

CHAPTER II

Not everyone who is broken falls apart.

Some become something else.



Commander of the Valkyries

***** Aurora Belt *****

21 SEP 129AO

CYNDRALIS III

Dalmeta City – District Prime

26 JAN 129 AO

The two armed soldiers who had brought her here still stood beside her, their hands firmly gripping her arms. The third, their squad leader, saluted Mortasky.

»Subject extracted and delivered without a scratch, as ordered, Field Colonel. Awaiting further instructions.«

Mortasky had just removed the collar from a small case. He turned, returned the salute, and walked toward the young woman.

»How nice to see each other again so soon.«

»Listen, whatever you want, I'll get it for you. We had a deal.«

Her voice trembled slightly.

»We had a deal. You provided the information, and I got you out of Beta Dalmeta. Deal fulfilled.«

Grinning, he slowly circled her, studying her carefully.

»What else do you want from me? More information? I haven't heard anything about those four women since our last conversation.«

»I'm aware of that. We already captured them, thanks to your help.«

Mallory swallowed. Something in her expression broke. That was probably the moment she realized this was about something entirely different.

A pleasant warmth of triumph rose within him. People were more predictable than they liked to believe.

He placed the collar around her neck. A soft click echoed through the room as it locked into place, tightening slightly and adjusting itself perfectly to her physiology - snug, but not painfully so.

Mortasky nodded. The soldiers released her.

Immediately, Mallory sprinted toward the door, desperate to escape his quarters. He pressed a button on his wrist. Electricity surged through the collar.

Mallory stumbled and collapsed to the floor, screaming as her body convulsed.

»Those shocks will occur whenever you refuse to do as you're told. And don't even think about leaving the compound. If you try, you'll die a very unpleasant death.«

He paused.

»Now... get up.«

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she forced herself back onto her feet.

»You bastard.«

Anger. Of course.

Mortasky turned toward the squad leader.

»You are dismissed.«

»Yes, Field Colonel.«

The man saluted and left with the other two soldiers.

Then came silence. Stillness. He waited. Sooner or later, everyone started talking.

One minute.

Then two.

People hated silence.

Three.

She is lasting surprisingly long.

»Why are you doing this?«

Ah.

»Because I want to know how far you're really willing to go.«

Mallory looked at him, confused. Naturally, she didn't understand.

»For your freedom, you betrayed four women.«

She flinched. The blow landed.

»Most people claim they would never do such a thing.«

He pointed toward a door leading into the adjacent room.

It was almost completely empty. A small table stood against one wall, holding nothing but a bottle of water. Two chains hung from a hook in the ceiling, running through a pulley system. At their ends, a pair of handcuffs dangled in the center of the room.

Mallory took a hesitant step inside and stopped.

»Please... please don't do this.«

»Put on the handcuffs.«

She obeyed.

The cuffs snapped shut around her wrists. Immediately, she tried to open them again. Pointlessly. He knew exactly what he was doing. He had restrained many people here before.

»What do you actually want?«

Mortasky walked over to the bottle and picked it up.

»To find out where your limit is.«

Mallory remained silent.

»For freedom, you sold out your friends.«

He raised the bottle slightly.

»Let's see what you'll sell for a drink of water.«

For the first time since her arrival, Mallory looked genuinely afraid. She realized she wasn't being punished. She was being studied.

»Do you want water?«

»Yes.«

»Take off your sweater.«

»What? No!«

He smiled.

»Not yet.«

CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Production Sector

26 JAN 129 AO

When Valentina opened her eyes, she thought for a moment that she had gone blind. Everything was white. Cold, merciless white. She blinked once. Then twice. Slowly, the world emerged from the brightness. A ceiling of light above her. Metal. The smell of disinfectant and recycled air. Then the pain came. Not sharp. Just everywhere. As if someone had pulled her body apart and forgotten to put it back together properly. She tried to sit up. Nothing happened. Confused, she tried again, but her arms wouldn't move. Neither would her legs. A cold stab shot through her chest. Only then did Valentina notice the restraints. She pulled against them. Nothing. Not even a centimeter. Her breathing quickened.

No.

No.

No.

Slowly, she lifted her head. The room was enormous. Silent. Only the occasional flat, distant beep broke the stillness. Rows of medical chairs stood there like machines in a factory hall. And in every single one sat a woman. Naked. Restrained and motionless. Just like her. Some had their eyes closed. Others stared at the ceiling. An empty and absent stare. Valentina felt something cold spreading through her stomach. Then she heard her name. Barely more than a whisper.

»Val...«

Her heart stopped.

She turned her head.

Jeana.

For a moment, Valentina could only stare. Jeana's face was hollow. Her lips were cracked. Her skin had taken on a pale gray tint. She didn't look like someone who was alive.

»Jeana.«

Her own voice failed her. Only a rasp escaped her throat. Jeana's eyes opened slightly. Tears gathered in them.

»This is Beta Dalmeta.«

A tremor ran through her body.

»Hell.«

Then she closed her eyes again. Valentina stared at her. And only now did she begin to notice the tubes. Transparent hemispheres covered Jeana's breasts, connected to tubes that ran toward a collection panel. Between her legs, another tube led into a reservoir beneath the chair. A display

flickered beside her. Lacto Output: 18 ml. Nexalyte: 12 ml. NeuroSyn: Standby. Valentina didn't understand any of it. But it wasn't just Jeana. They were everywhere.

Twelve women.

Twelve human beings.

Twelve production units.

Something broke inside her. Small, but important. Something that had continued to believe there was still a way out. Her gaze drifted farther. Two rows behind Jeana. Isabella. Valentina stopped breathing. Isabella sat motionless in her chair, her head tilted slightly to one side, her eyes half open. But there was nobody behind them anymore. They were simply empty. Blank. Silent.

»Issi.«

The sound broke on her lips, emerging only as a rough whisper.

Nothing. No response from her friend. Valentina felt tears running down the sides of her face. The pressure in her chest grew heavier. More desperate. Panic slowly crawled upward.

Oh God.

Please, God.

Where are you?

Where are you?

Please don't.

Please don't let it be...

There.

At the far end of the room.

Aurora.

Valentina closed her eyes. For a moment, she wanted to scream. Wanted to smash everything around her. Wanted to burn this room to the ground. But she couldn't even move her hands.

A hiss cut through the silence. Then footsteps, calm, controlled, unhurried, as if all of this were routine. A man in white protective clothing entered the room. He looked tired and almost bored, like someone working a night shift in an ordinary factory. He stopped beside Valentina and glanced at a display. Then typed something into it.

»Subject Seven-Three-One. Activation stable.«

Valentina tried to scream at him. To spit at him. To beg him. But nothing came. Only the faint twitching of her lips. The man didn't even notice her panic. Or perhaps he simply didn't care. He administered the injection. A brief sting shot in her arm. Warmth spread through her body. She felt the changes immediately. A pulling sensation within her breast tissue. A tingling in her nipples that steadily intensified. The warmth traveled deeper and lower. Valentina closed her eyes. She trembled internally. An involuntary contraction of the muscles between her legs. She felt moisture gathering. Her body no longer belonged to her. And for the first time since escaping the transport vehicle, she was truly afraid. Not of death. Death would have been easy. The truth was worse. Far worse.

They would not die here.

They would live.

Day after day.

Month after month.

Year after year.

Until nothing remained of them except whatever this facility could extract.

So this was Beta Dalmeta.

It was not a prison.

Not a rehabilitation facility.

Not a re-education center.

It was hell.



CYNDRALIS III

Dalmeta City – Helican Crown – The Golden Tower

31 JAN 129 AO

»The four have been captured. Here's the report.«

With a casual gesture, Mortasky pushed the file onto the desk holo.

Protector - Brigadier General - Krastan Vel Orun looked up.

»Really?«

He skimmed through the report, studying the faces of the four women now under his control. Then he leaned back into his chair, relaxing. The whiskey that followed tasted better than usual. A pleasant warmth spread through his chest and settled there comfortably.

»I admit, I'm pleasantly surprised. That was faster than I expected. How did you manage it?«

»We had an informant who fell into our hands by chance.«

Vel Orun smiled. A genuine smile. It was always satisfying when problems solved themselves. Moments like these reassured him that his system worked.

»Excellent. The mechs?«

»Currently in Beta Dalmeta for inspection. Afterward, they'll be integrated into the HDF. I've already received confirmation that all of them are equipped with Solarna cores.«

»That doesn't surprise me. Speaking of her, I want the Solarna here as soon as possible.«

»Well, I thought we'd harvest her for a while first. No sense wasting resources.«

Vel Orun considered it. Numbers immediately began running through his mind. Six weeks of harvesting would generate roughly three hundred and fifty thousand Zets. Enough to finance a considerable portion of the new facility on Nereon.

Sometimes this man has the patience of a saint. I need to be careful.

»Agreed. But monitor the dosages carefully. We need her brain functioning at one hundred percent.« His expression hardened.

»I'm entrusting you with more than I usually do. If something goes wrong, your head will roll.«

Mortasky raised an eyebrow. Then one corner of his mouth curled upward as he took a sip of whiskey.

Vel Orun found the reaction irritating. Either he was planning something. Or he simply wasn't afraid. Neither possibility pleased him.

»I heard Mascar will be visiting us. May I ask what this is about?«

For the briefest fraction of a second, Vel Orun froze.

Where the hell did he hear that?

Outwardly, however, he remained perfectly still. Not a single muscle moved. His gaze stayed fixed on Mortasky. Calm and professionally focused. He took a slow breath, though no change appeared in his posture or expression.

»You may ask.«

A pause.

»You will not receive an answer. It is none of your concern.«

He considered the matter for a moment.

»Personal affairs. I'm sure you understand.«

Mortasky stared at him. He seemed to be weighing his response. Then he set his glass down and looked out through the tower's panoramic window.

»Even so, he'll undoubtedly require an escort.«

What do you want?

The arrival time?

The meeting location?

Why?

»That has already been arranged. Focus on our new arrivals. That's a far greater priority.«

Mortasky saluted.

»Of course, Brigadier General.«

The office door slid shut behind him.

Krastan's eyes remained fixed on it for several seconds. He wasn't sure what Mortasky was planning.

He wasn't sure how much Mortasky knew. And that was exactly the problem.

Perhaps he would have to get rid of him sooner than planned.



CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Administration

01 FEB 129 AO

Unauthorized request. Access denied. Your attempt will be documented.

Kim knew those lines better than anyone else on the planet. She had written them herself. And now she had to get past them. Past her own firewall protecting the military servers. The AI she had developed herself wouldn't let her in. It had discovered her old backdoors and closed them. Even her own hacking AI struggled against the constantly shifting algorithms. Kim cursed both herself and the motivation she'd had back then. The attack had been running for hours and she was tired. Mostly on the inside. She poured herself another coffee. The sixth one tonight.

The clock displayed 03:05h. Beta Dalmeta was quiet at this hour. The subjects were asleep. The scientists and technicians as well. Only a small security detail remained awake.

»Hello, Kim. Still working?«

She flinched and turned toward the door.

»Good Lord, Jeired. You scared me.«

The guard shifted his automatic rifle aside and grinned.

»You know how much I enjoy teasing you.«

Calmly, Kim finished preparing her coffee and returned to her terminal. Her thoughts were racing.

»An annoying hacking attempt is keeping me awake. Some AI has been trying to get into the system for hours.«

She forced an irritated expression. Her heart, however, was hammering against her ribs.

»The raiders again?«

Jeired stepped farther into the room.

»Your job sounds more exciting than mine.«

Kim swallowed and glanced at the monitor. Her AI had finally succeeded. It had breached the barrier. But if the final steps happened too quickly, the system alerts would expose the intrusion. Her pulse quickened. She stepped between the guard and her terminal, blocking his view.

»Jeired, you know everything here is classified. And raiders? Hard to say. Whoever is behind this attack knows what they're doing. Almost no trace signatures.«

She forced a shrug.

»How are things on your end?«

Her eyes flicked toward the monitor again. Inner Wall breached. Core Wall remaining. Estimated Time: 20 sec.

»Quiet. A few wild animals along the outer perimeter. Nothing exciting.«

»Well then, I hope the rest of your shift stays that way. Unfortunately, I need to get back to this.«

»Fair enough. Good night, Kim. Good luck.«

Jeired turned and walked out. At that exact moment, a holo notification appeared above the desk.

Transfer initiated: 12%...

Kim heard the door slide shut behind her. Jeired was gone. She took several deep breaths. Then turned back toward the terminal.

»Let's see why you're so important.«

She opened the directory and selected the file labeled *New Arrivals*. Immediately, the data appeared across the holo display. Aurora Belt. Valentina Embers. Isabella Fyrn. Jeana Hayek. A photograph accompanied each profile. Kim opened Belt's file.

Aurora Belt. Sergeant AD. Birth: SEP 21, 105 AO. Age: 23. Parents: Maj. Catherine Belt (Senior Strategist – MIA). Senior Commander Ghustavus Belt (High Strategic Field Command – MIA). Military Academy of Dalmeta. Honored for bravery in the field. Honored for strategic excellence. Honored for camaraderie. Honored for mech handling. Honored for exceptional intelligence... The list continued. Kim scrolled down. Then paused. One line caught her attention.

Suspicious Contacts. Name: Torban. Surname: Unknown. Interesting. She knew that name. She had anonymously passed information to him more than once.

Kim switched to the next file. Her eyes widened.

Valentina Embers. Born: Solarna. Heir to Solarna Industries. Technical Officer AD. Birth: APR 05, 101AO. Age: 27. Parents...

Kim stopped reading. Instead, she stared at the first few lines again. Her pulse accelerated. She could hear it pounding in her ears.

A living Solarna.

Suddenly, Mortasky's unusual interest in these women made perfect sense. And they were all mech pilots. Every single one of them. If Kim could get them back into fighting condition by the time the escape happened, piloting the mechs should still be possible. Even after weeks inside this place. A new plan was already beginning to take shape in her mind. A plan that might get these four women and her daughter out of Beta Dalmeta alive.



CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Production Sector

05 FEB 129 AO

She didn't know what day it was. Nor what time. Her head felt stuffed with cotton. Fragments of thoughts. There was no clarity or logic. A suffocating feeling, yet very far away, buried beneath a blanket of clouds and cotton. And still, Aurora tried to focus. If she lost her mind, who would she be then? An empty shell, condemned to a vegetating existence? No. Her resistance grew as she stared at the concrete wall. Gray. Monotonous. Lifeless.

»Subject Seven-Two-Nine. Move.«

Her body obeyed automatically. Her legs moved against. Her head turned toward the man in white standing at the cell door. But her mind screamed: No!

Somewhere deep inside, the thought echoed. A spark of rebellion ignited. Yet her body did not listen. Her thoughts began drifting again, away from reality. But the core of her refused to accept it.

Count, Aurora. Count your steps. Stay here.

She counted.

>One. Two. Three.<

Gray walls.

>Four. Five.<

Bright lights on the ceiling. Blinding.

>Ten. Eleven.<

A door opened, she heard a humming tone. A man with a rifle stood beside it, pushed her forward.

>Thirteen. Fourteen.<

His touch felt distant. Yet she noticed it.

>Nineteen. Twenty.<

They entered the room with the rows of chairs. A surveillance drone. The light struck her face, and she narrowed her eyes. Slowly.

Some of the chairs were occupied.

>Thirty-six. Thirty-seven. Thirty-eight.<

»Remove the gown and take seat thirty-seven.«

The voice came from somewhere. Her arms removed the gown. It fell to the floor. Her body sat down in the chair.

>What now?<

Keep counting. Stay here. The lights on the ceiling.

>One. Two. Three.<

A shadow emerged. Then Footsteps. A sting in her arm. The tingling of electrodes against her skin. A pulling sensation across her body. Something was attached to her chest. Then a rhythmic pulling sensation. Pumping. A low hum beneath her. Her legs were moved apart.

>Five. Six.<

She felt something connect to her body.

>Seven. Eight. Nine.<

Then the procedure began. Her thoughts were dragged downward.

No. Stay here. The room. How large is it? Calculate. Stay here. Length of the walls.

>I don't know.<

Come on. Estimate the dimensions.

>I don't know. I can't anymore.<

Tell me the dimensions, damn it, or die.

>Maybe twelve meters.<

Good. Calculate. What is twelve times twelve?

The pulling sensation intensified. Her body reacted. But her mind was elsewhere. She blocked out the sensations rising within her. Separated them from real feelings. These were ghosts. They were not her. Not her feelings. She stared at the ceiling. Time passed. She didn't know how long.

>144.<



CYNDRALIS III

The Golden Tower – Reception Suites

08 FEB 129 AO

»...And for that reason, we have decided to support the Cyndralis System and our good partner, Protector Vel Orun, in every way we can. As Premier CEO of Valessan Military Works, I hereby pledge a donation of twelve billion Zets for the expansion of local hospitals and emergency care facilities. Each of the four planets will receive three billion, and I will personally ensure that the homeless and families facing hardship have access to free primary medical treatment. Let us rebuild the Cyndralis System together.«

The crowd erupted into applause. It was so loud that even a starship on final approach could probably hear the cheering and applause.

PCEO Henri Mascar kept his hand raised in a friendly wave for a few moments longer. Then he turned away. His smile vanished instantly. He hated these people. Hated these greasy speeches. But they were necessary. He was a respected businessman. A philanthropist. First in Valessan Territory. And now in the Cyndralis System as well. That reputation would bring new deals. New contracts.

And with it new profits.

He straightened his uniform jacket and strode confidently into the grand dining hall, where an empty seat already awaited him at the lavishly prepared table.

Vel Orun rose to greet him, embraced him briefly, and sat down at the same time.

»Welcome, my friend. Excellent speech. How was the journey?«

»Pleasant. Too long, but pleasant. As always, you've spared no expense.«

»Glad to hear it. How are your wife and children?«

»Wonderful. The youngest is already starting school. Can you believe it?«

»How quickly time passes. But first, settle in. We've prepared your favorite meal: Kaerwyndian sturgeon on couscous with Prümien and white wine sauce.«

»You never do anything halfway.«

»Of course not. Consider it a gesture of appreciation for your exceptionally generous donation - and the special shipments.«

Mascar merely smiled and enjoyed the attention.

»I'd like to address an uncomfortable subject right away. The loss of your convoy a few weeks ago. You remember? I wrote to Sevar, but he never responded. On the one hand, I wouldn't expect an Overstar Army Commander to contact me personally, but I'm still concerned he may hold the incident against me.«

Henri placed a hand on Krastan's arm.

»No, not at all. The border conflict has kept him occupied. He wasn't pleased to hear that a mech equipped with a Solarna core slipped through his fingers, but he understands the situation. Every now and then a local commander exceeds his authority. Sevar sends his regards - and says you owe him one.«

Krastan visibly relaxed. As though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

»Of course. The commander has already been executed, and I'll make it up to Sevar.«

»Naturally.«

Both men raised their glasses and drank while servants continued bringing food and placing steaming dishes before them. After a few moments, Mascar spoke again.

»I'd like some company during my stay.«

Krastan raised an eyebrow and studied him directly.

»Again? This is becoming excessive, my friend. We had an arrangement once, yes. But every visit?«

»I will not negotiate on this point, Krastan. Or do I need to remind you of our agreement? Our arrangement is what made your little empire possible in the first place. Ten years, Krastan. Ten years of guaranteed markets. Surely a bit of hospitality isn't too much to ask.«

»I appreciate what you did back then.«

Mascar set down his glass and gave Krastan a sharp look before beginning his meal. Without him, Krastan would be nothing.

That supply contract generated billions. And now he was acting difficult over a few women.

Granted, Mascar had a very specific request. But he would get what he wanted. He always did.

»Good. Then we're in agreement. The blonde.«

»Impossible.«

The answer came instantly.

»I should never have sent you those files. I know you too well. I should have seen this coming. She's unique.«

»That's exactly why I want her.«

»Forget it. If anything goes wrong, Mortasky will start asking questions. And when he starts digging, he doesn't stop. I still need him.«

»Her. No one else.«

Krastan took another sip from his glass. He considered the matter while Mascar continued eating. Mascar already knew how this would end. It was merely a game. And he was prepared to play it. He would not let this opportunity pass.

»You're asking a great deal.«

»No. I'm merely collecting what I'm owed.«

»We'll find something else. Other women. Several.«

Krastan would give in. He had no choice. The deal earned him millions - perhaps billions. He owed Mascar. A great deal. And a Solarna was worth it.

»Do this for me. And I'll consider our agreement - and your outstanding debt - fully settled.«

That struck home. Mascar could see it in his eyes.

»Fine. Fine. You have me. One night.«

»Five. Not one less.«

Krastan needed a moment.

»All right. Five. But not a single day longer. I'll need a few days to arrange it. And I get her back in one piece. Unharmd this time. I'm completely serious, Henri.«

Mascar merely smiled and raised his glass. Krastan returned the gesture. The glass was heavy. The wine was excellent. Somewhere in Beta Dalmeta, a woman slept.

A woman who had no idea what awaited her in a few days.

And he was already looking forward to it.



CYNDRALIS III

Dalmeta City – Valley Hills

14 FEB 129 AO

Valentina's thoughts drifted and her vision blurred. As always lately, she could never truly tell whether she was asleep or awake. A uniformed man placed her inside a limousine. Or perhaps it had been a truck. She wasn't sure. Time blurred inside her mind. She became aware of a large room. It smelled of flowers and freshly brewed tea. She heard voices. Then she was sitting on a couch. She couldn't remember how she had gotten there.

A man stood before her. He wore a long robe of fine red and blue fabric. The robe hung open, almost like a dressing gown. Who was he? Why was she here? He took a sip from a teacup.

»I'm very pleased that we're finally able to meet, Miss Solarna. I've been looking forward to this for quite some time.«

Valentina tried to move. Her arms and legs refused to obey. Her thoughts were slowly becoming clearer. The room around her was lavishly furnished. Expensive. She looked through a vast window overlooking nearly all of Dalmeta City. They had to be somewhere in the hills west of the city.

Perhaps the Valley Hills.

The man stepped closer. She tried to form words and heard herself speak.

»Who are you?«

She struggled to focus, but every time she managed to grasp a clear thought, something dragged her back and wrapped her concentration in cotton. She was sitting on the couch. Yes. But why? Why was she here? Who was this man?

The man slowly opened her blouse. She hadn't even known she was wearing one. Who had dressed her? A cold draft. A cold touch. Fear rose within her and settled deep in her chest. She heard him speak.

»A genuine Solarna.«

But the words meant nothing to her. What was happening? The scent of expensive aftershave grew stronger. The pressure on her body increased. She felt something warm. Moist. Her thoughts drifted again.

Suddenly she was lying on her back. She turned her head to one side. A bed. Or something like it. Soft beneath her. Gentle. She was lying on something soft. Her arms. She wanted to move them. She could. And yet she couldn't. Her thoughts grew clearer. It was a different room than before. She became aware of quiet music playing somewhere in the background. Something classical. Light, gentle melodies filled the fresh air. Her legs responded as well. Yet she still could not move. Her vision sharpened. Her thoughts gathered. Yes. Now it was slowly coming back. She was in a large bedroom. Her arms and legs were secured to the corners of a large canopy bed. She looked down at herself. She was completely naked. The man from before was there as well. And suddenly she understood what was about to happen next.



CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Production Sector

15 FEB 129 AO

The pressure on her body eased.

She simply lay there, staring at the ceiling.

Nothing happened.

Her thoughts slowly became more distinct. Not yet clear, just less distant. Fog instead of darkness. Still nothing happened.

She simply lay there, staring at the ceiling.

Where had she been these past few days? A technician hurried toward her. He picked up a datapad, walked around her chair, made several notes, paused beside a display, then entered more observations. Isabella saw everything through a dense veil. Blurred and imprecise. Then clearer again. Her body felt far away. Somehow heavy and foreign. The technician carefully removed the sensors. Slowly, she turned her head. In the chair beside her sat an unfamiliar woman. Long brown hair. A round face. She was staring at the ceiling. Probably somewhere in the middle of the process. The display beside her showed: Lacto Output: 11 ml. Nexalyte: 5 ml. NeuroSyn: Standby. Isabella tried to focus. She searched her memory for the terms. Had she ever encountered them during her training? Nothing. Nothing from medical school. Nothing from her military service. But ml.

Milliliters. A unit of volume. For liquids.

So something was being extracted from the body. But what?

The technician removed the collection cups from her breasts. The pressure across her chest gradually faded. She tried to take a deep breath. She couldn't. Her body was still too far away.

NeuroSyn. NeuroSyn. Where is it? Do I know that term?

A pulling sensation came from her lower abdomen as the technician removed the probe.

Nexalyte. Think. Nexalyte. Perhaps not from official medical literature. If only I could think clearly.

Maybe a thesis. A research paper. An experimental study.

Nothing.

Lacto. Lacto Output. Did it have something to do with her mammary glands? What were they collecting here? And for what purpose?

None of it made sense.

Or perhaps it wasn't something medically established at all. Perhaps these substances weren't naturally produced by the human body. A new pressure formed inside her chest. This time from within.

What if they've altered our bodies? What if they've made us produce these compounds?

The pressure intensified. Growing stronger. Gathering within her chest, settling around her heart.

What if they've turned our bodies into something they were never meant to be?

Her breathing quickened.

Oh God.

What if I'm already a monster?



CYNDRALIS III

THE RIFT – Valkyries Hideout

16 FEB 129 AO

Torban jerked awake. For a moment, he didn't know where he was. Then the deep, quiet hum of the generators reached his ears.

THE RIFT. Of course.

He blinked several times and sat up.

»Damn.«

Rubbing the back of his neck, he rolled his head from side to side. He had fallen asleep at the desk again. Aurora's desk. The clock on the monitor read 02:34. He rubbed his eyes. The handkerchief still lay beside the coffee mug, exactly where he had left it yesterday. Dried salt stains marked the fabric. Torban stared at it for a moment. Then he slowly picked it up and slipped it into his pocket.

A few months ago, he would have laughed at someone who cried all the time. Would have called them weak. A crybaby. A mama's boy. Now he saw things differently. Very differently. He got to his feet. Maybe they were back. Maybe they had simply let him sleep when they came home.

That was entirely possible. He left the room and walked through the silent tunnels of the cave.

Listening around every corner. Waiting to hear something.

Anything that might reveal their presence.

Maybe they were downstairs in the kitchen.

Maybe Isabella was telling another completely pointless joke.

Maybe Val was cursing at a broken piece of equipment.

Maybe Jeana was complaining about the world again.

Maybe Aurora was still working on reports, pretending she wasn't tired.

Torban stopped.

Nothing. No laughter. No voices. No footsteps. Only the distant dripping of water and the occasional whistle of the wind. Always that damned wind. He continued onward. When he reached the workshop, he paused. Valentina's tools were still there. A dirty wrench. Her open datapad. A half-disassembled sensor. Nobody had touched any of it. Three weeks. Three damned weeks. He swallowed, but the lump in his throat refused to move.

»Pull yourself together, man.«

Then he kept walking. The common room. Five seats around the table. Four for the women. One was always reserved for visitors. Sometimes that had been him. Sometimes Leynes. And by now, he knew

exactly where everyone sat. Val usually chose the seat facing the exit. Isabella sat opposite her. Jeana always occupied the back corner. And Aurora? A faint smile touched his lips. Aurora always tried to sit somewhere different. She never wanted habits to become routine. As in the small things, so in the big things. She had told him that more than once.

Again he felt the pressure behind his eyes. Again he forced it down.

He pulled his jacket tighter and headed for the exit. The cold night air struck him immediately.

The wind howled between the rocks, driving snow before it. Torban climbed to the small overlook Aurora had shown him once. From here, the entire valley could be seen. In the snow, he could still make out his footprints from yesterday. Or the day before. Or any of the days before that.

Maybe they would come back today. Maybe right now. Maybe in an hour. Maybe this very moment.

He waited, staring into the darkness. Trying to make something out.

Was that them? There were silhouettes out there. Or at least movement. That had to be them.

Five minutes. Ten. Twenty. Nothing but darkness stretched before him. No lights or the distant pounding footsteps of mechs.

Torban clenched his fists. A few days ago, he had finally received word from one of his Runners. The attack had been a trap. They had captured them all. Beta Dalmeta. He knew where they were now.

But he didn't know what was happening to them there. Not to just anyone. To Aurora. To Val. To Isabella. To Jeana.

Every morning he came to the Rift if he hadn't already spent the night there.

Every evening he searched the tunnels for any sign of them. And every day he ended up standing here again. Alone.

The pressure behind his eyes grew stronger. This time, he couldn't fight it. His vision already blurred.

He pulled out the handkerchief. Too late. The first tears were already running down his cheeks.

»Just come back... please.«

His voice was barely more than a whisper. The wind swallowed the words immediately. Torban sank to his knees. Snow crunched beneath his weight. He pressed his fists into the frozen ground. He tried to stay strong. Tried not to imagine what was happening to them out there. It didn't work. Not anymore.

He lifted his head and something inside him broke.

»AURORA!«

The name echoed briefly through the valley before dying in the wind.

No answer came. There was only darkness.

And a tiny spark of hope he desperately refused to let go of.

CYNDRALIS III

Dalmeta City – District Prime

16 FEB 129 AO

For over a week, she had eaten almost nothing and consumed very little water. Mallory sat motionless on the floor when he entered. She pushed herself upright and looked at him. Then at the water in his hand.

»Do you want water?«

She already knew what would come next. He had conditioned her to the point where she did what he wanted without him even having to ask. She unclasped her bra, the second-to-last piece of clothing she still wore. The chains around her wrists prevented it from falling to the floor.

Mortasky took a knife and cut through the straps. He poured two hundred milliliters into a glass and handed it to Mallory.

»That's better.«

She grabbed it eagerly and drank fast.

»Please. More.«

It was so easy. Too easy. Where was her limit?

»I want the name.«

She shook her head. She had been shaking her head for days. Strangely, exposing herself seemed to cost her nothing. Betrayal appeared to be triggered by something else entirely. He thought briefly about Beta Dalmeta. He had reviewed the recordings again and again. It must have happened when

she looked into the room with the other women. Something had changed there. But what exactly had triggered it? Where was the boundary? What had driven her to betray them in the first place? Fear? No. He had already tested fear. The pressure of helplessness? No. She had been helpless here for days. Humiliation? Perhaps.

»Tell me who you work for, and you'll get a proper meal and all the water you want.«

She shook her head again.

Interesting.

So starvation wasn't enough either. She possessed remarkable control over herself. The signs of malnutrition and dehydration were already becoming visible. He couldn't risk withholding food for another day. Perhaps humiliation really had been the trigger she had witnessed in Beta Dalmeta. Nothing else remained.

»Tell me to use you, and you'll get all the food and water you want.«

She hesitated. Was that it? Was this the line she wouldn't cross? She was still hesitating.

»Say it. They're very simple words.«

Then, finally:

»Use me. Please. Give me something to eat. Please.«

Mallory had already pulled down her panties and let them slide to the floor.

No. That wasn't the boundary either. Or was it something else entirely? He had to be certain.

So far, they were only words.

»The moment you give me the name, this ends and you get your food.«

Again, she shook her head.

»Turn around. Kneel.«

She did as she was told. That, at least, was no longer unusual. He set the water aside and pushed her upper body forward. She ended up on her hands and knees.

And still - no name.

»Spread your legs.«

She obeyed. He paused for a moment. She glanced at him.

No name.

Then he ran his hands along her back, across her breasts, brought himself into position. She began to cry.

»Tell me the name.«

Another shake of her head. He penetrated her, slowly, deeply.

No answer. Only quiet sobbing.

A flash of realization struck him. The Mallory before him was no longer the Mallory who had committed the betrayal. Something had shifted the boundary inside her maybe. Perhaps guilt. Perhaps regret. Perhaps something else entirely. But the woman before him was no longer the same person. And suddenly he felt something he rarely experienced toward other people. The faintest trace of respect.



CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Personnel Sector

17 FEB 129 AO

Kim closed the stall door, pulled down her pants, and sat down. Tanya was in the neighboring stall. They had become friends on the very first day, and that hadn't changed since.

The hum of the ventilation system above them droned softly in Kim's ears, but at least they were alone. And undisturbed.

»I don't know how much longer I can keep doing this. There have been so many, Kim. So many. Every age. Do you know what it's like to prepare them for all of this? To see them every day while their eyes become emptier and emptier? Especially the young ones. I just can't do it anymore, Kim. I can't.«

»You're still working downstairs, right? With the cells?«

»Yeah. Intake and aftercare. I see all of them. It's awful. It really is.«

Kim took a slow breath.

»Tanya, I have a plan. But I need your help.«
Silence. Nothing except the rushing ventilation.
»What do you mean, you have a plan? A plan for what?«
»I mean... I want Eva...«
Suddenly the restroom door opened. Someone entered. Kim fell silent. She took several slow breaths. Then she heard running water. The rustling of paper towels. Footsteps. Finally, the door opened and closed again. Tanya broke the silence.
»You mean because of your daughter? But they're leaving her alone as long as you cooperate, aren't they?«
»As far as harvesting is concerned, yes. So far. But I've already had to allow experimental procedures on her body because Evangeline generates an unusually high output. If they discover that her glands are more advanced than anyone else's, she'll end up on a dissection table. Or worse. Dr. Lang is her attending physician. He's helping us keep it hidden, but I don't know for how much longer.«
»Which means she needs to get out of here as soon as possible.«
»Correct. And the new arrivals are perfect for this. They might actually be able to pull it off.«
»And you want me to help you?«
Kim heard the toilet flush next door.
»Yes. Please. You have to give them the antidote and get them to the hangar. I'll make sure everything is prepared and the route is clear. You're the only person I trust.«
Silence again. Only the sound of water and a fresh draft from the ventilation system.
»I can only do that if I'm leaving with them. Because if they catch me afterward, I'm just as dead.«
Kim knew Tanya wouldn't simply say yes. But she had already thought about that.
»Of course. I understand. I'll do everything I can.«
»Give me your word. Otherwise, forget it.«
Kim knew that promise would be difficult to keep.
»All right. I promise. I'll get you out too.«
She heard Tanya move toward the sinks and wash her hands. Kim flushed, got dressed, and stepped out of the stall.
»You know, I've been waiting for this for a long time. Finally, a way out of here. And you're buying me a coffee. A large one. Right now. In the cafeteria. One of those with caramel and that white stuff on top.«
Suddenly Tanya wrapped her arms around her. Kim felt the woman's warmth.
»Thank you.«



CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmata – Administration

19 FEB 129 AO

The puzzle was almost complete.

She had manipulated the mech repair orders, rewritten the duty schedules. She had someone in the cell blocks, a technician in the hangar. Only one piece was still missing. His patrol had already begun. In roughly two minutes, he would pass her operations center. Kim glanced at the clock. 01:03. She positioned herself beside the vending machine near the entrance and waited. A moment later, she heard the familiar footsteps.

»Kim, hungry?«

She tapped the display, and the machine dispensed a chocolate bar.

»Yeah, well... it's actually for you.«

She handed him the snack. Jeired accepted it and looked at her with surprise.

»Come on. We need to talk.«

Kim turned and walked into her operations center. The guard followed. The door slid shut behind them with a soft hiss.

»What's this about, Kim? Trying to seduce me?«

He grinned and took a bite of the chocolate. Apparently, that was exactly where his thoughts went. Kim was thinking about something entirely different.

»I need your ID card.«

Jeired nearly choked. He coughed several times before recovering.

»If that's supposed to be a joke, it's not a very good one.«

Her expression hardened. She looked directly into his eyes.

»I'm not joking. I'm completely serious.«

»Ha. I think you've lost your mind.«

»Airlock Echo-12. Three weeks ago.«

The amusement vanished from his face instantly.

»What? What's that supposed to mean?«

»Subject Five-Five-Eight. The girl. You know exactly what I'm talking about.«

His hands began to tremble. The color drained from his face.

»Shit... how do you know about that?«

»Jeired, I can see everything and everyone in this facility whenever I choose to.«

Calmly, she gestured toward the wall of monitors. Several displayed live surveillance feeds.

»Nobody will believe you.«

Kim activated another display. A recording appeared. In the upper corner, a label read: Airlock Echo-12.

»Damn it, Kim. Turn that off.«

»I want your card. And I want a twenty-minute window on a night of my choosing. Afterward, we'll delete this recording together. Nobody will ever hear about it.«

»They'll fire me if they find out. No, they'll execute me. I can't give you my card.«

»I've always wondered why the harvesting technician never noticed the incident. He should have discovered it during the extraction procedure.«

»He didn't know anything. The guy's so bored he barely notices what's happening around him.«

»Really? That would be unfortunate. Because if that's true, the entire production batch was contaminated. Do you have any idea what it costs to purge your semen from the system? Not to mention the value of the batch itself. Perhaps I should simply ask him.«

»All right! Fine! He knew. I paid him off. The system is clean. Damn it.«

»Good. Then we're left with the lost yield from that girl. I assume he couldn't find a replacement on short notice. I don't think I need to explain what that alone cost. What do you think Mortasky will do when he learns he lost a five-figure sum because one of his guards couldn't keep his pants closed? Execution would probably be the merciful option, and I've never known Mortasky to be merciful.«

»Kim, please, I...«

»Your ID card and twenty minutes. Sectors D through G. That's all I want.«

Jeired sank into a chair. His thoughts seemed to race. After a long moment, he took a deep breath.

»I don't know. Honestly. And what about the guards in Sector G? The hangar? I have no authority there. And then there are the access codes...«

»Already handled. I've rewritten the duty schedules. There won't be a single person there between 02:00 and 06:00. And the codes? I pulled them from the rotation schedule three days ago.«

Jeired exhaled loudly.

»You realize that if they catch you, you're just as dead as I am.«

»Exactly. Which means we'll both have reasons to keep quiet. You know nothing about me, and I know nothing about you. Besides, think about your family. Children without a father rarely have an easy life.«

Jeired lowered his head. Another long breath. Another moment of silence. Then he finally nodded.

»All right. Twenty minutes. And my card. But after that, I have to raise the alarm.«

Kim smiled inwardly. The alarm would never sound. She had already taken care of that. The final piece had fallen into place.



CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Sector D – Cell Block

22 FEB 129 AO

A sting. It felt distant at first, yet with every passing second, with every breath she took, it spread deeper. First into her arms, then into her chest, then her legs. Creeping upward into her throat. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Fog. Everywhere. She raised a hand to shield her eyes from the blinding light. Where was she? Someone was standing nearby. She only could see a pale silhouette. Someone was calling out. She shook her head. That damned fog.

The sting had become a tingling sensation everywhere now. What the hell was happening?

Aurora. Yes. That was her name. Someone was calling her name.

She felt a hand gripping her arm. Pulling her upward. Her legs buckled immediately. Her vision sharpened slightly and the fog began to thin. She blinked.

Isabella? She formed the words with her lips, but no sound emerged.

Issi? Issi!

Yes. She recognized Isabella. It was definitely her.

Aurora rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath. The burning sensation had spread throughout her entire body. Her heart was racing. Her head throbbed.

»Issi!«

Finally, the words came.

»Come on. We have to get out of here. Now.«

That wasn't Isabella's voice. But whose was it? Someone helped her to her feet. Not Isabella. Who?

Aurora tried to focus. Her thoughts couldn't keep pace with events, everything was happening too fast. She was already being pushed forward. Then pulled. Then she found herself in a corridor. She was still unsteady. Her head felt as though it might explode at any moment.

There were several people. She knew them, didn't she? Isabella was there too. Who was that woman?

They stopped at an airlock door and Aurora could make out the lettering: D-16.

She stumbled. Someone caught her. Turning her head, she found her eyes focusing more clearly now.

A face. Yes, and a familiar one. Blonde hair.

»Val? Is that you, Val?«

»Yes. It's me. Just hold on. It'll get better soon.«

Her voice sounded different. Broken.

»What's happening, Val? What...«

»Later. Focus on your steps. Keep moving.«

Aurora obeyed. The arm supporting her was trembling, but it held firmly. She was no longer stumbling. Val was holding her and it felt warm and stable and almost like home.

»Val. I...«

»Keep moving, Aurora. Just keep moving.«

They reached another airlock. E-16. The pressure inside her body intensified. But her thoughts were becoming clearer. Yes. There were four people around her. No. Five. She recognized Jeana and Isabella. Valentina. Then a young woman she didn't know. And an older woman dressed in white. She seemed familiar somehow, but Aurora couldn't remember why. She shook her head again and finally the fog was disappearing. At last, her brain began processing information properly, almost. They were escaping. Aurora fought to regain control of her thoughts, trying to organize the faces. The situation. The pounding pain inside her skull made it difficult. Very difficult.

»Does anyone have an aspirin?«

»She's back.«

Isabella stepped in front of her, gently lifted her chin, and looked directly into her eyes.

»That's it, sweetheart. Look at me. Come on.«

Aurora did as she was told. Isabella examined her carefully.

»How do your legs feel?«

»Shaky.«

»Your head?«

»Like someone's hammering nails into it.«

»Your chest?«

»Pressure. Around my lungs.«

»Good. That's normal. You're fit to move. Another minute or two and your brain should be fully operational again.«

A beep sounded behind them. Then a voice.

»Move. Let's go.«

CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Hangar

22 FEB 129 AO

Where the hell are they?

Calrian glanced nervously at his watch. 05:02.

They should have been here by now.

He checked again.

Two minutes late. Two minutes.

In two minutes, anything could happen. Suddenly, the airlock door opened. Calrian pushed himself off the supply crate he had been sitting on. He grabbed the heavy wrench and was already preparing to complain. Then he froze. It wasn't the group he had been waiting for. It was Perst. Security Officer Julican Perst.

Damn it. Kim must have missed him.

His hands began to shake. Slowly, he lowered the wrench again.

»Calrian.«

Perst had spotted him immediately and was already walking toward him.

»What are you doing here this early? More overtime?«

Calrian forced himself to stay calm. His life was on the line either way.

»Julican, you old bastard.« He forced a smile.

»A last-minute priority order came in. Those mechs needed to be flight-ready. So now they're flight-ready. All four of them. Took me half the night.«

That part wasn't even a lie. The fact that most of that time had been spent restoring the cores' synchronization profiles for their original pilots remained unmentioned.

»Oh man, does that mean you'll have another excuse tonight when you lose again?«

Perst laughed. Calrian did not. His hands started trembling again. His heart pounded against his ribs.

»Calrian, at least you're a good loser. Still, I want my money. Tomorrow.«

His expression turned serious.

»Yeah, sure. You'll get every credit. I'll bring it tomorrow.«

And thanks to Kim, he actually had the money now.

»Everything okay? You look a little pale.«

Then came another hiss. The airlock door opened again. And there they were. The group he had actually been waiting for. Perst turned around. Casually at first. Then he stopped.

»What... what is going on here?«

His hand went to his weapon. Tanya stood at the front of the group. Slowly, she raised her hands.

»Perst, it's not what it looks like.«

The security officer stood motionless. His eyes moved across the group. One face after another. He seemed uncertain. Hesitating, maybe calculating what was next to come.

»Perst, let me explain.«

Tanya began walking slowly toward him. And Calrian knew there was no turning back now. He had to do something. His head was pounding. The wrench almost slipped from his hand. Yet something inside him pushed him forward. Slowly, he raised the heavy tool. Took a small step closer. Then swung. Metal crashed into the security officer's back. A gunshot exploded through the hangar. Someone screamed. Calrian stumbled and fell to the floor.

CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Hangar

22 FEB 129 AO

»What... what's going on here?«

Aurora saw the guard draw a weapon and aim it at the group. Her thoughts raced as fast as they could. And yet everything still felt wrapped in cotton. Damn.

Six steps to the target. Path blocked by two allies. Civilian at risk. Own combat capability severely compromised. Best angle: Jeana. Four steps. No weapon. Distraction required.

Then she heard a dull impact. A gunshot. A scream. The crash of metal hitting the floor. She saw Jeana launch herself forward. Then came the familiar sound of bone breaking. But no siren. Where was the alarm? Surely someone must have heard the shot.

When Aurora entered the hangar, Jeana was just releasing the guard's head. His body lay motionless on the floor. The technician knelt beside him, pale and shaking.

Tanya was breathing heavily. A wet rattling sound came from her throat. She was sitting against the wall and Isabella was already kneeling beside her, pressing a hand against the wound. A pool of blood was rapidly spreading beneath them.

»Tell... Kim...«

Isabella leaned closer. Tanya's breathing became uneven. Shallow and broken she desperately tried to pull air into her lungs.

»What should I tell her?«

»Tell... her... the coffee... was excellent.«

She drew one final breath. Then her head rolled gently to one side.

»Rest in peace, dear Tanya.«

Isabella closed her eyes and folded her hands across her lap.

»I'm sorry.«

Aurora tried to reassess the situation, but still her head hurt so damn much. And her thoughts were sluggish. Damn it.

»All right. Issi. Val. We need to keep moving. Jeana, help the technician to his feet and find out what he's doing here. You.«

She stepped toward the young woman she didn't recognize.

»Who are you?«

The girl shook her head. Aurora exhaled sharply.

»Damn it. Does anyone actually know how we're supposed to get out of here?«

»I... I do.«

The technician pushed himself upright. His voice was trembling.

»I'll explain everything.«

CYNDRALIS III

Beta Dalmeta – Hangar

22 FEB 129 AO

A message flashed across her HUD:

"Kappa clearance granted. Bogey bearing one-eight-five. Twenty klicks. Intercept and delay. Weapons free."

»OPS, confirm mission data and readiness to deploy.«

A few moments passed before the reply came:

[Done, Aurora.]

»Kappa Actual to Tax. We have clearance. Nav Alpha. Bearing one-eight-five. Let's move.«

In an orderly, by-the-book formation, the four machines slowly rolled out of their maintenance bays.

The snowstorm rattled the opening blast doors and drove drifts of snow deep into the hangar. Aurora walked her Toxotes with such calm certainty that it felt as if she truly belonged here. She did. Now. Just like the others. Just like the three machines behind her. They were part of the system. At least for a few more minutes.

»OPS, let them know we're outside.«

For a moment, there was only silence. Then the computer voice of the Bravo-Delta Command AI responded.

»Clearance confirmed. Hangar doors closing in ten seconds.«

Aurora couldn't help but smile. It seemed that Kim had done an astonishingly good job.

Now they only had to make it home - if *THE RIFT* could truly be called home. And she thought of Evangeline. She hoped the young woman would survive the escape.

The Taxis of the four mechs moved toward Navigation Point Alpha, just as planned. Supposedly, enemy sensor contact had been detected there. But they all knew it was only a decoy. After fifteen kilometers, they altered course and headed for the mountain range. The sky was gray. The storm was bitterly cold. And Aurora had never seen anything more beautiful.

CYNDRALIS III

The Golden Tower – Plaza

22 FEB 129 AO

As his two bodyguards stepped out of the elevator and headed for the exit alongside him, Vel Orun could already see hundreds of people crowding behind the outer security barriers. Closer to the front stood a smaller gathering of reporters waiting for him. Like vultures, they circled him, searching for a headline. They were always waiting. And he was always prepared.

The heavy armored glass doors slid open and Vel Orun pulled his coat tighter around himself. The cold wind struck his face. He narrowed his eyes slightly, but not a single other muscle moved. It was part of the game. The game they all played.

He could already hear the journalists shouting - a mixture of baseless accusations, politically explosive questions about the Valessan deal, a few insignificant remarks about job losses, and concerns over a pandemic. Every single time he had to restrain himself from telling them all to go to hell. Every single time they tried to corner him. And every single time they left with the answers he wanted them to have. He smiled inwardly.

He walked toward a young reporter wearing sunglasses, a thick black Maison Étoile Noir coat with a fur collar, and high boots. Around her neck hung the press badge of *Cyndralis Today*, the largest and most influential news channel in the system. She reacted immediately. Swallowing the question she had been shouting, she tightened her grip on the small microphone in her hand and spoke clearly. The others fell respectfully silent.

»Protector, is it true that a viral outbreak is currently affecting the southern regions and that fatalities have already been reported?«

A perfect opening. He could use this.

»Yes, that is correct. We currently have three confirmed deaths. We are not yet fully informed about all the details, but we are taking the situation very seriously. Efforts are already underway to develop a vaccine against the virus. Both our own scientists and the finest private researchers on Cyndralis III are working hand in hand in a coordinated effort to prevent further harm. We know the virus is highly contagious, and I can only advise all citizens to follow the safety measures issued by our authorities.«

»Should we expect an epidemic spread?«

»Since we still know too little about the transmission and effects of the virus, and since we have not yet identified its source, it is difficult to make accurate predictions. Our efforts are running at full capacity, and I will spare no expense and no effort to protect us all as best as possible. Beginning this afternoon, emergency packs will be distributed free of charge in all major cities. These will provide every citizen with at least a basic level of protection, from breathing masks to disinfectant soaps. As I said, we are taking this matter very seriously.«

Scattered cheers rose from the surrounding crowd. The reporter's expression hardened slightly, but Vel Orun remained calm. He had endured far worse accusations than hers. She did not frighten him.

»Are you taking the closure of the uranium mine in the northern RIFT just as seriously, where 530 workers will lose their jobs next week and families will be left struggling to survive?«

»Of course. The well-being of every person in this system matters to me. I believe you will be pleased to hear that all affected workers were already offered new positions yesterday evening. Their skills are urgently needed on one of our moons.«

The reporter looked genuinely surprised and was about to speak when Vel Orun interrupted her.

»Yes, I know what you're about to say.«

He raised his hands in a calming gesture.

»Relocating to Nereon is extremely expensive for a worker and their family - far beyond what most could afford. Not to mention the cost of living up there. Therefore, the offer includes free transportation and free accommodation for the worker and their immediate family members for the duration of their employment.«

She removed her sunglasses and stared at him skeptically, as though unwilling to believe a word of it.

»What exactly are you building there? Why do you need so many workers on a moon isolated from Cyndralian civilization and accessible only through a space dock? Are you planning to establish a new colony?«

»With the highest priority and at unprecedented speed, assisted by the finest builders and architects available, we are constructing a massive quarantine facility for Cyndralis III. In fact, I am currently on my way to a meeting with the head of the planning team. The virus I mentioned earlier could become a genuine threat. Perhaps it can still be contained before it spreads. Perhaps not. But we are not waiting to find out. We are already preparing for the worst-case scenario, and every additional pair of hands up there could save lives.«

The crowd erupted into applause as though he had just announced the salvation of the world.

»When did construction on Nereon begin?«

Vel Orun ignored the reporter's final question. He thanked everyone and ended the interview.

Always leave at the peak. His bodyguards escorted him toward the limousine, whose turbines were already humming softly.

The door had almost closed when his assistant came running out of the building. Without a coat.

Vel Orun knew immediately that something had happened. He held the door open. His assistant climbed inside, sat down beside him, and whispered into his ear. It took every ounce of discipline not to react. The information struck him like lightning and buried itself deep in his gut. The irony of a glorious day in the life of Vel Orun, savior of worlds.

CYNDRALIS III

THE RIFT – Southern Foothills

22 FEB 129 AO

Her machine was already running on autopilot. OPS was handling it. For a while, she allowed herself to drift into her thoughts, which were finally beginning to function again.

The sky was still a sea of gray when the first foothills of the mountain range finally appeared in the distance.

They owed this escape to a woman. A woman they did not even know. But what now? Until this moment, they had been fugitives. A ragtag group held together by circumstance. All she had wanted was to get off this damned rock that had cost her so much. Her family. Her career. But they owed that unknown woman something. Their lives, quite literally.

She thought about it. And deep in her gut, she already knew where this argument with herself was heading. Should she really stay? Should she actually start a rebellion against the entire system? From the miserable caves of a mountain range? Aurora already knew the answer before she was willing to accept it. She slammed her fist against the console and kicked the inside wall of the cockpit several times with all her strength.

»Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. Damn it.«

She screamed so loudly she was certain the others must have heard her.

[Aurora, I am detecting elevated stress levels. Do you require assistance?]

»No, OPS. Please leave me alone for a minute.«

She took a deep breath and stared into the snowstorm rushing past outside.

And she knew there were no excuses left for her anymore.

Goddamn it.