"I'll protect you," she said. Her muscles were rigid, and her body smelled of dust and smoke. She kept her promise, at the cost of her life.

"I'll protect you." You opened your eyes in that dark night. You can't tell the conviction that keeps yourself going, whether it is for the justice, or simply the revenge, or only to protect the girl who once died for you.

Translated by Anne, a beloved work《生于荒蛮》on LOFTER, originally written in Chinese by 鸵鸟的秘密. Special thanks to co-translator 羽塵 (Vincy), editor and proofreader Natalie (Shipping is sharing) and Chen.

Notes

Hi there, this is Anne. I'm translating this work because the storyline is just so good I was blown away. I believe language should not be a barrier for readers all over the world to read such a good work. And that's why we decided to translate the work! Special thanks to our translating team: Vincy, Chen and Natalie for helping me out! They are just amazing. So helpful and fun to work with! Okay, gotta stop ranting. Enjoy!
01

You couldn’t completely stop humans from continuing their research on computer chips. It is the
technology correctness in this era. It is an inevitable result of the development of science. Sarah
Conner got imprisoned in a mental institute trying to stop it and now you are also fighting against the
people responsible too. No matter how small and insignificant your efforts felt, you kept on chipping
away tirelessly piece by piece.

Your efforts are not without repayment. Frequent anonymous warnings have finally raised people’s
precautions against The Legion. Computer programmers have set up 3 different compulsive self-
destructive programs in The Legion, so that when the rebellious AI appears, those programs can
stand as defense lines to protect the human race.

The order of the human society still remains, even though uncontrolled terminators emerge now and
then. You know that AI is essential to the productivity of today's society, and that humans can never
learn the lesson before the end of the world comes. What you are fighting tooth and nail for is to
maintain the balance between humans and the machines.

For ten years, you are in a constantly war against the derailed AIs. You were seriously injured
several times. Your life was once hanging by a thread. But you survived. Every time.

Your dedication and rich experience against the rebelled AIs have gained funding and support from
the government. Finally, you became the official leader of the Human Reserved Army Against
Rebellious AI. The army absorbs people who share the same beliefs, and you led the development of
destructive viral codes and lethal weapons. You connect allies and build military bases around the
world, working together with one aim to kill those unruly Terminators.

These are things that Sarah has been doing for her entire life. But you led it into a much bigger
resistance. Sarah had to admit, you were born to lead.

02

You set up the headquarters in a small town where Grace lives, and occasionally after work, you go
to see her without her knowledge. She has long blonde hair and her eyes are full of light that you’ve
never seen before. She didn’t have to go through the bereavement of losing her parents, nor has she
been trampled down by the cruelty of life. Grace, as you expected, lives a calm and ordinary life.

She is smart and full of life. She has a great personality, and many friends. She is the eldest girl in the
family. She has a pair of loving and encouraging parents, two siblings, and a dog. Sometimes, you
brush past her on the sidewalk when she jogs with her dog. You watch her grow taller and taller, and
she gradually becomes the Grace in your memory.

The cases of rebelling AI are increasing every year, and the mission list on the big screen of the
headquarters keeps rolling, never ending.

You and your people are professionals in dealing with AI cases, but the sacrifices and injuries are
inevitable. Your soldiers jokingly complain that every trip is like death waving a sickle on your head,
but none of them refuse to go on a mission.

You smashed a glass at the special meeting with the government. You firmly rejected the proposal of
the human augmentation project.
The government has no choice but to compromise. After ten years, aside from Sarah (retired already), you are the person who’s most familiar with Terminators. They suspended the human augmentation project, and they keep delivering fresh blood to your team. They call you The Special Forces. Your research labs and training camps are filled with young elites from all over the world. They have gone through a strict series of screenings and exams since their teenage years, hence developed an almost instinctual understanding of artificial intelligence. You guide them and protect them like a hen to its chicks, and they develop a deep admiration for you as they hear the victory messages from your troops all around the world.

Young recruits undergo a series of rigorous assessments. Stamina, agility, speed, and strength are all indispensable physical abilities when fighting against Terminators. The admission rate to your troops is usually less than 5%, and the soldiers who scored less than 60% in survival rates are dismissed. You have to win each and every battle. It’s not winning if you’re piling up dead bodies.

You once returned to your home in Mexico. You buried your father and brother’s ashes, cleared all traces of your existence, and took the last family photo left there. You suddenly thought of how you and Grace never had a photo together.

But then again you don’t want the photo you’d rather hope that she’s never met you and is living safely.

It was the last night you slept at home when you dreamed of Grace. She carried you out of the truck that exploded in the next moment. Her muscles were rigid, and her body smelled of dust and smoke. "I will protect you," she said. Her fingers were cold and stiff, like some object, like there’s no blood flow.

You know that an augmented human doesn’t live long. She kept her promise, at the cost of her life.

"I'll protect you." You opened your eyes in that dark night.

This world, you won’t let her fall into danger again. She will have a normal life. You can’t tell the conviction that keeps yourself going, whether it is for the justice, or simply the revenge, or only to protect the girl who once died for you.

Two years later, you saw Grace's name on the new recruits list.

You could not believe your eyes. It can’t be happening. You looked at the girl's picture attached at the top right corner, the long blond hair tied into a ponytail, and a bright smile.

There are many people staring at you during the meeting. Your hands are shaking. The recruit officer hasn’t noticed. It is usually his job, but as normal, the list has to be signed by you.

“This one, cross her off.”

You said, pointing to Grace’s name.

“But ma’am,” he tried to justify his new recruit,

“She is outstanding. All the indicators are far above the average. She is arguably the best among all previous recruits.”

“Don’t make me repeat myself.”

You turned around with the resume in your hand. The officer was at a loss, only to salute to your back.
You’ve got a lot of work on your desk, but you are holding on to Grace's resume so tight that your knuckles turn white.
No wonder you haven't seen her in the past two years. You thought she finished high school and went to college out of the town. You even felt a little sad about it. You had no idea that she passed the test of The Special Forces Academy and planned to join your army.
And she is as good as her past life ---- you want to curse the ruthlessness of fate.

06
On the third day after the recruitment, Grace finds you. You don't know how she does it. You never take bodyguards. You leave the headquarters at 10 and drive back to the apartment you share with Sarah.
Grace stops you at the door of your apartment.

"Why did you cross me out?"
Her eyes are so blue, with courage that only belongs to the young,
"You have no reason. You can’t cross me out just like that, not even if you’re the commander!"
You are twelve years older than the young Grace. Ten years of being a leader has given you a solid rock heart. In the face of the question from Grace, you don’t even blink your eye.
"I have no reason.” you said, “I just don’t like you.”
Grace holds a breath. She can’t believe you smothered her for such reasons.

"It’s really not a friendly meeting, eh?"
Sarah comes out of the door and she’s still quite fit. You give her a side eye, and she of course ignores you.

"Have a drink, kid?"
Sarah pushes a slice of lime into a bottle of beer and hands it to Grace.
You know Grace was about to turn it down. She’s still under twenty. But the girl glances at you and reaches for the bottle. She drinks like a defiant teenager.
The three of you are staring at each other. The air is tense. And your eyes suddenly get a little wet.

"No one can live under your wings for the rest of her life. How she respects you in the first place, you should respect her in the same way."
Sarah and Grace clink the bottle, you know she’s criticizing the way you protect Grace.

But they aren’t you. They don't know what you’ve been through.

Chapter End Notes

Finished translating the first chapter in one night. It's not as easy as I thought it would be. But here it is. Comments are highly appreciated! Let me know if you like this work! And also please let me know if there are anywhere confusing or I translate wrong. I'll be more than willing to correct them!
07.
Grace’s appeal results dismissed your previous decision. The military commission commented that your decision lacks reasonable explanations. You know that the members of the commission are a group of arrogant and useless old guys. You also know that if you insist, they will eventually let you use the commander’s privilege.

But you didn't take further action on it. Sarah was right, if Grace is determined to take this path, you can’t stop her. And you don’t really want to screw up your relationship with the girl.

But you still put her into an awkward situation by forcing her appeal.

Grace had a perfect record as a cadet, and her appeal letter dropped a bomb in the military base. Some say she is too audacious, and more soldiers didn’t like her because she got you questioned by the military committee.

But Grace doesn’t give a shit about the rumors. She didn’t cheat on her records and she is indeed the best recruit in the past few years. You are not surprised. In the future that hasn’t happened yet, the reason you chose her to go back in time was that she indeed was the best soldier ------ and the one you trust the most.

08.
After the intake boot camp, all recruits will face a three-day real-scenario assessment. The Terminator simulators your army developed has had some breakthroughs. It can generate various combat situations to test the soldier’s ability. Among all the models, the T-800 series are regarded as a classic test by the drill instructors.

James Taylor is the head of recruit department. Right now, he is doing the pep-talk of the assessment and the precautions for the new recruits. Anxious suddenly struck you out of nowhere. You look down through the single-sided glass from the console on the second floor. Grace is standing next to a red-haired girl who is whispering to her. You’ve seen that girl before. She and Grace went to the same high school and they graduated from the academy at the same time. As Taylor announced dismiss, Grace grabs the girl’s shoulder and start messing with her hair. The two laughed together.

You turn around and leave.
When you have some free time, you would give classes to the rookies. You never teach by the book (you aren’t good at those anyway). You hand out situation simulators and start real-time combat immediately. When the thirty-minute simulation ends, you rewind the combat. During the playbacks, everyone’s behavior gets magnified, no mistake escapes under your eyes. And you do not play mercy during your classes. Even so, the seats are always full, and the soldiers fight each other to get a spot.

But you’ve never seen Grace in your class. Your conversation that night seems to make the girl hold the grudge.

“You’re the person all of the soldiers look up to, but you just broke her dream.”

Sarah taunts you.

You regret a little for that night ----- a decade of being in the middle of warfare has made your heart cold and hard like a stone. You want to protect her, but the way you chose lacks some friendliness and kindness that you know you should have.

Sarah gave you the video from the closed circuit televisions and you watched it (hacking into the surveillance system to see what the new recruits are up to is always her guilty pleasure after retirement), when Grace’s friends invited her to take your class, she refused with some hesitation: “The commander doesn’t like me,” she said with a bitter smile.

Occasionally, you two would run into each other in the hallway, she would salute you as normal, but her body was a bit stiff. You can tell while other recruits are thrilled to talk to you, she just wants to dodge you.

But you didn’t regret for long. Your relationship soon ran into a tempering opportunity.

The recruits are set to run the lowest setting in the situation simulator. But two scammers sneaked into the control room for a stupid dare, changing the simulator setting into a difficult mode. While in the simulator, soldiers don’t get much damage to their body, but it can cause tremendous mental stress if not in control. And it doesn’t take long for a person to get permanent psychological trauma with no simulating experience.

James finds out the mischief five minutes after the simulation initiates. He reports it to you immediately and launched the emergency protocols.

Fifteen minutes later, the recruits get kicked out of the system one by one. Most of them died in the simulator. Still suffering the pain, the victims are transported to the hospital urgently.

After forty minutes, Grace is the last soldier still in the simulator. The stress indicator on her helmet turned orange. It means that although Grace has not died in the simulation, her mental state is critical. You tried to hold her hand, but she shoves it off and her helmet starts alarming.

Before James can stop you, you get into another simulation by her side in a swift movement and connected yourself in.

Even though it's you, in a hard mode like this, you can’t help but to feel almost suffocated. You are familiar with this simulation. It is taken from a block of memory provided by Sarah - the day that 3 billion people died. A living hell on earth. The Terminators approach the city from all directions. Very few survived in a city that had several hundred thousand people.

By using your memorization of the city, you find Grace in a short time. She is kneeling in the
shattered glass, in the corner of a cafe, and she’s still trying to protect a group of survivors. Her hands are on a child's ears, and the gun by her side looks like a piece of plastic toy.

You notice her hand trembling slightly, she is squinting at the streets and you can see blood dripping down her temples.
You feel some relief as Grace has found the main task in this simulation. She is taking the responsibility to send the virtual humans to a safe point.

You walk towards her. She turns towards you alert, but she her eyes widen in surprise when she sees your face.

"Ma’am?"
She asks slowly: "Is this part of the simulation?"
You don’t know what to do but to tell her about the situation she’s in, and the fact all her teammates have been eliminated.

"This is a team task. Just the two of us won’t be able to make it to the end. So I am coming to..."

You can’t finish the sentence. A new round of attack begins. You instinctively pull her behind you.
Bullets brush past your cheeks. The pain is real.
You firmly hold her hand. It’s warm, and it has a normal body temperature. Your heart wrenches.

Grace hesitates for a split second, but she doesn’t let go of your hand.

You and grace run in rain of bullets, trying to find a safe point to get out of the simulation.
You hold her hand as tight as you can, just like she held yours ten years ago. You don’t know what you are thinking right now, whether it is compensation or nostalgia.

Grace hasn’t fully grown into that woman yet. She’s not so much taller than you, and still ties a ponytail. She has a typical girl's stature. The muscles are not that strong yet.

But she is already covering you when running - it’s like her innate instinct.

"The exit point is right in front..." she yells.

You saw the blue lights under a sculpture in the center of the city.
You know that a minor boss is coming to you, it’s a liquid terminator. You have to be hit by it once before you can get out of the simulation. That is the penalty for quitting halfway.
The moment you push Grace away, the side of your torso is penetrated by a bullet.

You have run the simulation so many times that you know the injury is inevitable. So you anticipated the shot and received it with a tricky body position. The shot won’t slow you down, and the injury won’t be so light that the system determines as an invalid shot.

But you can feel Grace frozen by your side at that moment. She looks at you incredulously, stunned by the fact that you took the shot for her.

You keep running, tumbling through the exit point while dragging Grace behind you.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

13
The incident with the simulator tampering is considered a major failure within the department of recruitment. The two idiotic new recruits were dismissed from the army, and all drill instructors received punishment. You also spent three days writing a report of the incident. The injured soldiers need more than two weeks to recover, meanwhile there are frequent AI attacks in North America. An elite team that had fifteen soldiers were trapped and eventually killed. After the funeral, Grace waits for you at the door. Some officers tell her to leave because they sense your mood. But she doesn't move, just stares at you over the crowd.
You could've ignored her. As a new recruit, she has no privilege to talk to the commander on a formal occasion. But you stopped in front of her.
She came to say thank you, for that day you entered the simulation to get her out, and for taking the shot so that she didn't have to.

"That was the best way to get out with the least damage,"
You don’t move. Your eyes are fixed to the reports and analysis from the front line. "Every soldier should be able to assess the situation and make the best decision they can. You don't need to thank me for that.
"I will become a better soldier." Grace lowered her head, her blonde hair was coated with sunshine. "You've already done great."
You are telling the truth. You didn’t say it to comfort her feelings. But her eyes are so bright. She stands up straight and lifts her arm to perform a salute to show her respect.
You couldn’t look her straight in the eyes.

14
After the incident, the tension between you and Grace is clearly getting looser.
She starts to sign up to your classes like all other new recruits do. She always prepares a bunch of questions to ask you after classes, and waits in line to get your individual coaching during office hours.
You keep warning yourself that you should keep a distance from her, because that’s better for both of you.
But you can’t do it. You always answer her questions in great detail. You take her into simulations to mentor her. In the first year, you took her through dozens of different simulations and full-dress rehearsals. You showed an enormous amount of patience that hadn’t been seen for more than ten years. In Sarah’s words, you taught Grace with strictness and warmness.
Even the instructors complain that you are biased, that you’ve never spent so much time on any other recruits.
But Grace is worth it. She’s talented and hardworking. She learnt all the core techniques and knowledge in the Special Forces like a sponge. She took just eight months to complete her two-year training. Grace went on to serve as a reserved soldier for the First Formation, the troop that receives orders directly from you.
"As a person with over 800 attempted assassinations a year, you should bring up a successor." James said, "You should feel lucky that you’re still alive."
He is not joking. You are too many people’s enemy. In addition to The Legion and its machine dogs,
there are many extremists and rival countries that want you dead. Your head is the most wanted on the darknet. Even Sarah admits that she would be interested with that amount of money.

So, you have been perfecting the structure of The Special Forces. You work on decentralizing power, and cultivating elite soldiers. You want to be prepared so that the organization can operate normally even when you are gone.

And your carelessness towards your own safety frustrates Grace a lot.

One day, you and Grace go into a tropical jungle simulation to practice a mission to rescue the hostages. To catch a meeting you scheduled at 9 pm, you almost used yourself as a human shield for Grace and you got quite a few shot wounds just to finish the simulation quickly.

After you both take your helmets off, Grace loses her temper. She thought you didn’t care about your life. Even though this is a simulation, you should avoid unnecessary injuries and sacrifices.

You know that she is right, but her tone was quite rude as a soldier talking to the commander, and it reminds you of the Grace from thirteen years ago.

You are so triggered. You throw your age and identity away and have a big fight with her like a couple of teenage girls.

During your meeting at 9 pm, everyone at the table can sense your fury. Your face looks like you’ve just ripped ten T-1000 apart with your bare hands.

Of course, you can’t rip a T-1000 apart by hand. Moreover, you are soon to be torn apart by the T-1000.

You can sense the evolution of the Terminators. This time they set a sneaky trap - without a clear mind, you fall directly into it.

Your team is on a nameless island deep down in the pacific ocean. You have no way to call for help even the mothership is only seventy miles away - your signal is cut by the AI.

The pioneer squad suffers heavy losses. The wound you’ve sustained is so deep that your femur is visible. You take to the jungle for cover, struggling with the survivors until the final time comes. It’s only a matter of time before you and your squad get exposed - drones brought by T-1000 can sense the infrared waves from your body.

The moment you are discovered by The Legion, countless bullets splash down like raindrops and the fire almost forms a curtain in the dark woods.

That’s when Grace appears. She pushes you into the bunker and leans over you. She uses her body to separate you and the bullets.

You almost stopped breathing.

She is now only a fragile human being like you, but the posture she protects you with seemed like she could use her body to block everything away.

You order her to release you. You yell so loud your voice is cracking.

You don’t know since when she has grown so tall that she can cover you completely. Neither do you know when she has became so strong that you can’t resist her at all.

This scene ignites the deepest fear in your heart. You glare at the front but can only see the white lights.
The two of you get lucky, the bunker takes most of the bullets. Grace doesn’t get injured, only the last flicker of fire slips through her ponytail burning the hair. She releases you when the attack stops.

You sit up straight and slap her.

17
You didn’t hold back your force of slap, and she is stunned. She sits up as well, the light in her eyes is dark and unclear.
“What did I say...”
You are having a breakdown: “What did I tell you?! Did you pay attention to what I said?! ” “Never sacrifice your life for others.” She replies quietly.
You clench your teeth, just a minute ago, you almost lost her again.
“This is a real warzone! What you just did can get us both killed, Grace! There are other people in the base that can replace my role! You don’t sacrifice yourself like that!” Your voice even carries a pleading tone that you aren’t aware of: “You promised me...”
“No.”
Suddenly she raises her head and looks at you firmly:
“No one can replace you, Dani.”

Your heart misses a beat.
She looks at you.
She has called you teacher, ma’am, commander. And today, it’s her first time in this life that she calls you Dani.
The support troops come to defeat the terminators and you flee away.

18
You stay in the emergency room for a long time and everyone has a lingering fear for your life. They did a bunch of unnecessary examinations on you, tended to your wounds and gave you a vaccine for some communicable disease.

You are really tired. Your physical capabilities decrease as you age. But you are afraid to fall asleep recently - when you do fall asleep, you always dream about the Grace from thirteen years ago. She layed in a pile of ruins, holding her last breaths. She comforted you softly, telling you not to be afraid, and her eyes were slowly losing focus.

You scream in tears trying to grab her, and you feel her arms in your hand.

Your eyes open.

It’s Grace. She is standing next to you adjusting your IV. She has cut off her burnt ponytail and the new haircut is neat and clean. She is wearing a white vest, exposing the strong muscles on her arm. There are red marks on her face - you just slapped her a few hours ago.
You look at her dully, you can’t tell if this is a dream or not.

She doesn’t know why you are crying so hard. She cuddles you and comforts you with a soft voice. Her arms are warm, just like the day she carried you out of the pick-up truck 13 years ago.
Special thanks go to 羽塵 (Vincy) and Natalie!
What do you think of the work? Do you like how it's going? Let me know what you think in the comment section!
That day you cried for hours until you were so tired that you lost consciousness. Grace stayed with you the whole night because you wouldn’t let go of her shirt.

The two of you never mentioned about it like there’s an unspoken mutual agreement. After the battle, you are back to being the commander that gets admired by all soldiers, and she officially became an active-duty soldier of the First Squadron due to her military exploits.

You spend three days rewinding and self-reflecting over this battle in your head. Being emotional is an amateur mistake during combat, you have never let your emotions cloud your judgement - until Grace showed up.

“I couldn’t protect her.”

You complain to Sarah: “she never listens to me when it matters.”

Yet Sarah looks at you like she’s looking at some idiots:

“You sound like a single mother who doesn’t know what to do with her teenage daughter.” She laughs at you:

“Don’t worry too much. Grace is not your daughter. She is a lot more mature than you think.”

You know she’s right.

There are some differences between this Grace and the Grace from 13 years ago. She was like a prickly hedgehog back then, full of vigilance and hostility. She never let down her guard and she fought with gloomy eyes. But Grace of this timeline looks more like an ordinary girl befitting of her age. She has lots of friends and is always there when someone needs help.

You just want to protect her innocence.
No matter how many times you protest, when your finally have some precious free time from work, Sarah would always watch the surveillance camera of the army’s common room while making spicy potato salad.

You would tease her about her guilty pleasure, but you understand why she’s doing this - Sarah is too old to fight as a soldier, but she is still a warrior, and she misses the energy from the new recruits.

Sometimes you would glance over (god knows it was just a coincidence) and your eyes are caught by Grace and a red-headed girl. They chug tea and coffee and work on their assignments in the common room.

Her name is Nova Smith. She is an IT engineer. You’ve seen her before, from when you went over to sneak a peek at little Grace. She lived next door to Grace’s family.

Their peers like to tease her and Grace. They’ve locked them into small places, and they would tease them when they show up together.

Grace would beat up the person who made the tease while Nova would stand next to her, smiling with soft eyes.

All of a sudden you could begin to understand Sarah’s hobby. Who wouldn’t be jealous of their youth?

21

James is handing over his application for a short leave when Grace and another soldier came to your office. As a veteran, James has been working with you for six years now. He has long since been divorced from his wife. He has a five-year-old daughter, born with a rare blood disorder, living in a nursing home.

James gets a fair amount of stipend, but he always gets his food from the recruits’ dining hall, and he rarely asks for leaves unless it’s necessary.

Grace and her partner stop to salute him. James pats her shoulder, and sits next to you to fill in some charts for his application.

You’ve never met the boy who came with Grace. He keeps his eyes on the floor and looks very nervous.

“Ma’am,”

Grace started addressing you this way two years ago,

“Jim and I would like to use your simulators to do a pre-run of the C+ mission.”

You raise your eyebrows.
It’s not a secret that you pay special attention to Grace, and it is common for her to use your private simulators for combating training. However, it’s the first time that she brought someone with her.

“Jim is my partner for this mission,” Grace explains,

“The mission is on tomorrow, but the simulators for trainees are full.”

“Huh, you are afraid of a class C mission?”

James quips as he scribbles on his application.

“You are famous for your intrepidness.”

“It’s not like that, Sir.”

Jim, her new partner tries to explain for Grace:

“Our mission is to protect the technicians being transferred to another base. And as for me… I’m not really good at combat yet. That’s why Grace’s here.”

“The technician…”

James nods, he isn’t really asking a question:

“I know, it’s Smith, Grace’s little girlfriend. Of course she will be nervous.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.” Grace retorts immediately.

“Don’t worry, I know fraternizing is not allowed in the military.” James’s eyes never left his application, “We’ll keep your little secret.”

“I said she is NOT my girlfriend!”

Grace raises her voice and everyone is shocked, including you.

She turns to you, desperately trying to explain:

“Nova is not my girlfriend, ma’am! We are just friends from childhood. I didn’t break any rules…”

You attempt to appease her by hastily sending them on their way with the key codes for the simulators.
Three nights later, you go back to the apartment to retrieve some letters, and Sarah is making pizza. She put canned peas on pizza, and you are unable to reconcile with her palate.

"Do you have it?" Sarah asks you: "The cheesecake I wanted."

You take the cake box from your bag and toss it onto the dining table. Sarah pours a carton of whip cream out of nowhere and starts stirring it with a whisk. She orders you to put the marinated chicken into the preheated oven.

"Do you have a guest?" You don’t understand why she’s preparing such a feast all of a sudden.

"I called Grace," Sarah said, "It’s her 21st birthday. I promised to get her some beer when she’s finally old enough to drink."

"I don’t drink." You replied immediately.

"Nobody’s inviting you. You may go back to work now." Sarah didn’t even look at you, "Take the trash on your way out."

You are really spending the night at the office after all.

You do have a lot of work to do, but it’s not like you wouldn’t have stayed for a drink with them if they had insisted.

You put the file into the shredder somewhat spitefully.

It’s just a few minutes past midnight when your doorbell rings. It’s Grace. She’s wearing a denim jacket that you got her as her birthday present a year ago. Her cheeks are flushed, but somehow she manages to walk straight.

"Not bad." You really mean it, "You can still walk after a round of drinks with Sarah."

At the age of 21, she’s reached a height of 5’10” (1.78m). It seems that she has grown a taste for having short hair. She never grew her ponytail back after that battle.

Except for the light she has in her eyes, she has fully grown into the Grace of your memory.

You take your eyes off of her.

She sits down on the chair in front of your desk, and her blue eyes are fixating on you. Comparing to the normal Grace, it’s almost rude of her.
"You should go back to your dorm," you said, "you have drills tomorrow morning."

"Sarah said that you’re keeping someone in your heart, that you’ve been keeping this person for ten years."

Grace stares at you, she didn’t call you ma’am. "Can you tell me about it?"

You are screaming on the inside, cursing at Sarah’s meddling. If you knew she was going to talk about this, you would have barricaded your apartment door earlier this afternoon.

"There’s nothing to say, Grace."

You use every ounce of strength inside of you to try to stay calm: "It has nothing to do with you."

She lowers her head for a moment, but she stubbornly refuses to leave.

"Sarah said you loved each other, and you are doing all of this because she died protecting you."

You feel yourself suffocating.

"That’s why you broke down that day, you thought I was putting myself in danger to protect you, right?"

Grace is a bit drunk. She looked upset:

"You cried so hard that night, did you see her in me? Do you still love her? Why won’t you talk to me..."

"What exactly do you want to talk about?" You look up. Your tone flat.

"About how I killed her?"

Air freezes.

Grace looks at you in shock. Her beautiful blue eyes were full of disbelief.

“It’s simple.” You look at her. Your voice steady.

"Only one of us could live. If I didn't do it, I would have died."

This is the real reason you couldn’t forgive yourself after all these years. Regardless of the fact that augmented humans don’t live long, or that you had to live to save the world, none of those justified what you had done. You are the murderer who killed Grace, and there’s no excuse for it.

This is what jolts you awake during those countless nightmares. This fills you to the brim with guilt and no escape in sight.
"Do you still think we love each other?"

You look into those blue eyes:

"If I really love her, I would have died with her thirteen years ago. But I lived. And now I am the commander of The Special Forces, granted the highest national honor and administrative allowance. What I've accomplished is well known by the people. But all of this is only possible because she died for me."

"I told you, Grace. Only victory is real. The most important thing is that you live. Dying leaves you with nothing!"

You can’t keep your emotions in check any longer:

"You see, she died in the hands of the person she trusted the most. She doesn’t have a single photograph. She doesn’t even have a gravestone for people to commemorate her! She is by far the dumbest idiot I've ever met in my life! And if you dare to be anything like her!! ”

Your haven’t finished your words.

Grace forcibly pulls you into her arms, only then, did you realize you’ve lost it again in front of her.

"I’m sorry,"

Her voice is trembling, as if she could feel your pain:

"I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked."

Her body smells faintly of roasted chicken and cheesecake, and it feels like sunlight scattering through the treetops during autumn.

"I won't be like her,"

She buries her face into your hair:

"I won’t let anyone die."

You finally let your tears stream down your face.

Chapter End Notes
Whew, this is an emotional one. My heart wrenches when Dani tries everything to change Grace's fate, even if it means she has to push her away, again and again, while desperately wanting to love her.
The next chapter is even more of an emotional rollercoaster, get prepared :)
25

Grace grows fast. And as she promised, she’s getting stronger.

She was recognized twice for the Special Operation Awards and once for the Special Force Distinguished Service Medal. Grace was promoted from a recruit to the Second Lieutenant in just 18 months. At the beginning, there was gossip about the relationship between you and Grace, but the rumors disappeared after Grace showed her strength.

Corporals occasionally organize hand-to-hand combat matches at the bar near the troops. This is not in accordance with the regulations of the Army, but you have turned a blind eye to this activity. After all, this is the most effective emotion outlet for the soldiers, and so far, it works better than any counselling.

Grace would occasionally join the fight - her odds are low but the seats sell out fast. She is one of the bar owner’s favourite contenders.

Sarah loves to watch this kind of activity, frequently spending her own dimes for VIP seating, and even joining the bid from time to time. Today you somehow ended your daily meetings earlier than usual and agreed to go to the game with Sarah.

Both of you know the fact that it is Grace’s turn to throw-down tonight.

26

Grace usually plays for two reasons, it’s either to teach the instigators a lesson, or to vent her heightened emotions, after grueling missions.

You know she’s fighting today due to the latter.

Grace just finished the last mission of the season yesterday. The squad she led had zero casualties, yet the squad sounded the alarm when they returned to the base.
You couldn’t go there with the first responders because you were tied up discussing the recent combat reports with the captains. It is only until later that you learned the dispatched medical staff were all mental health specialists.

The Special Force occasionally assists the government in completing welfare tasks. This time Grace confronted a cult. It is said when they arrived at the location, all the hostages had been skinned and hung upside down in the cave - most of them were still alive.

It was hell on earth, all the team members had lost it, including Grace. What’s more terrifying than any unfeeling machines is the capacity of humanity itself.

When you rushed to the hospital, Grace was sitting in the hallway, cross-legged, with her elbows resting on her knees, and an orange blanket draped over her. Her eyes were bloodshot.

Nova Smith was standing in front of her, holding her face in an attempt to comfort her. It seemed like Grace said something in reply, and then the girl leaned down and kissed on her eye.

Your only choice was to leave, because if you had stayed, your emotions would have exposed you.

It shouldn’t be like this, you told yourself. You are twelve years her senior. She treats you like a mentor and a Commander. She trusts you implicitly with her heart and soul.

How could you admit that you were wild with jealousy.

The bar owner almost has a heart attack when he sees you. But the shock transforms into a warm reception when he realizes that you have no intention of exposing your identity or clearing the stage.

Sarah and you are seated in the balcony on the second floor. It is both hidden from the arena and has a nice view of the stage. The bearded owner even threw in a fruit platter for free.

Grace is warming up for the night. She has three opponents tonight, and they will be drawing lots to determine the order. The last person standing will receive a very handsome prize.

Grace is not in high spirits. She looks somber wrapping bandages around her palm. With Smith and
Jim gathered around her, the sexy barmaid puts a metal dog tag with the fighting order around her neck, then proceeds to wink at her.

It’s the weekend tonight and the bar is packed. When Grace jumps onto the stage, the applause was deafening.

“She has lots of fans,”

Sarah shakes her bottle towards you:

“I might be the oldest among them all.”

“Understood,” you mutter, “Grandma.”

Grace is not very lucky today, she is up in the first round. Sarah tells you that it’s pre-arranged by the bar owner, since over half of the bar’s patrons are only here to watch her fight.

Her first opponent is a tall and slim middle-easterner with dreads. It only took Grace three minutes to put him down.

The second opponent is twice as big as Grace. She is six foot five, maybe taller, and looks to be about 200 pounds. You remember her, she is the lieutenant from the Third Squadron. She is a relatively rare aggressive female warrior, and her rank trumps Grace’s.

The game is evenly matched. Grace takes several punches from the opponent. The corner of her mouth is split and her upper arms are covered with abrasions from hitting the floor. But she ends the fight with a skillful back throw and trips the opponent off the stage.

That’s a technique you taught her, and she learnt fast.

When the third opponent is revealed, Sarah let out a breath. In contrast, the entire arena is filled with deafening cheering and screaming. If half of tonight’s audience is here for Grace, the other half come for him.

Thomas Gray, a major general in the army, known as the person walking on the bottom line of moral and ethics. He is tall and muscular, and famous for his cruelty. He has already gotten several penalties for breaking military regulations. What makes Thomas even more famous is his hatred towards women. Rumors say his birth mom is a prostitute, who abused him in his childhood. Even on a few formal occasions when he is standing in front of you, his eyes were unkind.
"I thought officers at the major’s level aren’t supposed to be here."

Anxiety is creeping into your mind.

"They aren’t," Sarah’s not surprised:

"You shouldn’t be here either."

"That’s not fair!" You hear Jim yelling in the overwhelming cheering, his voice pitifully small:

"Grace just fought 2 rounds!"

“Shut the fuck up, midget!”

He is shoved aside. That man seems to be a fanatic supporter of Gray, waving his fist and roaring:

"Kill her!! Thomas! Let her taste some real blood!! Teach her a lesson in humility!!"

Immediately, Grace's supporters turn to yell at him. The moment Thomas steps into the ring, is the moment that the night reaches its climax.

At the beginning, it is completely one-sided, Grace is pummelled by Thomas.

Thomas was enlisted five years prior to Grace. He is a very good soldier, with plenty of combat experiences, and he doesn’t hold back his strength. He caught onto Grace's weaknesses and struck back viciously.

Grace's right pinky is injured, and there’s a cut on her forehead that’s bleeding profusely. Nova and Jim are at the base of the stage, shouting at her to forfeit. The moment that Thomas tripped Grace and slammed on her, you sprang out of your seat. You swear you could hear her ribs cracking.

"You are weak, little girl. How did you get her favor?"

Thomas mocks her. Everybody in the arena know who he’s referring to:
“Did you climb onto her bed to please her? How did she like it? What did you do to let her think that a woman can do it better than men...”

He couldn’t even finish his words before Grace throws her elbow in his face. Thomas stumbles back a few steps from the momentum.

Grace’s eyes are dark and fierce. Her movements swift - she jumps up, grabs the railing and kicks Thomas’ abdomen with all her weight. Thomas is thrown to the ground a few meters away.

You grip tightly at the backrest of the seat in front of you, and your heart is racing. This Grace is a split image of the Grace you knew from 13 years ago.

"Stop her!"

You hear someone yelling: "Stop her! She’s going to kill him..."

Nova and Jim rush into the ring, but they couldn't pry her hands off of Thomas’s neck.


She grits out, one word at a time, with increasing fervor.

When you climb into the ring, it is as if someone hit pause on reality itself, and the whole place went silent. You grab Grace's arm and skillfully pull her hands off of Thomas Gray, whose eyes are now rolling back.

"Hey Grace, calm down."

You speak softly into her ear.

Grace looks back in astonishment.

The moment she sees you, the darkness in her eyes vanish. There are no more bloodlust or aggression. It is as if the gloomy Grace was just part of your hallucination.

Her eyes widen. She turns around to hug you, holding you tightly.
You pat her shoulder. You can hear her heart pounding wildly.

"You were right,"

Her voice is a little hoarse:

"You were right, Dani. I can't save everyone."

30

You leave Sarah behind to take care of the arena, and you take Grace to the roof of your apartment. The sky is clear and the stars are shining. In the fresh breeze, you open your first-aid kit by the dim street lights.

Tomorrow, you may go back to being the Commander and give all the people at the arena hell. But for now, you are just an older sister, trying to help a flustered kid.

"When we got there, a girl was crying for help."

Grace muttered:

"I couldn’t tell how old she was, but she hadn’t lost a lot of blood yet. There was a chance that she could have made it. When I set her down, I didn't even know what to do with my hands."

Grace is reliving her memory, and you didn't stop her.

That girl passed away, ten minutes after Grace brought her to a hospital.

"On the way back, I couldn't help but think, if I had caught the signal earlier, or if our aircraft arrived a little faster, maybe just by half an hour, I could have saved all of them."

She buries her face in her hands:
"Or fifteen minutes, just fifteen minutes, I could have saved at least half of them."

"Don’t blame yourself." You comfort her softly:

"We’re not God, we can only do what we are capable of. Grace, what did I tell you? You gotta take care of yourself before you can help others. Otherwise it is just meaningless sacrifice, not salvation."

You really want to drill this into her head. You are still hung up over her getting injured tonight.

She looks at you through the glowing streetlights. Her eyes are as clear as the sky.

Then she lowers her head and presses a light kiss on your cheek.

You are surprised. Not sure why Grace is being so intimate all of a sudden.

Gawking at your reaction, the girl flushes.

The very next moment, her lips are on yours.

Chapter End Notes

So here's Chapter 5! They kissed, THEY KISSED!! I'm dead already.

But! Gotta wait for the other shoe to drop...
31.

Grace’s lips are hot and soft. She presses into you right before pulling back, as if leaving her mark on you.

You could barely think during the whole incident. You slowly raise a hand.

She shivers a little, stepping back to put a safe distance between you. She looks at you carefully:

“... I can’t?”

“Of course you can’t!!”

Your brain finally came back online to shout at her. Your cheeks are burning.

Thankfully, it's dark out, and your natural skin tone makes it easier to hide your blush. You are in your thirties for crying out loud, it’s embarrassing to have your heart racing from a gentle kiss.

“I thought it was nice.”

She bows her head and mutters disappointedly.

“No Grace, you are just a little overwhelmed.”

You stand up and start to pace back and forth on the narrow rooftop, words come spewing out of you:

“You should head back to your dorm now. Both you and Gray will need to submit an incident report to your direct supervisor by tomorrow. Make sure what happened tonight never happens again. I’ll pretend nothing just happened.”

“Why pretend?”

Grace looks a little miffed. She blatantly disobeys your order and remains seated:

“I meant it!”

“I am 12 years OLDER than you!!!”

You want to scream, who could possibly have coddled and spoiled her into this degree of
stubbornness? Definitely not you.

“I don’t care!!” She raises her voice as well.

“Go back to your dorm now!!” You shout at her.

“NO!!”

God knows how much you want to kick her off the roof. Thomas Gray was such a good-for-nothing, he should have shut her up on that ring.

“I know you’re still thinking about her!”

Grace seems wounded by your outburst, she starts to ramble carelessly:

“But she is dead, Dani! It is me who’s by your side!”

You freeze, a chill runs up your spine.

Grace reminded you.

You don’t know where your destiny leads.

Is Legion ready to strike again? Will humans still have to face Judgement Day? Did you really put an end to the human augmentation project?

Everything seems to be falling into a predestined path. You are still the one who raised Grace. She admires you, she worships you, and she is even ready to sacrifice her life for you.

Then is it possible, that someday in the future when everything goes off the rails, you will still have to accept the fact that she will be transformed into a cyborg, and sent back to the past through your own machinations? By your own hands?

Is this an infinite time loop?

“You’ve crossed the line, Grace.”

You look at her blankly. Your heart heavy with fear:

“You should’ve kept your distance.”
Everyone can tell that something is up between you and Grace.

She became your only protégé after you rescued her from the simulator five years ago. She is loyal to a fault, and lives by your words.

But now it seems like her demeanor has changed. She refuses to attend any non-mandatory meetings and throws herself into missions. She seems to be keeping herself busy in order to justify avoiding you.

Although you feel a little lonely, you know this is to be expected.

Grace doesn’t belong to you, she is brilliant enough on her own. Even without you around, she will do just fine.

Nova and Jim are her faithful friends. Her squad is always complaining about her boundless stamina while giving her cover on the battlefields.

For vacation, Grace went to an island. They spent the entire day playing beach volleyball - everyone got a tan. You hear someone mention a fling she had — a girl working as a part-time hula dancer sneaked into her room in pajamas on the very last night.

“Did you sleep with her?”

Another soldier in her squad pokes fun at her in the hallway, then pats her squarely on the shoulder:

“I can’t believe it! There were fourteen dudes and she chose you!”

Grace is laughing, but glances towards you as you are passing by. She brushes him off, and the whole squad immediately wipes their smiles off their faces and steps aside. They salute you impassively.

You nod in return, making a friendly small talk with Grace about her vacation.

“It was good, ma’am.”

She replies in a very formal tone.

You feel a little helpless while those accompanying you keep silent. You graze past her, but the distance between the two of you spans decades.

“What did you do to her?”

James is holding a stack of files, smacking his lips:
“She’s looking at you like you owe her a shit ton of money.”

You let out a sigh, then enter the meeting room.

33.

You don’t have time to dwell on what is going on between you and Grace, this is not a sentiment born out of arrogance, but the future of mankind rests on your shoulders.

After all these years of hard work, you have kept AI development under control, but there are always unforeseen circumstances as society evolves.

Said emerging crisis originates from a set of data intercepted by the government.

An analysis done by the intelligence sector indicates that Legion may have constructed a time machine through self-directed iterative processes.

The time machine in its current state is not fully operational, it has the basic function but lacks the functionality to select exact time slots - which means right now Legion can only teleport items randomly, without a specific time or location. The teleporting process is very unstable, due to Legion’s currently suppressed development, there are chances that objects teleported could be lost in the time stream.

Even so, this is terrifying enough.

You recall that teleported machine, a Rev-9, from seventeen years ago. It killed your father and brother.

It was only supposed to be a routine meeting - but with your discretion and expertise, it became a meeting requiring the highest clearance, concerning national security. You gathered all the current literature, data, and known experts on time travel, and you formed a research group.

Next, you have to submit a request to suppress this information, and also check on the time-travel capsule created by Legion. It’s useless to destroy it - if Legion is capable of creating the first capsule, it can always make more.

You try to convince yourself that this isn’t a complete disaster, At least now The Special Forces have a time machine as well. You will monitor its data and prevent unexpected visitors from starting a massacre in your timeline.

You set your glasses down and rub your eyes, trying to catch a nap before having to rush to the government building in the afternoon. That plan fails - chaos breaks loose outside of the conference
You walk out of the room and are shocked by what you are looking at.

Ever since that fight, Thomas and Grace became enemies. Their squads have been competing under the table for quite a while now. Now when they run into each other in the hallway, the hormonal boys were easily provoked, and it did not take much to escalate things into a brawl.

James and the other instructors follow you out to put an end to the skirmish. You see Grace sitting against the wall with her head down, holding her hand.

Your heart drops.

Her pinky is not fully healed over such a short period of time, and you know Thomas is the insidious type. He must have reinjured it.

Your heart wrenches, and you hurriedly squat down beside Grace:

"What's wrong with your hand? Show me."

Grace trembles when you reach out to touch her hand, yanking it away immediately:

"I’m fine," she says, her voice sounds husky.

"Commander!"

The vice captain of the squad is a brunet, you can't remember his name. He is still entangled with his opponent, but he shouts in your direction:

"It’s not the captain's fault! It’s Gray! That son of a bitch sneaked up and attacked the captain!"

"Shut up!!" Grace yells at him.

You are so mad that your whole body is shaking. You have decided that you’re going to teach Thomas a lesson for this, but right now you need to help Grace. You reach out to offer her support:

"Come with me. To the clinic."

Grace avoids your hand again, and you can feel anger creeping up inside you:

"Grace..."
"You said no. So stop messing with me, Dani."

She looks at you, her stunning blue eyes are full of sorrow:

"I'll go by myself. Can you please stay away from me? Please."

You kneel there sullenly. Her words are a slap to your face, and there’s a dull ache in your heart.

Grace lowers her head, her face is pale, and her brows are tightly knit. The pinky on her right hand is twisted at an odd angle, looking very painful.

Neither of you speak for a while. You turn your eyes to the floor:

"Okay."

You whisper, trying to keep your voice calm:

"I’m sorry."

35

You aren’t yourself the next day. You are caught zoning out twice during the summit.

The existence of a time machine has created panic and fear in the general public, and you’ve managed to successfully gain full access to it. The government permits you to detach the time machine from Legion and bring it back to the headquarters for research and real-time monitoring.

After all, if something ends up being teleported to this world, you and your army should be the first line of defense.

The time machine is a huge egg-shaped tungsten metal capsule with a volume of ten cubic meters (353 cubic feet), enough for two adults to enter at the same time. Its door is made of some special compound alloy to ensure stability and safety during transmission. Legion is an advanced Artificial Intelligence, and its creations can be considered works of art. The research team is very interested in this thing, and you decide to transport it to the base overnight, to avoid potential incidents.

The government dispatched a large military transport aircraft to assist with the process. At 4am the plane landed 70 kilometers away from the base.

The base has sent two squads for this mission, and Grace is directing the team with a walkie-talkie. They carefully haul the time machine into a military tractor trailer. The two of you brush past each other without a word.

You didn’t return to your apartment. You slept on the sofa in your office and set an alarm for 8am.
You are cleaning yourself up, getting ready to study the time machine, when you see Grace playing with James’ daughter out on the lawn just beyond your window.

The little girl’s chubby arms loop around Grace’s neck, and both of them are smiling radiantly.

The moment you step out of the door, Grace’s smile stiffens. She lets go of the girl, who stumbles back to James and hugs his legs.

"You’re still on duty?" You ask her.

She nods.

You turn back to James with a calm expression, requesting him to follow you to the time machine. Grace takes her weapon and escorts you both.

You and James investigate the machine thoroughly. The Legion isn’t kind enough to provide you with an instruction manual. The two of you examine rows and rows of buttons again and again, then return your focus back to the power source and the console.

“This is a job for the professionals.” You sigh.

Normally James would agree with you. But today is a little different - he keeps on fiddling with the buttons on the console.

“It’s almost time,”

You turn to him: “We should go.”

As soon as you finish the sentence, all the buttons in the machine light up. It has been activated.

“James?!” You are stunned: “What’ve you done?”

He doesn’t look at you; someone is banging at the door.

You turn around, and through the small window on the time machine’s hatch, you see another James. He slept in the dorm last night and seems to have just woken up. He is in his pajamas and staring at you with utter confusion.

Grace is smashing against the door. She seems to be screaming out your name frantically. You try to
read her lips, she is telling you to open the door.

“Grace!” You try to make the door budge but it’s already locked. You can see your baffled reflection in her panicked eyes.

Grace pounds repeatedly at the hatch with her fist, one that’s still covered in bandages. She shakes the handle desperately, and seems borderline frantic.

“It’s time to go, General.” James in the time machine finally makes a sound.

The next thing you feel is complete weightlessness.

Chapter End Notes

Plot twist! This time it's Dani’s turn to go to another world.

Let me know your thoughts! What's gonna happen next?
You twist into a flip gracefully, bending your knees to cushion your fall, the moment gravity re-establishes itself.

The other James lands beside you and offers his hand. You give him a cold glance and he doesn’t budge.

You should have noticed - this James is nothing like the friendly instructor who always followed you around. He is leaner, more vigilant, and has a very subtle scar on his face.

“Where did you take me?”

He doesn’t answer your question, just signals you to look up.

You follow his gesture. Even for a person like you, who has been through a lot, you are at a loss for words right now.

This is the end of the world.

The time machine lands on a clearing near a cliff. You notice that the capsule is more advanced, yet more aged than the one you have seen before. The surface of the cliff is burning hot. Above you, the sky is a picturesque sunset, beneath you, the canyon is filled with rolling lava.

The world is cast in an orange glow, the black ashes drifting down are the remnants of this decaying world.

All that remains in this world is the ground beneath your feet, and it looks ready to collapse.

You take a step back and see the drones sent by Legion. They are hovering in the air, moving in sync, like a series of balloons floating in front of you.

“Don’t panic, they are not active anymore.”

Someone breaks the silent. But you completely lose the ability to think when you hear that voice.

It’s your own voice.

You jerk your head around violently and see another Danny.

She is standing near the entrance of a cave next to the cliff, and she looks about your age. She is
wearing a black vest and camouflage cargo pants. She smiles at you with a face that you know by heart.

38.

You look at her, suddenly dumbfounded.

No wonder this James addressed you as general instead of commander. This world belongs to future Grace - a world where Terminators thrived, and humans set up resistance out of despair.

And this mirror image standing in front of you, is the you who raised the Grace from the future.

“I am sorry to invite you over in this manner and at this point in time”

Danny motions you to take a seat on a chair outside of the cave:

“But we have no choice, it’s the last day of this world.”

You sit down slowly, starting to feel a headache coming on.

“The time machine can operate a time jump through an internal linkage. We tried our best to protect this capsule and its battery. And as a result, it brings back the first one who entered it in the parallel world - you.”

Danny starts to explain.

You notice her wording: “Parallel? You mean what I did in my timeline can’t influence this world?”

“That is correct.” Danny replies quietly:

“We are two independent parallel timelines. And you are the only me who successfully prevented the Judgement Day in all existing alternate universes.”

You fall silent.

And then you start to hyperventilate.

That is the BEST news you’ve heard in seventeen years.

Your efforts are going to pay off and all your fears are unfounded. Your world will be safe and Grace won’t become a cyborg. You succeeded!
Then you realize something, and you look at her:

“Is that the reason you sent Grace back to save me?”

"Yes,"

Danny fidgets with her fingers, the same way you fidget with yours:

"We know the end of humanity is unavoidable. The scientists calculated data on numerous parallel universes, and they locked onto yours, Dani. They told me that your universe is the only one that can escape annihilation. The only one where humanity survives. Your universe is the only hope for all of us."

You cover your mouth in astonishment.

"So I asked Grace to go back in time to protect you. I told her to save your life even at the cost of hers. It is not just for humanity, but for me. All of me, in an infinite amount of parallel universes."

Danny looks at you, and you see tears in her eyes:

"She lived up to my orders, didn’t she?"

There is a sudden throbbing pain in your chest.

What an experience. You never expected that someday, someone would feel exactly the same way about Grace’s death as you:

"Yes, she did a good job ... she ..."

You think of your Grace in that split second. What went through this Danny’s mind when she sent Grace away? You couldn’t begin to fathom, because even at the cost of all humanity, you would never send your Grace onto the operating table.

It’s obvious that Danny has picked up on your train of thought:

"Don’t give me that look, Dani. Your Grace is the lucky one. You fought hard so she can have that peace. This is her fate. After all, in the majority of these universes, her and I, or you and her, we all
died together."

Danny looks up into the distance, reaching her hand for the horizon that had already disappeared, where lays inseparable seas and skies of neon and red:

"See? This is the last day of humanity in our universe. James and I are probably the only living creatures left on earth. I destroyed everything in this world, but I took Legion down with me."

Your eyes trail along her arms into the red nothingness, and you both fall silent.

40

This James pours a glass of water for you.

You talk about how you met Grace 17 years ago. Danny listens attentively, with a gentle light in her eyes.

You can sense her longing.

Danny has been fighting alone for far too long in this universe. Watching her teammates die one after another has made her insane and detached.

But Grace is a soft spot, both for you and for her. She even asks you to talk about your Grace, and you open your inner chatterbox - you just can't stop yourself.

The more you talk, the more you can't hold back your love, the emotions come flowing out.

You watched her grow up from a jumpy little girl to a determined strong woman, watched her stumble as a recruit to becoming an experienced soldier. Every practice in the simulation pod and every fight on the battlefield, every picture of her being with you, every look, every word, you remember them so clearly.

You love her.

You are finally willing to admit to yourself.
No matter which universe you are in, it’s clear that Grace will always be the love of your life.

At the end of the conversation, you down the water that was placed on the table.

Danny stares at you. She appears to be absolutely entranced by the story you have told her.

James coughs on the side.

You set down the cup, then stand up.

You bend down to tighten the laces on your boots.

"Now that we are done talking. Are you going to get to it?"

You grin slightly.

The atmosphere in the cave suddenly drops to the freezing point. James backs away, and Danny's eyes transformed.

In that split second, she has turned back to the ruthless resistance General, by whom thousands of lives have perished.

"So you figured it out?" She inquires softly with a dangerous tone.

“I AM you, Danny. I know what you are thinking.”

You respond in a growl:

“Destroying the world in such a draconian way, yet preserving the time capsule. Spending so much time analyzing data and finding the only parallel universe that avoided the end of the world. Sending James to kidnap me on the last day, right before the destruction of the world. All this work, just so you can kill me and replace me in my timeline?”
You take out the blade that was hidden in your boot.

You know you can’t beat them. They are rebels who went through Judgement Day - that James could possibly be a cyborg as well. Their combat experiences and capabilities far exceed yours.

You only have a slim chance, and you have no choice but to fight.

That Danny in front of you stands up, she swings her ponytail to the back and cracks her knuckles. She gives you a smile that can be considered genuine:

“I’m sorry but I have to do this. Do you have any last words? I’ll try my best to fulfill them for you.”

“If you happen to be the last one standing, since I have told you so many little things about Grace,”

You step back a little and fall into a fighting stance:

“I just want you to know, please put up a halfway decent front, and hide the truth from her.”

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger! I'll get the next chapter done as soon as possible, probably later today :)

We decided to use Danny and Dani to distinguish the two. Hope that makes it clearer!
You’re no match for her.

You know it before the battle even begins.

This Danny is a lot tougher than you.

Human potential is limitless. You live in a peaceful time, while she struggles in a post-apocalyptic world. She faces starvation, terror, and death every single day. She has lost her family, her friends, and her loved ones. She has nothing left to lose, meaning she now has nothing left to fear.

James doesn’t step in. Your one-on-one duel with Danny is her tribute to your impending demise. Both of you wield the same model of knives, no guns, and nothing else. It is a fight for survival.

She is faster than you, her muscles stronger, and her attacks ruthless. Her blade gliding against your skin in nearly every strike.

You try your best to defend yourself, while watching your steps so as to not fall off the cliff and tumble into the lava.

"Tell me more about her -"

Somehow that Danny is still able to chit-chat during the fight:

"How did she die? Was it painful?!"

There’s quite a bit of distance between you and her. She is shouting.

You don’t know if this is part of her tactics, or if she simply wants to hear everything about Grace.

"It was quick!"

You don’t know what you are thinking by responding to her:

"She told me she doesn’t have much time left, she told me to take her power source!"

With that said, you suddenly realize that Grace wasn’t talking to you when she muttered “I’m not.”
She was talking to this Danny:

Commander, I am not sorry, I did the right thing.

At the end of your epiphany, Danny's blade jabs into your upper arm.

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The blade is sharp and her movements are swift. It lacerates through your muscles and blood splatters onto your face.

You grit your teeth at the searing pain and take a few steps back.

Danny’s face turns venomous, her strikes suddenly accelerate. You are all too familiar with this maneuver. This is how you attack.

You quickly dodge her blades, again and again, retreating back to a relatively safe distance. You stop lashing out, trying to get past the pulsating pain.

She’s nimble and robust. You can’t even get close to her - you can’t see any openings.

But since she can hurt you by using this strategy, of course you can use it to fight back.

"Why did you augment her?"

It’s a question you’ve always wanted to ask:

"If I were you, I wouldn’t have changed a thing!"

"I was unconscious at the time!"

Danny is waving her knife towards you again:

"She was critically injured! I never consented!"

You have nowhere left to retreat. She springs off the ground and makes a jab at you. You narrowly avoid it, but she manages to knee you in the gut.

You take it like a champ, and sweep your knife upwards. Danny raises her head to avoid being sliced in the neck, but you still manage to open a giant gash on her cheek.

You both stumble backwards, blood dripping from your wounds.
“You didn’t protect her.”

You make the accusation.

Danny is obviously provoked by your words. She sneers, aiming the blade towards your eyes.

“Commander!” James shouts at her:

“Stop listening to her!”

“You sent her back to rescue me, just so you can live on? What is she to you, a pawn? When did you come up with this plan? Before the augmentation? Or after you sent her to the past?!”

You lean backwards, the blade skims past your eyes with less than an inch to spare.

Danny looks livid and her attacks become uncontrolled. You are no longer able to dodge them, and finally her knife pierces through your abdomen.

A rusty tang coats the inside of your mouth - this is possibly the worst injury you’ve ever sustained in your entire life.

Danny looks at you intensely, with a pitying look reserved only for the victor. There are inexplicable emotions swirling in her eyes:

“You don’t know anything.”

You smirk weakly in between gasping for air:

“Grace was apologizing before she died. To you.”

Her eyes widen.

You heave your arm, stabbing her in the chest without hesitating.

James snarls in the distance.
You reach out and push Danny off of you. She falls on her back and let out a soft wheeze.

She’s not dead yet, and neither are you.

You glance towards the time machine off in the distance, taking a deep breath and using the ground for support - you slowly get up.

You know the threat is still present with Danny, and the James from this timeline is standing right next to the capsule. They can drag you right back to hell.

But you don’t care.

You are going back.

Back to your Grace.

You are going to tell her, you have been watching over her since she was young. You are going to tell her you love her, tell her that all your efforts eventually pay off.

The Judgement Day will never come, and the two of you can finally be together.

You keep pressure on your wound, dragging your feet slowly.

You inhale sharply, the pain is hitting your head like a sledgehammer. The blood drips onto the ground and quickly evaporates on the steaming rocks.

There are footsteps near you.

The next thing you know, someone is grabbing your hair and pulling you back. A cold blade presses against your vulnerable throat.

The scars on James’ hand prove that he has been augmented. But even if he is an ordinary human, you have no strength left to break free.

You look up at the sky with the burning sunset. The blade presses down with increasing pressure, in a matter of a second, it will slit your jugular.

“James,” you hear Danny say, “Let her go.”
The blade on your neck stills, but the person behind you keeps ahold of you.

“You were right. It does seem like I used her after all.”

Danny is laying on her back. Her skin red from the scorching heat radiating off the ground, but there is no pain in her expression. Instead, she looks at ease:

“It’s not fair. Despite both of us being Danny, when it comes to Grace, why do you get to have the happy ending.”

“I knew she wouldn’t live long after the augmentation…she died in your world and I have always wanted to visit her.”

“Grace will probably blame me for hurting you. She tried so hard to protect you.”

“It’s me who should say sorry.”

Her eyes start to lose focus:

“James, let her go. My Grace is gone…but hers…is still waiting for her...”

The man behind you hesitates for a second, then he suddenly lifts you up and carries you. Fading in and out of consciousness, you vaguely sense him opening the time machine’s hatch and shoving you inside.

You lie on the deck, wheezing, the pain almost knocks you out.

James steps across you and activates the console for you. The machine starts to roar as he exits the capsule.

“I heard that, in your timeline, a treatment for Lisa’s blood disorder is undergoing clinical trials, is that true?”

He holds on to the hatch, gazing hard at you.

Your world is still up and running. Society has not been severely incapacitated, and research in various fields continues to develop and have breakthroughs - including medication for various terminal illnesses.

You look at James and nod slightly.
In that moment, James’ face contorts to halfway between a sob and a smile:

“Keep Lisa alive.”

Lisa is his five-year-old daughter and your world seems to be carrying their last hope.

You close your eyes.

The time traveling process feels long and drawn out. So dark and silent that you feel as though you have already died.

But all of a sudden, your surroundings turn rowdy, there is sound, and there is light.

You can’t open your eyes, in fact, you can’t move at all.

You sense the hatch opening and hear the crowd gasping. The commotion comes in waves.

Someone is shouting for the doctor, somebody else is looking for a stretcher. The rest of them are dispersing the crowd to make a path. And the familiar footsteps rush to your side immediately.

“Dani!”

Grace calls you, trembling.

She grabs your unharmed shoulder, gently turning you over.

The crowd falls silent, and someone draws back a breath.

They see the knife embedded in your stomach.

“DOCTOR!!!”

You hear Grace yelling unsteadily:

“Where is the doctor?!”

She scoops you up into her arms:

“Hold on Dani. It’s just a stab wound, you will be fine!”
“Calm down. And don’t call me that in public.”

With your eyes closed, you weakly chastise her like you used to do.

“Oh for God’s sake ma’am, please shut up!”

She is hyped up from anxiety, fear, and your stubbornness:

“This is not a drill! And you have a knife sticking out of your stomach!”

You finally open your eyes. You reach out to softly shove her face aside. Leaving two bloody handprints, finding the time to appreciate the dark humor of it all.

“Don’t worry,”

Your heart fills with fondness:

“I’m back.”

Chapter End Notes

How do you like this chapter? I know cliffhangers are no good for you eager readers so here's a new chapter!

Comments are always appreciated :)


48

You sleep for a very long time.

Even though you tried to stay conscious to reassure those freaking out around you, travelling through time and space with such injuries almost cost your life. You’re just glad nothing was torn off. You definitely don’t want to leave behind an arm or a leg during quantum tunneling.

When you finally come around and open your eyes, it’s a dusky autumn afternoon. The sunset is glorious, with flaming clouds filling the sky. It reminds you of the sky in the post-apocalyptic world.

If it wasn’t for Sarah noisily flipping through a magazine right next to you, you would have been lost to your moment of melancholy.

"Is eating potato chips even allowed in a hospital ward?"

You stare at the ceiling:

"It feels like you’ve been crunching into my ear for at least an hour."

"Bullshit." Sarah says:

"There’s no way that a 12-oz bag took me an hour."

"I meant stop eating!"

You groan, wanting to cover your face, but the shooting pain in your shoulder makes you think twice. You are about to lose it:

"Please, I'm in pain. The smell of wasabi is way too pungent! You promised me you wouldn’t buy this flavor anymore! Jackass!"

Surprisingly, Sarah complies. She puts away the potato chips and the People magazine (Sexiest Man Alive issue), and looks at you with her arms crossed:

"Dani?"

You stay silent for a moment.
Sarah has anticipated everything, so the chips were just a little test to gauge your reaction to her.

"It's me," you say, "she let me go."

You stare at each other from across the room, with a thousand unspoken words.

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You spend ten minutes filling Sarah in on what happened in that world, and she takes it in with an unexpected seriousness.

"From the moment that James told me that another James was present in that capsule, I knew."

Sarah keeps talking:

"I'm more familiar with their tricks than you are. Traveling through time and space, killing your counterparts, replacing them, and screwing up everything else along the way. The invention of time travel is like dropping a rotten apple into a fresh barrel of apples. Once it spreads, there’s no stopping it, there’s no end to it."

Sarah shrugs:

"And you, Dani, you really are the type of person who would do this. After all, not just anybody can become the commander of The Special Forces or the leader of the Resistance. Without incredible foresight and a cutthroat attitude, you never would have made it."

"I just got my life back," you stare at your palm:

"Can you please save your backhanded compliments?"

"So, Dani can’t deliver Danny from her sins. Only Grace can make her repent."

Sarah snorts and sums it up poetically:

"Grace is truly an angel. She managed to subdue Danny’s inner demons."

You stare at Sarah blankly, the grey-haired woman arches her brow at you:

"In short, the fact that there’s no Judgement Day coming is the single most valuable piece of info."
That stab you took to the gut is well worth it. Grace is coming to swap shifts with me at 6pm. Are you gonna tell her the truth?"

You hesitate for a moment and shake your head:

"I'll wait a little longer." You utter:

"These things are a little too heavy for her..."

" Oh, Mommy. " Sarah mocks you:

"Better buckle your baby back into the stroller."

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Sarah and Grace take turns to care for you.

Sarah takes care of you during the day (if you can call it caring), and Grace spends her nights on the couch in your ward after completing classes and missions.

You’ve told her to return to her dorm to rest; there’s overnight medical staff on call, but she refuses. Through her descriptions of events, you find out that you were declared critical twice, after being taken to the hospital that day.

The Senior Staff immediately blocked the news from getting out, but too many people witnessed Grace carrying you out of the capsule with serious injuries. Rumors spread and the whole of headquarters went hysterical.

Under your leadership, the Army learned to operate very efficiently. Regular affairs and scientific researches carried on as usual, but everyone was a little distracted.

The generals were complaining incessantly. It’s not that they hadn’t considered the possibility of this ever happening, but nobody was mentally prepared for it to actually happen. Someone proposed selecting a successor during a regular administrative meeting, and he almost got beaten to death by officers who are close to you.

Fortunately, your vital signs gradually stabilized, and the Army is once again back to business as usual.

There is a greeting card on your bedside table, celebrating you waking up; the words "We love you" crookedly written on it.
But apparently Grace did not hop onto that happy bandwagon. She is sparse with her words. She will answer whatever questions you ask, and as for the rest of the time, she just sits there silently. Her eyes motionless, and you are a little spooked by them.

"Grace,"

You feel helpless. You maybe the patient, but you still have to give attention to the girl’s feelings:

"Come here and talk to me."

She sits down obediently on the chair beside you. She peels an apple for you, and thoughtfully divides it into small bite-sized chunks.

"What are you thinking?"

You ask her.

"I didn’t open that door."

She whispers:

"I should’ve opened it, but I couldn’t."

“I was on duty that day, but I didn’t notice anything strange with General Taylor.”

She blames herself.

“That wasn’t your fault,”

You are a little frustrated:

“I have spent years with James, I didn’t notice either.”

“I’m really sorry, ma’am. I…I wasn’t in my right mind at the time. Per our regulations, I should have entered the capsule with you. But I didn’t.”

Grace takes a deep breath:

“When you went missing, Sarah told me to be mentally prepared, the next time that machine
activates… be ready to deal with… ‘that thing’."

Your heart drops.

“I was in a stupor. I think I understood what Sarah meant, but I just couldn’t accept it.”

Grace covers her face:

“Thank God you came back, but you had a knife jutting out of you. Doctors said your organs were shutting down and told the Army to expect the worst. Have the obituary ready, just in case.”

Eventually she brings her emotions back under control and drops her hands. Her eyes are a little red:

“I was acting like an idiot the entire time. I was useless.”

You shift a little closer to her and nudge her cheek with your nose:

“You saved me.”

She has saved you, either from Legion, from the Rev-9, or from Danny in the alternate universe.

She has saved you, whether it was seventeen years ago, right now, or in the future.

To you, her existence is your redemption.

But right now Grace doesn’t know how deep your feelings run. She thinks you are referring to how she carried you out of the capsule and brought you to the hospital, so she is understandably a little confused by the extent of your gratitude.

This incident broke the ice between the two of you. On top of your affectionate gestures, her fear of losing you, brings her back to being close to you. Since you have stopped keeping your distance, the relationship between Grace and you is closer to a friendship, rather than that of teacher to student, or supervisor to subordinate.

Sarah has quite the collection of home entertainment from the last century.
Gramophone, VCR, DVDs, and stacks of vinyl discs - Nova Smith is fascinated by these kinds of things. Now every weekend, Grace, Nova, and Jim sneak into your apartment to watch Sarah’s collections of movies and TV shows.

“I can’t believe this,” you turn up the heat on the stove:

“Me, the commander of The Special Forces, is cooking lunch for a bunch of sergeants who are watching a movie?!”

Sarah is enjoying her cold beer behind you. She is preparing potatoes and chopping them into wedges, with a smug expression on her face:

“What else can we do? Someone’s sweetheart wants to eat beef stew with potatoes.”

You roll your eyes:

“You don’t keep pornographies in your collections, right? That Jim kid might be under 21.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Sarah snorts:

“Don’t question my taste. The only dangerous thing in my collection is the memory card from that T-800, right before he died.”

You knife clatters onto the cutting board and Sarah chokes on her beer.

The two of you look at each other.

“Didn’t you...” You look at her, tongue-tied: “You didn’t...”

Both of you rush out the kitchen towards the living room, just as the projection on the white wall displays the destruction of the Rev-9.

The screen turns into white static, and there is a deafening silence in the living room.

Grace is sitting in the middle of the carpet. She turns around and stares at you.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so here's what happens after Dani comes back. Maybe they should thank that
Danny for getting them closer? ;)

You guys are being really creative and funny in the comments section. I've shown all of them to the original author and she loves your ideas!
(and she's writing another story - not related to this one - about Grace and Dani, also in second person perspective. So let the comment flood in to let her know how much you like her works!)
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You guys don’t get to enjoy the beef stew and potatoes. Nova and Jim are blown away by the footage, and Sarah drags them out to the backyard to teach them the art of keeping their mouths shut.

Sarah knows she fucked up. This is the first time she didn’t give you any outlandish suggestions. She is even considerate enough to shut the door on her way out, leaving you alone with the now silent Grace.

You motion for the girl to sit down, then retrieve two cups of coffee from the kitchen. You have a hunch that this will be a long conversation.

Grace sits silently, her fingers tightly clasped together, her back hutches, and she rests her elbows on her legs. Her beautiful blue eyes studying the steam rising from the coffee.

Sunlight scatters through the blinds, casting patches of light and shadow over her. Her muscles are well defined and her hair is cropped short. If you were to run your fingers through it, it’d probably feel soft.

She’s gorgeous.

You sigh quietly.

“Sarah said we could help ourselves to those discs.”

Grace finally speaks:

“That wasn’t a movie, was it? That was from the memory card of a Terminator.”

You silence speaks volumes.

“So everything in that footage actually happened.”

Grace continues:

“I showed up in its memory as an augmented human, but I should have been seven years old when
that happened. She looks older than me now, perhaps in her thirties.”

She raises her head to confront you:

“You called her Grace.”

54

“She is Grace.” You nod.

“She is you, from a parallel universe. She traveled back in time to save me.”

Grace’s focus stays on you, she’d already guessed the truth.

You tell her the whole story. You talk about how Grace from 17 years ago tracked you down in Mexico, and how she protected you after your family was slaughtered. You mention Sarah and the T-800, and you explain on how you used her power source to destroy the Rev-9.

You mention how you and Sarah supported each other and kept each other going. The hardships you two encountered while establishing The Special Forces. You also recall all the times you pretended to run in to Grace when she was eight or nine years old.

You tell Grace all about your younger years, as if you were a bystander to your own life.

The girl listens quietly, never interrupting. Your story finally ends once the coffee runs out, and the light outside turns into a soft orange glow.

When the room is no longer filled with your slightly raspy voice, the silence feels a little intimidating.

Grace does not speak or look at you. You know that this might be a hard story to absorb. Afterall, it’s not everyday that you find out that you were transformed into an augmented human and sent back in time to save your Commander.

“This is why I rejected your application from the very beginning.”

You are a little anxious, and you feel the need to explain:
“It’s because I didn’t want you to be caught in this war...you’re brilliant, you could’ve been a lawyer or a doctor... I keep thinking that if I throw myself into fighting Legion, maybe I can secure a safer future for all humanity...”

Your voice gradually trails off.

She raises an eyebrow at you.

“I wasn’t trying to hide anything from you,” you are a little frustrated:

“I just wanted you to be safe!”

“So there is no such thing as you disliking me!”

Grace suddenly perks up, recalling the night that she stood outside of your apartment five years ago.

“You were just worried about me.”

55

You are startled by the sound of her chuckle, and for a moment you are at a loss about what to do.

"In all seriousness, that Grace is not me. She is stronger, more experienced, and a better fighter than me."

Grace rubs the tip of her nose and leans against the armrest of the sofa:

"But I can relate to her. Hypothetically, if we’re also facing doomsday in this world, I’d make the same decisions as she did."

You stare at her, stunned.

"If there’s no other way around, then getting augmented into a cyborg capable of short intense bursts of power, in order to protect you... whether it’s for professional or personal reasons, it’s well worth reducing my lifespan or sacrificing myself for."

Grace says quietly, with a serious voice:
"Maybe I don't get to say this, but Dani, you really don't need to feel guilty. If I were her, I would be content to meet an end like that, a life well lived."

It feels like a tidal wave of emotion and you can feel your eyes swell up.

"I've always wondered what kind of person would reside in your heart for so many years, but after discovering the truth today..."

Grace finally looks into your eyes:

"Maybe you should give me a chance. After all, no matter which world I'm in, I will always want to protect you."

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Before you can catch yourself, you're kissing her lips.

You kneel on the sofa between her legs, cupping her face, and forcing her to tilt her head up to kiss you.

Her lips are soft, with a warmth you adore, and you taste the flavor of coffee in her mouth. You probably taste the same way, you vaguely linger on that thought, you were drinking the same brand of coffee.

No wonder Grace is your star pupil, she flips the table on you in the next second.

Your lips stay connected when she presses you backwards into the sofa. That large hand of hers wanders down to the bottom of your shirt, slowly caressing up your spine - her calloused index finger is gently rubbing against the side of your waist.

A moan escapes your lips - God, who taught her this.

You called a timeout before things get out of hand.

Your lips are red and swollen, and Grace is looking down at you utterly dissatisfied; her right knee is still in between your legs, teasingly pressing into you.
"Sarah could be back at any time," you’re panting:

"The last person who ruined her sofa got pulverized."

"Okay, we can stop" she snorts:

"But give me an answer."

"I love you,"

You nestle in her arms, making a confession that is seventeen years overdue:

"In any universes, as long as it is you."

Chapter End Notes

Whew, gotta admit these 2 sections are the hardest ones for me in my short translation career LOL
(Vigorously fanning myself
With one hand resting on your forehead, and the other resting on the wound that recently had its stitches pulled, your feet dangle off the armrest, and you are sprawled out on the living room sofa in a scandalous manner.

Your brain is still riding the high.

Grace has just left. She has to go check on Nova and Jim before her night classes.

You get up to take a shower, and in the foggy mirror, you spot hickeys all over the side of your neck and on your chest.

This is the wrong season for turtlenecks, and you’re getting a headache just thinking about it - you should’ve kept things under control. But there are very few things in this world that can keep lovers from making out, and you can't deny that you really enjoyed it.

Your injury has caused you to be absent from work for more than a month. The backlog of files in your office is piling up. James even prepared an external hard drive to compile all the work for you.

He is always so endearing especially when he shouldn't be. Although this isn’t fair to him, you’ve developed a bit of an irrational fear when it comes to James Taylor, so you reject his offer to work overtime with you.

As soon as the news of you returning to work comes out, the phone in your office never stops ringing. Notifications keep popping up on the computers belonging to your two assistants, and all kinds of information floods into your office.

Even after stringently filtering the calls, there is still constant ringing in your office.

When you are skimming through the combat reports, you get a call from the FBI.

"Why do you want to talk to Conner all of a sudden?"

You are not taking this very seriously:

"I thought we had an agreement from a long time ago?"

You and the FBI don’t see eye to eye most of the time, but under your request, they took care of Sarah's active warrant for arrest in all 50 states, so that she can go buy chips and beer from the grocery store with no fuss.

They say a few more words on their end, and you straighten up in your seat.
Grace is driving and Sarah is riding shotgun. You sit in the back with headphones on and your legs crossed on the seat, typing furiously on the laptop.

It’s a bumpy ride as the jeep traverses the desert, but that doesn't stop you from working. It reminds you of 17 years ago, except this time around, Grace has become the youngest person in the vehicle.

You are heading to where Legion is based.

After re-evaluation by your forces, Legion’s core Artificial Intelligence network was relocated to the middle of the Great Basin desert.

There is a lack of resources for Legion to exploit there, and a 15-meter-thick wall made of composite steel and concrete, that can withstand most attacks. The construction inside the walls are very basic. Except for the electrical circuits, it is intentionally designed in such a way that Artificial Intelligence can have no influence on the facility.

The UN Security Council members take turns deploying troops to be stationed here, and researchers of all nationalities have formed a monitoring system to keep a close eye on Legion's data and its operations in real time.

Sarah was specifically invited to visit this place at this time, because they’ve found that Legion has created a new Terminator with its own spare parts.

The control centre opens the gate after vetting the vehicle and its occupants.

Grace drives fast. Comparing to gunning the accelerator in the sand, the road inside the base is significantly better. After pulling aside, she and Sarah hop out of the van. You close your laptop and take off the headset.

The passenger side door is pulled open. It’s Grace, she is offering you her hands, staring at you intently.

_Hmm?_

You look at her with confusion: "What?"

"Can I try something?" Her blue eyes are sparkling in the sunlight.

Sarah rolls her eyes at a distance. And you have no choice but to reach out and let Grace carry you out of the van.
A staff member opens the elevator and salutes you. You and Sarah walk in the front, and Grace surveys everything curiously while strolling behind you. It’s her first time coming to Legion’s Base.

"She isn’t trying to recreate everything the other Grace did to you, is she? She's such a sweetheart."
Sarah makes fun of you.

"That depends on how much of the recording you kept from that memory card."
Your embarrassment is starting to turn into exasperation.

"Yeesh, that's pretty long."
Sarah ponders for a second:
"And she made a copy of everything on that memory card, so you’d better be prepared."

When the door to the laboratory opens in front of you, the smile on Sarah's face suddenly drops. Your feet also stop dead in their tracks. Standing there in shock, you see an intricate meshwork of cords and cables coiled around a human-shaped capsule.

The FBI officer approaches you. He presses a button on the console, and the human-shaped capsule turns over, allowing everyone to see the contents.
Sarah stumbles backwards. Before she falls, Grace helps steady her onto her feet.
The officer politely shakes hands with each of you, then turns his attention to you:
"The Terminators created by Legion are typically uncontrollable. They have their own consciousness, and they usually initiate attacks the second they are done being constructed. But this one,"
The officer clears his throat, "It's the only AI that hasn't activated on its own and has been contained in this human-shaped capsule. We decided to contact you and Conner once we discovered it."
You and Sarah certainly recognize it, and now Grace does too.

The T-800 is born into this era.

Sarah does not object to naming it T-800. You reach a agreement with the FBI, that the T-800 will be escorted to your base inside the human-shaped capsule, for research and monitoring.
This is a big deal, which means you will have to bend over backwards for the FBI for the next six
months, but you made the compromise for Sarah.

Sarah is the only person who intuitively understands you, unconditionally supports you, and is always by your side since Grace died. The establishment of The Special Forces is undeniably tied to her efforts. Even though her mouth is quite a piece of work, you know deep down she is your best friend.

On the way back to the base, you swap seats with Sarah. She lies on the back seat, with her excuse of being exhausted.

You're a little worried about her, so you set aside your work and keep turning around to check she’s ok.

Grace stretches out a hand to hold yours, reassuringly rubbing your palm with two fingers:

"Don't worry,"

she says:

"It might not be a bad thing."

Only god knows how much Sarah despises the T-800. The machine that ruined her life and later, saved her life, is once again born into this world. Even a nemesis is capable of easing certain loneliness.

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Lisa Taylor stumbles towards you.

Her dad has just sold their house to gather enough money for the girl's treatment. Lisa will be the first patient to be treated for the H blood disorder, at the price of losing her home and having to live with her dad at the base.

"Are you sure about this?"

You ask James casually, standing with your arms crossed over your chest. You watch Grace play with Lisa off in the distance.

"Raising your daughter on a military base and letting her attend schools here might lead to her becoming a soldier. She could face all kinds of dangers in the future."
But this is not unusual. There are family-style residences in the military base, and many researchers live here with their loved ones.

But Lisa's medical condition is quite serious, and you are not sure if the environment is suitable for her.

"It’s her choice," James says.

"She likes Grace so much that she wants to move here."

That’s true. Lisa is a pretty little girl with dark curly hair and brown eyes. She calls Grace “Ms. Grace” adorably, and shares her toys with her.

"She's only six years old,"

You roll your eyes: "Who makes life decisions at six?"

"She does," James retorts:

"She’s my daughter, not yours."

Before the two of you are able to continue, Lisa runs towards you with her little chubby legs; her ball rolling towards your feet.

You bend down to pick up the ball for her. She has learned to respect you from a very young age, and she’s a little scared to approach you. You pass the ball to her, and the little girl gives you a tentative smile:

"Thank you Mrs. Ramos!"

Lisa is technically making a fair assumption by addressing you with that title, but the corner of your mouth twitches uncontrollably.

Grace and James’ attempt at holding back their laughter is very obvious.

The way Lisa addressed you makes you feel down the rest of the day.
You are already at a low point anyway, and that’s how you justify eavesdropping on others, hiding behind the cement pipes outside of the basketball court.

On the court is the trio. Grace’s team just finished the halftime. Right now, only Grace, Nova and Jim remain on the court.

You were just passing by, but you heard Nova mentioning the word commander and you couldn’t help but hide nearby.

You are still a little rattled by Nova. Her closeness to Grace makes you feel a little uncomfortable.

Grace is dribbling the ball, without much rhythm, but her hands are steadily.

“I know that you guys are in a lovely relationship right now, but are you sure Commander isn’t substituting you for, you know, that Grace?”

Nova stands in front of her, with an empty water bottle in her hand:

“To be honest, that Grace is augmented and stronger than you are. She saved Commander multiple times, and she will always be remembered.”

“Smith...” Jim says cautiously, “Please stop.”

“I’m telling the truth,” Nova ignores him:

“I know that you really adore her, Grace. You have been worshipping her and her army since you were like 13. You collected so much information about her, gave 120% of your efforts just to join the Forces. But you should know, your relationship has not been on equal footing since the very beginning. You put in way more effort than she does.”

“Do you remember what happened that night when we walked puppy Peanut in fifth grade?”

Grace suddenly interrupts her.

Nova pauses to think.

“Of course I remember.”

“We witnessed a crime in the garden. The murderer spotted us when he was disposing off his knife, right?”
“Yep,” Nova nods, “You reacted immediately and dragged me into a sprint. Although I couldn’t run very fast, that murderer didn’t end up catching up to us…?”

“No, not that he couldn’t catch up, but someone stopped him. And that person was Dani.”

Grace says quietly:

“When I looked back, she’d grabbed the guy and thrown him onto the ground.”

You hide in the shadow of the cement pipes and take a deep breath.

You remember that night. You thought you took care of it stealthily, you didn’t expect Grace to have seen it.

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“So, our relationship has been on equal footing since the very beginning.”

Grace keeps dribbling the ball, now with a rhythm:

“She was always there, watching over me as I grew up. And after all this time, my admiration for her turned into love.”

“If she sees me as a substitute, she would’ve approached me much sooner.”

“But she didn’t. Not only did she not, she even tried to kick me out of the army, just to keep me away from all of this.”

Nova is silent and Jim is fascinated by the story.

“Even so, if she sees me as a substitute, I don’t mind.”

Grace smiles charmingly:

“The person who gets to stay by her side is me, and it will always be me. I will replace the original sooner or later.”

It seems Nova is convinced. Jim and her say their goodbyes to Grace and head back to the dorm. Grace has been sitting in the court since then, and you can’t find a chance to sneak away.

“How long do you intend on hiding there?”

Grace sounds a little annoyed:
“Aren’t you going to praise me on my wonderful speech? Ma’am?”

You know you can’t hide anymore so you walk towards her. You stand in front of Grace and she stretches her hands up to circle your waist.

“I don’t see you as a substitute.”

You speak softly.

“I know.” She raises her head to look at you. Her eyes are sparkling under the moonlight.

You bend down to kiss her.

Your breathes mingle with each other as you two exchange your affections, as if you’re falling in love on this barren wilderness for an entire century.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah... The last sentence is where the title comes from, and I didn't catch that when I was translating the title of the work. My bad.
In Chinese the author chose a very poetic and abstract word to imply that their love is born in a place that resources are scarce and in a time that just staying alive is a blessing. But here barren wilderness summons it up very well. (Thanks to Vincy, the BEST translator I've ever worked with!)
My name is Lisa Taylor and I am a frontline soldier serving The Special Army.

I was born with a fatal blood disorder, but after my dad raised a large sum of money for me to get into an experimental treatment, my disorder quickly remedied itself. Fascinatingly, after the injection, my body started to produce a new type of antibody.

This special antibody makes my skeletal muscles significantly tougher than the average human. I can take shots from bullets that are smaller than a .50 caliber, and I heal at a much faster rate.

In other words, if I had a cut on my hand, it would heal within a minute.

When I was 10, the Commander of the The Special Forces, Dani Ramos, discovered the anomaly. She took my blood sample for research. Two and a half years later, the military medical team officially announced their breakthrough with the G10 booster shot.

Soldiers injected with a single dose of G10 are able to maintain a hyperfunctional state for about 30-40 minutes depending on their physical condition.

Then the Army began to form the strongest scouting squads ever known.

Five years ago, the army expanded substantially, and the divisions became increasingly effective. Dani gradually diffused her leadership responsibilities and went backstage. The top tier of the Army was split into three separate sectors, to maintain order and balance.

Brigadier General Jim Baker is now responsible for the logistics department. He has built a laser-based protection network and constructed a barrier with a special mixture of materials to protect the base from physical assaults. The logistics department has also started their own plantations and farms to ensure better nutrition and more flavorful meals for the military. I have to admit, the nutrition packs and the MREs prepared with fresh produce simply can’t get better than this.

Major General Nova Smith is in charge of the research department of The Special Forces, providing communications and information technology support for the frontline, and leading the frontier of advanced military research.
The most important part of an army is always the frontline soldiers. The Commander of the frontline troops is Grace, and she is in charge of all the strategic deployments, military mobilizations, and dispatches of operational units. She has become a major military presence and a beloved teacher.

Legion is a very cunning Artificial Intelligence. Ever since it evolved its own consciousness, it has been fighting humanity with an unrivaled precision. I once asked Grace why we can't just completely eliminate Legion, and Grace told me that it's not that simple.

Although Legion occasionally rebels, for the majority of the time, it's maintaining its normal operation as a network of AI programmes, bringing tremendous productivity to this world. The agreement to Legion's existence leads to frequent confrontations between major political players all over the world - they have never managed to reach a consensus in regards to Artificial Intelligence.

However, in the meantime, Legion has become increasingly familiar with human nature.

For example, this time, Legion even leant to imitate the SOS signal that humans send out for help.

After receiving the signal, The Special Forces dispatches its nearest team on duty to perform the rescue mission as usual. But when our team arrives at the designated site, it turns out to be a trap.

This is a slaughter involving seven Terminators. The moment we enter the area, the attack begins.

I manage to find cover, as explosions blast around me continuously.

Our luck isn’t so great this time. Every combat tactic and drill are being taken into analysis by Legion. The next time around, it formulates a personalized strategy based on our data. Shit is about to hit the fan.

In addition, polyalloy Terminators have appeared. Although I have ran into them in the simulators before, this is the first time I have encountered them on a battlefield. A few seconds after we sent out the signal for help, our aircraft gets shot down by Legion, an explosion took the console with it.

Even with the help of the G10 shots, the soldiers in my team are injured to varying degrees.
The dosage of G10 is strictly controlled, because of the human body’s metabolic limitations. The Army prohibits soldiers from getting a second injection within 24 hours. Now 20 minutes have passed since we sent out the signal asking for reinforcement, none of us know if we’ll be able to make it.

I'm an elite scout, the only human who can stay in the hyperfunctional state without injecting G10, but even so, I can't fight against two polyalloy Terminators; they are already difficult enough to deal with in the simulator.

They are indestructible. Unless their bodies are melted in molten steel, they will stand up again even if they are beaten into a pulp and left on the ground.

"Cease fire-"

Captain shouts at us. He knows that the G10 is wearing off in most soldiers.

I force myself to stay calm, but as the first soldier falls into a coma due to the large amount of blood loss, everyone can sense death approaching.

"Taylor," Captain looks at me:

"If we can't handle the next bit, leave us, and retreat on your own!"

We both know very clearly that if reinforcement doesn’t arrive, I may be the only survivor in this team.

He is the best captain in the world.

"I won’t--!" I shout at him through the flames.

"You have to! Or Grace and Ex-Commander will kill me!" He growls:

"They raised you as their successor!"

"But you’ll be dead anyway!" I shout back.
I lean back against the cover, exhausted.

The polyalloy Terminator has raised its knife in front of me, just a second more, and I might be split in half.

I raise my arm with all the strength I’ve got, trying to parry the attack with my hands.

The Terminator is thrown back.

A woman stands in front of me, her stature tall and her eyes calm. She fires at the Terminator as she approaches, her footsteps strong and steady.

"Get up."

She reaches out to me, and I hurriedly stand up, staying behind her and re-loading weapons.

"Commander!!"

The surviving soldiers are cheering. The reinforcements brought by Grace have surrounded the battlefield. Some of them are assisting the wounded to retreat, while others are pushing back the Terminators.

"Ma’am!" I can't hide my excitement:

"How are you here so fast?"

"We were in a nearby area, but our ship was on the outskirts of the city and it us took some time to hit the road."

Grace says. She has also injected the G10 booster. She throws the empty bazooka launcher at the terminator, so hard that it shot through the machine:

"Report, T-800!"

"Affirmative. They are Terminator T-1000s."

There are also traitors within the Terminators. The T-800 is one of them who turned to the human side more than ten years ago. He walks towards us with a gun in hand:
"The molten steel containers are ready."

Grace’s ship is well equipped. Dani has made a lot of preparations to destroy Terminators - the molten steel is one of the weapons specifically targeted towards the polyalloy Terminators.

It takes a lot of time to get all seven Terminators onto the ship. With limited manpower, even Grace, who is the commander, needs to pull her own weight on the battlefield. She rips the T-1000s’ chips out with the T-800’s assistance, and they push the robots into the molten steel.

The Terminator army that devastated our squad are like battery driven toys in front of Grace and the T-800.

The instant the molten steel splashes upwards, multiple burnt marks appear on Grace’s face, but they heal within seconds.

After confirming that all Terminators are dissolved, she turns around to inquire about the casualties. Frowning at the update, Grace arranges the aircraft to transport the seriously injured directly to the medical center in the base. We’ve lost two comrades, three people are in critical condition, and no one knows if they’ll survive.

I know this is the worst attack on the Forces in recent years, and Grace blames herself. I want to comfort her but I am too scared to speak, so T-800 and I just keep eyeing each other.

When Grace is in a bad mood, even the most authoritative general, Nova Smith, tries to avoid her.

Finale

Thankfully, the savior arrives swiftly.

Captain hands Grace a communication device.

The moment Grace answers, her stoney face softened. Her frown vanishes, and she turns away from
me and the T-800.

She speaks with a slow and gentle voice:

"Yeah, they’re T-1000s. Lisa is fine... We’ve got two casualties and three heavily injured. Yes, but I’m responsible for... I’m not blaming myself."

T-800 and I look at each other again. We can both guess who’s on the other side of the line.

When the lead ship lands at the base, I’m the first to jump off the lift and rush towards the woman who is welcoming us home.

I know very well that if I don’t hug Dani first, I won’t have a chance to hug her at all.

As expected, the little dark-haired woman gives me a bear hug, and the very next second, she is taken away by a pair of arms from behind.

The T-800 gestures at me to take a hint, leave and give them some space, but I take my time anyway.

I’ve seen those embracing figures in the sunset for more than ten years now.

And I know that I’ll continue beholding them until the end of time.

The End

Chapter End Notes

So here's the last chapter! We've done it! 20K words people! Thank you so much for reading and many thanks to our amazing translating team: Vincy, Chen and Natalie! It'll take me forever to finish it without you! It's so fun to work with you guys! You are amazing!!!

And we're working on translating another work by the same author. It's another intriguing story in a linear universe setting (which means there is only one future and going back in time changes it), and it's for Big Grace and Young Dani. So if you're
interested in that one too stick around!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!