy was reading in his room, but always knew to listen while his father probed the airwaves. It was his only real connection to news from the outside world, and to the military bases nearby. Why his father still listened to the codes and gibberish, he wasn't sure. He wasn't even sure if the men on the radio were in the military, or just observers elsewhere on the island.

Either way, at this point, the boy had resigned himself to life as a civilian. The fleet would come and go from the spaceport, hovering like fireflies in the distance, and he could watch the ships and listen to the radio, but that was it. Certainly, in time he would be old enough to move away from home and do what he wanted with his life, but for now he was locked into a farmer's life. It felt like such a waste.

Life at 'the compound,' as he thought of it, was relatively easy. The admiral ordered him about to help take care of the gardens, but that wasn't so hard. He also gave the boy lessons several times a week, though they were more about following the old man's example than learning the actual history or 'art' of the subjects.

Outside of joining the fleet, history was the boy's real interest, and farm-life left plenty of time for reading the plain-covered history texts on his father's bookshelf. He would flip through them late at night, dreaming of the explorers who navigated by starlight and subsisted off of the strange plants and animals they encountered on their journeys. Those people had truly been free.

So he read, and thought, and watched the ships and stars, and waited, knowing 18 wasn't that far away and, at the very least, he could escape away to college, and brighter halls and and larger libraries, and friends. If he even knew how to make friends at that point.

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Even in the unsteady light of his headlamp, the boy could tell they were getting close to the ridge-top. The canopy was giving way to a view of the glowing specks among the clouds. These days, some of them were planes, others ships zig-zagging through the sky.

"Finally..." he huffed.

As he dropped his bag to the grass, the boy could see that the admiral's pants were ripped at the knee, but the old man seemed not to care. His grim gaze was fixed on the horizon, like a cowboy watching the sunset as his friends rode off into the distance.

The boy turned to look and saw the normal view: the warm skyscrapers of Honolulu sparkling in the night while massive ships came and went from the port near Diamond Head crater. Only now the flow had ebbed, and all the ships seemed to have taken off.

"That's strange." The boy observed. "Really strange." The old man just crossed his arms.

It was then that the roaring began. It started as a low rumble, like the beginnings of an earthquake, then escalated as the fire rained from above. At first, there were only beams of light falling from points in the darkness above. Then came the ships, tumbling out of control, roaring and burning up through the atmosphere until they came crashing into the city. One by one the buildings toppled, and as he watched, the boy wasn't even sure the city had been the target.

Then, he realized. "You knew this was coming?"

The man nodded. "For some time."

"But why didn't you tell me?"

The man watched the growing flames quietly. "Would you have believed me?"

The boy clenched his fists. "We should both be out there, fighting!"

The admiral shook his head. "We'd both be out there, dead." Without another word, he turned and began to set up camp.