THE SHADOW WORLDS

Project PRAE: The Evolutionary Break

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Volume 2

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Chapter 1 - Nautilus Seven

The rain came back like a bad memory—salty, harsh, and unapologetic. It pattered against the steel deck of the promenade, drumming on umbrellas, heads, and hopes, washing nicotine and motor oil into a glossy film that looked as if someone had slit the throat of the night. "One more drink of courage," I said to my bottle, and the bottle said nothing. Good whiskey speaks softly. Bad people scream. Behind me, the dock clinic siren blared; ahead, the hologram PRAE ALERT blinked—like a red eye that had blinked too many times to be taken seriously.

"Kjell!" shouted Rurik, the man with the voice of a rusty loader. "The maintenance AI wants us in Sector D. Another malfunction with the nanofilter." "The filters like me," I said. "I whisper dirty jokes to them, then they run." "You whisper dirt into everything," said Rurik, "that's why the people around you rust."

We turned into the corridor that chewed through the city like a cigarette burn. Nautilus Seven was a miracle, if you liked miracles that squeak, leak, and send bills. Eight floating panes, connected by bridges, danced in storms as if they'd had too much of the wrong stuff. Up above lived the dreamers with their glass balconies and rain deflectors. Down below – with us – the repairs stuck like Band-Aids on broken bones.

A man ran out of the rain as if the Pacific Ocean itself had spat him out. Barefoot, bare-chested, skin covered in scratches, eyes like screws—driven in too far, too tightly. He stumbled, slammed into the railing, and hung there, gasping, his lips white as if they'd forgotten what blood was.

I was already on my way to him because I'm stupid, but not dead. "Everything okay, buddy?" I asked, sounding like a liar trying to reassure himself. The man raised his head. His mouth was full of spit, or what had later been spit. "Help," he said, but it sounded like the word was slipping through gravel.

Rurik was quicker to reach him, as big as a harbor crane, which can be gentle. "Don't panic, okay? We'll take you to the hospital." He grabbed the man's arm. Then it happened quickly. The man jerked, leaned forward, and grabbed Rurik's forearm—teeth first—like a clamp that never lets go.

Screaming is an art. There's the operatic scream, the baby scream, the scream of people who think pain is a passing visitor. Rurik screamed like a bear with its paw wedged in a door. I pulled. He yanked. The man held on. And then—blood.

So much blood that the rain could barely cover it. It ran down Rurik's arm, mixed with the water, and became pink streaks on the steel floor.

"Damn it!" I yelled, pulling the man away. He was hot, way too hot, and his gaze—somewhere between hunger and memory. For a moment, I thought I knew him. For a moment, he was one of us.

The dockside clinic pushed aside its windows and spat out two paramedics—in white raincoats that were no longer white. A drone buzzed above us, staring with three eyes that took in everything and understood nothing.

"Bite wound," said one of the medics, words like nails. "Nanopatch?" "Active," said Rurik, crunching, "but that shit just burns." "It always does," said the medic. "Hold it."

He stuck the plaster over Rurik's bite, and the micro-spiders inside hissed like offended cats. I took the man by the shoulders. "Listen to me, friend. What's your name?" His gaze swept over me, searching somewhere behind my face for an escape route. Then he growled. Yes—growled. Not like a dog. Like a machine that had forgotten it was once human.

The drone beeped. PRAE ALERT flickered on the hologram above the dock. The rain seemed to get louder, as if the city were listening to our little scene. "Inhale," said the second medic, "exhale." The man jumped. Not a jump, as you'd think. More like a wrench flying from a hand and hitting the right—or wrong—thing. He came toward me, teeth out, and I smelled something I hadn't smelled in years: real saliva, warm and metallic. My flask slipped out of my jacket, clinked open, and the whiskey shot into the gutter like a soldier in a hurry to die.

I raised my elbow, the old harbor maneuver, and hit him in the jaw. There was a crack, a fine, pretty sound that briefly demanded attention. The man staggered, gasped again, this time for air. The medics tried to restrain him, but he was faster. He was... wrong. Too fast, too strong for skin that looked as if it had been washed for too long.

"Clarice?" said Rurik, and the maintenance AI spoke from my earpiece, which sounded like a cheap angel.
— Yes, Rurik. Emergency protocol?
“Protocol Three,” he said, “Quarantine Dockside.”
— Confirmed. Quarantine in 90 seconds. Please move away from the red line.
The red line ran across the floor like a vein about to burst.

"He's breathing asynchronously," said the paramedic. "Heart rate too high. Temperature—" "The rain wipes away the temperature," I said. "Can you shut him down?" "Only if he wants to." "Well then we're screwed," I said, because the truth is rarely polite.

The man lunged forward. The drone screamed. I grabbed his wrist—bony, but the bones felt... denser. Like they'd been pumped up. A creepy upgrade no one had ordered. "Kjell!" Rurik pulled me back, but his hand was shaking. The nanobots were working, but the bite around his forearm glowed beneath the pavement like an evil star.

"Let him go!" the paramedic yelled, "We'll sedate him!" "Do it!" I yelled back, and in the same breath I felt the man's teeth on my jacket, right on my shoulder, crunching on fabric, just missing the flesh. I smelled blood—not mine. Not yet.

The syringe went in. It took the man a second to understand what "sedated" meant. Then he fell. Heavily, like the truth after a long lie.

The quarantine gates slammed down like a boss's whim. A metallic clang that reverberated in the gut. Red lights flashed. PRAE ALERT stopped blinking and became serious.

"Keep your distance!" the drone shouted. "Biohazard level—" "Save the level," I said, "clear the air." "The air is clean," said the drone. "The people aren't."

I put my arm around Rurik's shoulder. It was heavy, but that was normal. "You won't die," I said, "not until you pay me back the five loans." "Six," he growled, his forehead cold even though his arm burned. "Interest."

We took the man and Rurik to the hospital. The paramedics spoke in numbers. I spoke in curses. The drone didn't speak to anyone else who was still there.

The anteroom smelled of iodine, plastic, and fear that no one admitted. We laid the man on a stretcher. He looked strangely... long. His fingers had grown too large, his nails too hard, as if someone had swapped the instruction manual.

"We have a new protocol note," said a voice from the wall. "PRAE-1 – Suspected case. Please register all direct contacts." "I'm not a contact," I said. "I'm an accident." "Accidents rarely kiss people," the wall replied.

Rurik laughed, a dry, brave sound. "Are you okay, Kjell?" "Sure," I said, "I've had worse nights. Okay, not many. But this one's still going."

The medic raised his visor. Beneath it was a face like an old master: stern, tired, not unfriendly. "Was the man fully conscious before the attack?" "If consciousness is a bar," I said, "he was asleep at the bar." "Any abnormalities?" "Everything about him was abnormal," I said. "Especially how quickly."

He nodded. "We've had three similar cases in the last few days. First fatigue, then fever, then..." He searched for a word, found it, and didn't like it. "Behavior." "Aggression?" "That would be a nice way of putting it. Let's say the brakes release, but the engine stays on." "And the nanobots?" "They climb in, come out confused. As if their bodies are posing riddles to which they don't know the answer."

I felt the city rock. Not much, just a nod, but enough for the lights to respond. Nautilus Seven was alive. And like all living things, it didn't like disease.

"Can we go?" I asked. "Not yet," he said. "Quarantine means quarantine." "I know the definition," I said. "I just don't like the game."

Behind the glass, the man writhed. His muscles twitched in waves, like fields in the wind. His face bore lines I didn't want to see on people. The skin across his back took on a grain that resembled fur, something that didn't belong here. Not in a clinic. Not in a city. Not in this time.

"What is PRAE-1?" I asked, even though I didn't want to know. The wall answered: "Classification tentative. Retroviral activity, highly adaptive. Transmission—" "—by bite," I said, noting how much I liked my own arm. "—most likely," the wall continued. "Secondary: blood-to-blood, possible. Incubation: variable." "Variable means?" "Exactly that."

I stepped closer to the glass. The man had his eyes closed, but his fingers clutched the edge of the bed, as if groping for a second earth. A dark film clung to his lips, and when he opened his mouth, blood slowly, defiantly, trickled out—warm, thick, a statement. He turned his head and smiled. Not friendly. Knowing. As if he'd just stumbled upon an old password that still worked.

Rurik cursed. "This isn't normal." "Normal threw Nautilus Seven overboard five years ago," I said. "We've been drifting ever since."

The alarm changed its tone, deeper now, less dramatic. The drone returned, accompanied by two minis with syringe arms. The holo outside read PRAE

ALERT again. It became the weather, the sea—just there. "Contact Mertens, Kjell," said the drone. "Please, arm into analysis." "First call me a gentleman, then you'll have my arm." "Gentleman Mertens, Kjell," said the drone. "Please, arm."

I held it out. A cold sting. The nanobots in my blood clicked like ice cubes in a glass: present, straining, not very useful. "Result?" "No findings," said the drone. "Not yet."

"It's not a long hallway yet," I said. "How many doors to the exit?" "Statistically?" asked the drone. "Leave it," I said. "Statistics is the machine's sense of humor."

The door to the inner ward opened. A woman entered, wearing black raincoat. Her gaze was like a fuse: small, but the wrong touch makes everything go dark. "Dr. Voigt?" asked the paramedic. She nodded. "I was hoping the report was false. It never is." She stepped to the glass, studying the man as if he were a poem with bad paragraphs. "How fast did it go?" "Minutes," I said. "Or I'm bad at counting." "Both are possible." She turned to me. "Name?" "Kjell," I said. "And you're the one who gets to explain." "I'm the one who can't explain," she said matter-of-factly. "Not yet."

She ordered data that flew through the air like flies that had a queen this time. "We thought the nanoprograms would block it. They don't. PRAE-1 sees them, talks to them, sends them home. Like a con artist who knows the bouncer."

"And now?" asked Rurik. "Now we close doors," she said. "And pray that the hinges hold."

In the glass, the man moved again—no, not just movement. An intention. His shoulders broadened, his arms contracted in a way that promised strength, not discussion. A sound came from his throat that lived somewhere between a roar and a laugh. He raised his bloody hands—and smiled again. I've seen a lot: machines that are more sensible than their owners. Men who break even when they're only lightly tapped on the truth. But this smile was new. It was old.

"Sedation isn't enough," said Dr. Voigt. "We have to secure him." "He's already secured," said the paramedic. "Four straps, top-certified." "Certificates are poetry for people without time," she said. "Steel."

We all saw at once how the right ankle gave way. Not torn—yielded, as if the man had whispered a friendly word into the material's ear. The drones buzzed

nervously. I reached for the nearest tool: an angled spanner that had been complaining for weeks about not being treated like a gentleman.

"Kjell," said Rurik. "Don't do anything stupid." "I'm professionally stupid," I said. "I'll make it look good."

Inside, the man half-sat up. His teeth weren't growing—we're not that far along. But they were emerging because the rest of it was receding. The flesh was rearranging itself beneath the skin, like a team without a leader suddenly delivering results.

"Door closed," said Dr. Voigt. "It's closed," said the wall. "Even more closed," it said.

The second shackle gave way. The man jerked his head around, and blood sprayed against the window as if to greet us. It trickled down slowly, drawing lines like children, only they weren't children and they weren't lines. I heard my heart. It sounded insulted.

"I need the security module," said Dr. Voigt. "Now." "Available in 120 seconds," said the wall. "Then we have 60 more to learn how to run," I said.

The man slammed himself against the glass. A dull thud that felt as if someone had briefly reduced the space around us. There was something in his gaze that wasn't just hunger. I swear, for a split second, he looked at us. Not like prey. Like... witnesses.

"He recognizes us," murmured Dr. Voigt. "Maybe—" "Maybe nothing," I said. "Maybe he just wants to know what we taste like."

The third shackle broke. "Retreat!" shouted the medic, and for the first time today, someone did something that made sense. We retreated as the drones plunged forward, their needles like small, useless swords.

"Kjell," said Rurik, "when we get out of here, I'll pay you seven." "Make it ten," I said. "I'm having an expensive life today."

The man stood. Too tall, too broad, too sudden. The drones stung. He shook them off, casually, like you shoo flies from a beer glass when you desperately need a drink. Then he approached the glass, his hands leaving red, wet constellations behind them. I thought of maps, of paths, of getting lost.

"Security module active," the wall finally said. "Define active," said Dr. Voigt, but there it was—a crackle of electricity, a blue light licking the edges of the room. The air contracted like a regretted lungful.

The man twitched. He roared. He didn't stop. Then, very slowly, so slowly it was almost friendly, he took a step back. He looked at us. He sank to his knees. And even as he sank, blood flowed from his mouth again, heavy and, despite everything, deliberate. His hands, completely red, fell to his sides. He breathed. He laughed briefly. Just a breath, a broken engine. Then he was silent.

The alarm changed tone. More theater—but this time for us. PRAE ALERT outside stood firm, like a verdict. "He's alive," said Dr. Voigt. "Still." "And Rurik?" I asked, and only then did I realize I was clinging to him. "We're taking blood," said the medic. "We're running the nanobots over him, we're praying, we're waiting."

"Waiting is for people with chairs," I said. "Sit down," said the wall. A chair popped out from the side where someone had written "comfort module," probably joking. I sat down. It squeaked. Everything squeaks, if we're being honest.

Outside, the rain continued to pour down. Nautilus Seven floated. Nautilus Seven held fast. Nautilus Seven acted invulnerable. And I thought of the man's laughter and the red writing in the sky. I drank the last drop from the bottle, which tasted like an apology. "PRAE-1," I said quietly, "you bastard. Welcome aboard."

The door to the outside released me into a rain that had now decided to seriously hate us. I pulled my jacket tighter, which was about as effective as being kind during a tax audit. The promenade was deserted—except for those who no longer had time to be human.

“Clarice,” I said into the plug, “give me the latest quarantine records.”
— Access restricted, Kjell.
“Restrictions are for the pious.”
— You are not pious.
"Then give me sector data. Ventilation status, hydraulics, bulkhead times."
— Ventilation network stable. Southern hydraulics need attention. Shutdown times vary due to storms and…
"And?"
— And staff.

I saw the shadows in the skylights. They moved differently. Not the tourist walk, not the shifty gait. Something between crouching and jumping. I put my hand on the peeping Tom. A bad joke of a gun, but the humor suited me.

"Kjell!" Rurik's voice came over the radio, thinner than I liked. "You're not gone, are you?" "I'm here," I said. "How do you feel?" "Like a door being kicked in from both sides." "That's just the love of nanobots," I said. "Then I want a divorce."

I turned around. At night, the clinic looked like a church for people who no longer believe in anything, but are still waiting. Inside, Dr. Voigt was poring over data. She didn't look tired—she looked as if she'd given up on tiredness.

"How fast?" I asked. "Too fast," she said. "Some hours. Some minutes." "And sometimes not at all?" She looked at me. "You believe in luck?" "I carry it in my left jacket pocket. Right next to the hole."

She nodded, probably more at the answer than at me. "I need samples from Sector D. Air, water, organic residue. I need to see PRAE-1 laugh when we annoy him."
“And if he laughs back?” “Then we laugh louder.”

I asked for the cassettes—small, durably elastic coffins for things better left undone. Outside, the rain was on duty, dutiful as a civil servant. I set out, and the city went with me. Sector D lay lower, closer to the belly of the platform, where the sea hammers against the steel until both understand each other. The lights hung lower here, warm like cheap bars where stories begin that no one wants to finish.

I heard footsteps. Not human footsteps. A scraping, pushing pace, as if someone was practicing walking upright again. I stopped, breathing quietly, which is never my style. Something moved behind the row of containers. I smelled metal, salt water, and this other thing: sweet, alive, wrong.

"I saw you," I said quietly, "and I'm not impressed." The thing hesitated, like a lie that realizes it's been caught. Then it jumped. A figure, hunched over, arms too long, head too heavy. Not an animal—no longer human. Skin mottled, with those first shadows of hair that say: We're choosing a different direction.

I ducked, the tensioner rose, and hit my elbow. A dirty crack, but no music. The figure grabbed at me, fingernails as sharp as new. I kicked my knee, and my

knee was surprised. We staggered. The sea laughed, the rain counted the points.

"Stop," I said, and most of the time things don't stop when I tell them to. But this one—it paused, just a heartbeat. Enough to see: There was something in the eyes I recognized. Not humanity, no. Something else: recognition. As if it wanted to ask: Another one? Then the question died away, and Hunger wrote the text again.

I yanked up the sample box and hit it. Plastic did its best. The figure retreated, and I retreated with it. We danced. I didn't like the dance. Finally, it stumbled against the edge of the shore and disappeared between the dock and the sea, into the cracks where Nautilus stores its nightmares.

I stood there, wet, angry, alive. My hands trembled. Not from fear. From insight. Insight means: This is going to be bad. And somewhere far above, perhaps in the restaurant with the good view, a person screamed, and the screaming slid down the drainage channels until it was standing in my shoes.

I returned to the clinic with water samples, air filters, and bloody breath in one of the cassettes I had wrested from a railing. Dr. Voigt took it from me; we barely exchanged words, just glances. Glances are the cheapest currency of the night.

"This is going faster than we thought," she finally said. "PRAE-1 is in a place we haven't thought about for decades: He reads our nanoprograms like they're comics. He finds the punchline before we even turn to the first page." "And then?" "Then he rewrites the speech bubbles."

Rurik was lying on a cot. His arm looked better than it was. His eyes looked worse than they needed to be. "You owe me eleven now," I said. "Make it twelve," he said, "if you dim the lights for that." I dimmed the lights. He closed his eyes. I didn't close mine.

Outside, the storm rumbled, and the holograms made PRAE ALERT wander across the wet streets like dogs no one wanted to let out. I drank air and imagined it was whiskey. It doesn't fill you up, but it keeps you awake.

"We need a name," I said. "We have one," said Dr. Voigt. "PRAE-1." "No," I said. "For what we're doing. For the stupidity of continuing when the city says it doesn't have a chair for us." She looked at me as if testing the joke. "Call it what you will." "I call it life," I said. "And I hate it when it's right."

The night grew older, we grew no wiser, but we learned to move without screaming. That's all there is to it sometimes. I heard the distant crash of a bulkhead. Someone had decided to be a door. I thought of the man behind the glass. Of his smile. Of the blood falling so deliberately. Of the hands painting red constellations, as if they knew where we were going.

Nautilus Seven rocked. I swayed with it. The sea wanted us. So did the sky.

The clinic had a clock without numbers. Just a red circle breathing. It was getting faster. I was getting calmer. That happens to me sometimes: when the world decides to run, I stop and count teeth.

"We're losing bulkhead H-12," said the wall. "Hydraulic pressure below target. Glitches in the maintenance line." "Glitches," I growled. "Just tell me: Someone's chewing on our intestines." "Inappropriate metaphor," said the wall. "I'll show you inappropriate," I said, but quietly.

Dr. Voigt pulled her hood tighter. Her hair wasn't visible, only her eyes. Eyes are the only thing that ages well on a person. "Kjell, I need you down in the substructure. Take two drones and the emergency kit. If H-12 falls, Sector D will flood, and the hospital will float away." "And us?" I asked. "We're not a hospital."

I took the emergency kit. A metal case that promised too much. The drones hung on my shoulders like bad habits. Rurik tried to stand up. "I'm coming with you." "You stay," I said. "The chair has developed feelings." "I'm cold," he said. I put my hand on his forehead. It was hot. "Cold is just a stylistic device."

I left. The doors exhaled me, the promenade welcomed me back. The rain was smoother now, finer, as if the clouds had switched to nano. I walked down the service corridor until the lights stopped being pleasant. The undercarriage of Nautilus Seven is no place for strolls. It's the belly of an animal that has learned to pay its taxes. Pipes, cables, drive struts, the eternal hiss of pressure, the clacking of valves—and in between, wooden ladders that someone hasn't replaced out of sentimentality. We cling to our bad ideas.

“Clarice, give me H-12.”
— Two decks down. Three branches. One sensor dead, two on strike.
“Strikes are for people with unions.”
— The sensors have no union.
“Maybe they should.”

The drones hovered ahead, their small spotlights like belated apologies. I heard my breathing, didn't like hearing it. A trickle ran down my neck. Rain, sweat, relatives.

I stopped at the end of the aisle. Not because of a sign. Because of the smell. There are many smells in the basement: ozone, oil, sea salt, old fish from the deck market. This one was new, sweet and tart, like fruit someone had forgotten—and then found again with their teeth. I raised the clamp as if it had suddenly grown.

"Lighting," I said. The drones positioned themselves around me like a bad play: spotlight, main character, empty space. The room wasn't empty. Something sat in the corner, its knees drawn up to its chest, its back to me, its shoulders just skin over bone, about... something that wanted to grow. "Hey," I said. It turned its head. A teenager, maybe. Too much fear in its eyes, too little space in its jaw. Lips chapped, teeth red. It was holding something in its hands. A stuffed animal, I thought at first. Then I saw it was a protective cover for hydraulic heads that someone had painted. A face on it. Smiling. Lies are everywhere.

"Are you in pain?" I asked, even though the question was dumber than I was. He nodded. "We can—" "Thirsty," he said. His voice brittle, like cheap glass. "It burns." "There's plenty of water," I said. "Open your mouth, I—" He shook his head. "Not that. The other one."

It's good to have feelings. Even better is knowing when not to use them. I lowered the peeping Tom. "What's your name?" "Tariq." "Okay, Tariq. H-12 is acting up. I have to get in. After that, I'll find your people." He laughed, short and fake. "My people are faster."

Behind us, something scratched against metal. Nothing serious, just honest. Two more figures emerged from the darkness, hunched over, long arms, and little shirt. Not like animals—animals have style. This was a draw. Development with a flat tire.

"Tariq," I said, "stay seated." He stood up. Redemption is rude. "Clarice," I whispered.
— Yes.
"Unlock battery channel beta for me. Running light, 30 percent, in bursts."
- Why?
“Because the bell rings.”

The lights blinked, first hesitantly, then in waves. The figures snatched at the light like children snatching soap bubbles. I slid sideways along the wall, close to the railing, half voyeur, half excuse. Tariq followed me, too close, his breath on my neck.

H-12 lay behind a service door on which someone had scrawled "Always Closed." Good wisdom. I unscrewed the panel. The hydraulic cylinder vibrated. Not from pressure. From teeth. Someone had ripped the rubber; bite marks in the seal body, fibers hanging loose, as if they'd talked too much. The leak rate was terrible. Five more minutes, and the flood would do the work.

"I need some rest," I said. "Can you give me some?" Tariq growled, not angrily. More like a stomach growl. He sat down against the wall, rested his forehead on his knees, and rocked. The others remained standing, suspended between curiosity and hunger. I did what I know how to do: put an emergency seal over the wound, clamp it, release the pressure, and build it up again. The line hissed in offense, calmed down, and did what it always does: pretend nothing had happened.

"H-12 stable," I said into the radio. "Pressure reset. We'll remain closed."
- *Confirmed,* said Clarice. — *You have company.*
"I know," I said. "They don't eat much."
- *Not yet.*

I turned to Tariq. His fingers were cramping. He was tearing at his forearm as if trying to pluck an invitation from his skin. "Burns," he gasped. "Burns, burns, burns." "Nanopatch," I said, and he recoiled as if on fire. "Doesn't help," he whispered. "The little things talk against it. Then they sleep."

The others approached. I raised my hand. "No. I can smell you. You can see me. That's enough for today." A shudder went through them, a collective low-level reflection. Then they crawled backward into the shadows, surprisingly quietly, as if the darkness had already taught them sailor etiquette. Tariq stayed. "Come," I said. "Clinic, Dr. Voigt." "I don't like glass," he said, and his tongue ran over his cracked, shiny lip. "Today, glass likes you," I said. "You as art."

We reached the stairs. At the top stood a silhouette. Human-sized, but the calm was off. This wasn't the restlessness of the hungry. This was the serenity of those who are full and merely curious. The head turned slightly, giving us profile. No hurry. No fear. No negotiation. "You're late," said the silhouette – a voice like dry sand being poured into a bottle. I looked at Tariq. His eyes shone

briefly, as if they recognized something. "Who is that?" "The Dock Runner," he whispered. "Used to be one." "Was?" "Not now."

The figure stepped into the light. His face was... organized. Not like the others. His jaw broader, yes. His forehead lower, yes. But his eyes organized. He was still wearing a jacket, half-open, covered in salt and stains. On the sleeve was a patch:*Dock Run 6*. An old colleague, perhaps. He smiled. Not friendly. Not stupid.

"You two," he said. "Get off the dock." "We need to go to the hospital," I said. "You don't need to," he said. "Yes, we do," I said, "he's bleeding from the inside." "We all bleed from the inside," he said. "It's called life."

Tariq took a step forward. He smelled the air, the way it tastes when you're about to do something wrong. "You said you'd help us," he murmured. The dock walker nodded. "I'm helping you, Tariq. Not him." "He closed H-12," Tariq said, and the sentence held the naive logic of a child who believes repairs please God. "H-12," the walker said, as if it were a joke. "You fix the city, and the city doesn't fix you."

I raised the peeping Tom. "One more step, and we'll be talking without words." He looked at the peeping Tom as if I'd read him a poem. "You talk a lot." "Otherwise I hear things," I said. "Then listen," he said, and his hand went up, not quickly, just firmly. Tariq flinched, but stayed. "People think we're losing our minds. Wrong. We're just losing politeness. And some words. The others are becoming clearer."

"Which ones?" I asked, because sometimes I'm too curious to grow old. He looked at Tariq. "Hunger." Then me: "Rang." Then the drones: "Noise." "And what are you?" I asked. He grinned. His teeth weren't longer. They just seemed busier. "Me? I'm on the early shift."

The drones nervously clicked through menus they didn't understand. I stepped forward over the step so I was standing between Tariq and the runner. "We're going," I said. "You stay and think about the word politeness." He nodded. "I have one more: first." "First what?" "First to come back and stay." "And what do you want?" "To see you burn," he said, kindly, as if he were forecasting the weather. "Not now. Later."

He stepped aside, as casually as if he'd invited us in. I expected the jump, the screech, the teeth. Nothing. Just a look that scanned me like a salesman. I didn't like the look. "Go," whispered Tariq. We left.

Halfway to the clinic, Tariq stumbled. I caught him, smelled his feverish breath, felt the trembling that didn't want to be trembling. "Three more corners," I said. "And a lie." "Which one?" "That everything will be okay." He laughed, short and genuine. "I like lies that don't pretend."

The clinic took him, Glas took him, Dr. Voigt took Zahlen. Rurik raised his head. His lips were gray. "You have new friends," he said. "I've had worse." "And better?" "They're dead."

"Show me," said Dr. Voigt. I showed the case, the bite mark in the rubber seal, the samples. She nodded, sorting them. "That fits." "What fits?" "PRAE-1 uses currents. In the air, in the water, inside us. It clings to good paths. Like a bastard who never pays rent."

"I've seen the dock walker," I said. "He talks. Too much for someone who's just hungry." "We know that," she said. "We call him an anchor specimen internally. Stable, but... different." "You've seen him?" "On tape. Never close enough. He knows the cameras. He knows us better than I'd like."

"What do you want to do?" "Move," she said. "From rules to instincts. From nanobots to..." "To what?" "To courage," she said, not smiling.

Tariq lay in the glass. His body was negotiating. His face lost words, gained sounds. He looked at me, once, clearly, as if he were standing at the harbor, waving to a boat that wasn't coming. Then he closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, there was art inside. Hard lines, dark shadows. He raised his hand. Slowly. Bloody. He tapped the glass. Not aggressively. A Morse code that only he knew. "He's remembering," said Dr. Voigt quietly. "The memory is moving. Different furniture. Same apartment."

"How long?" "Until he doesn't recognize us anymore. Or until we stop looking the way we do." "And Rurik?" She looked at him. "The nanobots are holding him. For now." "For now is a bad word." "We love bad words these days."

The wall threw out a new message:*Quarantine level extended. Bulkhead H-12 stable. Bulkhead F-3 loss. Evacuation of upper decks recommended.* "Recommended," I said, "sounds like they're afraid of the disclaimer." "They're afraid of everything," said Dr. Voigt. "That's finally smart."

I stepped to the window. Tariq watched the drones. Not angry. Studying. Like us. And I felt that bitter little thought that likes to settle in the minds of

whiskey-loving people: Maybe we're not the heroes. Maybe we're just the front pages. The middle section has other favorites.

There was a crackle in the loudspeaker, then another voice, rough, distant, as if coming on a wet cord: "Nautilus Seven Station, this is Orbital Hub Kallisto. We're registering irregular biopulses. You're beautiful offline. Report ugly." "Kallisto," said Dr. Voigt, "this is Voigt, ad hoc medical lead. We have—" "—PRAE-1," Kallisto interrupted. "Yes. The song's already playing in orbit. Hold the gates. Breathe through your teeth." "We could use some backup." "We could use all the backup," said Kallisto. "But we only have each other. Send data. And pray for load times."

The line broke. The red holo outside flickered as if it had gotten the punchline.*PRAE ALERT*remained. It would remain until someone took his hand away.

Rurik called me over. "I'm warm," he said. "Because you're a fireplace," I said. "Pass the glasses." "No more glasses," he whispered. "Just thirsty." "I'm talking nonsense," I said. "That calms me down." "Doesn't calm me down." "Then stop listening."

His pulse was a small war. The nanobots were the peace negotiations, but the generals were smoking inside and looking out. I held his hand. It was still strong. "Stay with me," I said. "If you leave, leave in the morning. I hate night goodbyes." He grinned, crookedly. "I'm staying because you owe me twelve." "Thirteen," I said, "because of the inconvenience."

"Kjell," called Dr. Voigt. "The readings—" "Don't tell me," I said. "—are increasing." I nodded. "He knows." Rurik closed his eyes. "I know when I'm floating and when I'm being carried." "Today I'm carrying you," I said. "You have thin arms." "I have thick words."

A scream cut through the clinic, not from inside, but from outside. A scream that wasn't just fear, but surprise. I ran to the door, the drones following. Three people stood on the promenade, staring upwards. I saw it too: shadows were moving on the glass walkway of the upper deck—quickly, purposefully. Not many. Enough to show what it looks like when you're relearning to walk and decide to run right away.

A security cannon extended. It scanned targets, found faces, hesitated. "Do not fire" protocols. I knew them. I never liked them. One of the shadows jumped onto the cannon's casing, ripped open the maintenance hatch, as if it had the

plan. The inside glittered, beautiful as jewelry. It bit into a bundle of wires. Sparks. Smoke. Silence. "They're sabotaging—" "—," I said. "Yes."

"Back to the hospital!" someone shouted. I didn't like following my own advice, but sometimes even an idiot is right. Inside, the door locked. I tied the peeping tom to my wrist. I hate losing things.

"That's not a wave," said Dr. Voigt. "It's a test." "Who's testing?" "He," she said, and we both thought of the same person. The dock walker. The early shift worker. The one who spoke as if he still had a right to pronouns.

"He's not the first," I said. "He's the first to stay. But not the first." "No," she said. "The rumors about the first..." "What rumors?" "That he's mutating more slowly. And smarter. And that he's waiting for something." "For what?" "For us," she said. "Or for the moment we stop acting like us."

I laughed, briefly, for no reason. "Then he won't wait long." She looked at me. "Stay with Rurik. If he starts to fall, press the panic button. Don't be heroic." "I'm not heroic," I said. "I'm fussy with seconds."

The night became even wetter. The clinic vibrated, as if the city beneath us were choosing a different course. I sat next to Rurik and listened to his breathing, that old music that never makes the charts. Tariq quietly tapped his forehead against the glass, in time, as if he were counting us.

At some point the rain stopped briefly, an interlude. In the silence, I heard footsteps outside the clinic. No rushing. Walking. The door camera clicked on. I saw him. The dock walker. He stood a meter from the door, hands loose, head slightly tilted, as if he were looking at a new car. There was no anger in his face. A plan. He raised his hand and knocked. Three times. Politely. "Kjell," said Dr. Voigt, "don't go." I went. "We're closed," I said into the intercom. "I can see it," he said. "Close the door. Open your eyes. Classical music." "What do you want?" "I want to talk before talking gets too expensive," he said. "Tell Voigt to stop cleaning the ventilation lines. The spores like it clean." "Since when do you give advice?" "Since I realized you'd otherwise follow the wrong advice." "Why?" "Because you're staying," he said. "And because he likes you."

"Who?" He smiled. "The first."

Air stirred behind me. I didn't turn around. The runner looked over my shoulder, nodding to someone who wasn't there. "He's listening," he said. "Always. If you go to sleep downstairs, he'll go out. If you scream upstairs, he'll

be counting." "Counting?" "With paths. With smells. With mistakes." "And what is he counting today?" "That you won't go," said the runner. "That's why I'm talking. So you'll have something to say tomorrow."

He stepped back, deep into the rain, until the drops consumed him. Before he disappeared, he raised his hand once more. A gesture that could be called a greeting, if the word weren't already so overused. Then he was gone.

I stood at the door, my forehead against the cold glass, and tried not to think. I was having a hard time. Behind me, Dr. Voigt cleared his throat.
"Do you believe him?" "I believe everyone who doesn't bite me," I said. "That's not a standard." "It's mine."

"The ventilation lines?" "We'll clean them later," I said. "Let's leave it dirty today. Maybe for the first time, someone here will like us."

She nodded, only slightly. "Good. Then we'll listen to Rurik's Blood discuss, and you'll tell me everything about the substructure that you don't tell anyone else." "That'll be long," I said. "I have time," she said. "We don't," I said. "So I'll talk fast."

I told her stories. About leak paths, about dead zones in the airflow, about pipes that sound like arms that have grown too long. About the corners where even the sea speaks more quietly. About the dark triangle beneath Sector F, where bats should live if we lived in a world that still had animals. She listened, but didn't take notes. Good people take notes where no one can see: inside.

Rurik groaned briefly, like a wave breaking. Tariq answered with a knock from the glass. Outside, the rain began to fall again, as if trying to cover the city's ringing. And somewhere, very far away and yet here, someone laughed. Not an angry sound. An astonished one. That's the kind of laugh you get when a plan works that you hardly believe yourself.

"The first," I said. "Yes," said Dr. Voigt. "We'll see him." "Yes." "And then?" "Then there'll be a new kind of conversation," she said. "One that doesn't like words." "That suits me," I said, smiling crookedly so no one would notice.

The hospital lights grew warmer. Not out of kindness. Because of a lack of electricity. The wall told us what walls tell us when the air gets thinner:*Stay calm.*
I stayed. Because I was holding Rurik's hand. Because Tariq looked at me like I

was a chair in a storm. Because the dock walker had knocked politely. Politeness is a weapon. It doesn't hurt. It reminds you.

I thought of the bottle that had died in the gutter and promised to send her a sister tomorrow. If there was a tomorrow. If not, then this chapter will remain open, like a door that no one closes, because everyone hopes someone else will.

Outside, the holo rose like fog.*PRAE ALERT*burned in the wet. You get used to everything. Even that.

The night continued. So did we. And way down below, behind H-12, where I'd found the smell earlier, something large, slow, and deliberate was moving. Not the early shift. Management. It was feeling its way around the struts, as if it were learning how to hold a city so it wouldn't fall.

The first one rehearsed. We listened. And Nautilus Seven, old bowl, old dream, swayed a touch—approvingly, reluctantly, alive. I wiped the water from my eyes and sat back down next to Rurik, who gritted his teeth as if they were the last fence.

"Hold on," I whispered. "Just hold on." "I'll hold on," he murmured, "until you stop talking." "Then you'll live forever," I said.

The clock without numbers continued to breathe. The red circle grew smaller, larger, smaller. A heart on the wall. Ours was inside. It was still working. And outside, in the rain, night was written in steel, blood in water, and a new alphabet practiced its first sentences.

I was still sitting next to Rurik, my hand on his wrist like a damned talisman, when the wall spoke again. "Movement in the substructure, Sector E. Three signatures. Two humanoid, one unclassified. Movement pattern: coordinated."

"Coordinated," I repeated. "I thought they hunted like dogs on drugs." Dr. Voigt came up beside me. "Not all of them. Some learn. The unclassified signature could…" "Don't say it," I interrupted. "I don't want to hear the name until I see his face."

Rurik turned his head slightly. "You're talking about him." "Sleep," I said. "I'll sleep when he sleeps," Rurik muttered. "Then you'll be damn tired for the next few years," I said.

The drones flickered on, drawing cards into the hologram. I recognized the shaft beneath the Dock Market—a labyrinthine maintenance tunnel where, even before PRAE-1, only rats felt at home. "I'll go down," I said. "Alone?" Voigt asked. "You can hear better alone, if someone's sneaking." "And if someone's running?" "Then you can hear even better."

She considered this, chewing on an invisible cigarette. "Take one of my med drones with you. In case you find anything alive." "I always find something alive," I said, "the question is how long it lasts."

The descent into Sector E smelled like a mixture of wet laundry and old metal blood. The light only came on in spurts when a capacitor decided it needed to signal again. The med drone buzzed behind me like a nervous dog.

I heard them before I saw them—deep, slow breaths. No gasps, no snatches. The kind of breath that tells you: I know you're there, and I'm not in a hurry. Then voices. Two. Human. "We should go back," one whispered. "Too late," the other said.

I turned the corner. Two figures in wet work suits, helmets under their arms—dockworkers. Both carried that uncertain stance, as if they didn't know whether they were on the payroll of the Living or the Others. "Hey," I said. "You're lost." The taller one turned to me. His eyes were clear, but there was something false in the clarity—like a mirror that smiles at you before you do. "We're waiting," he said. "For what?" He pointed behind him. "For the one who guided us."

He came out of the darkness, tall, slow, his shoulders too broad for the walk. No dockwalker. I knew immediately. The posture, the steady pace, the look—not a hint of madness, just intent. "Damn," I whispered.
"Kjell," he said. "We know each other?" "Not yet," he said. "But you tell stories about me."

He stepped closer, and I saw that his hands didn't shake, didn't twitch. Every movement was measured. A body that had changed, but the mind had kept the pen. "You're the first," I said. He smiled, not cold, not warm—like someone who knows he already has the answer. "And you're the one who writes everything down, even though he should know better."

The two dockworkers stepped back, as if he didn't want them anymore. He kept his eyes on me. "You hold the gates," he said. "Until they break," I said. "They don't break from the outside," he said. "Remember that."

I wanted to say something, something stupid to give me some air. Then I smelled it—that sweet, metallic mixture that every story here writes sooner or later. Behind me in the tunnel, something moved. Slowly. More than one thing. The first one nodded at me. "I like it when the beginning is good. The rest... follows."

He walked back into the darkness, the dockworkers following behind, and the sound blended with the dripping water. I stood there alone until the med drone beeped softly. "Heart rate elevated," it said. "Oh, never mind," I muttered. "Wait until we get to page two."

The tunnel suddenly smelled narrower. Not because it was getting narrower—but because the air behind me was getting thicker, as if someone had oiled the walls with hot breath. The med drone made that nervous whirring noise that the manual probably calls "diagnostic noise emission," but in practice means: Shit, Kjell, we're not alone.

I didn't go back. Going back is always the path where mistakes await.
I took two steps forward. Something behind me took three.

"Show yourself," I said. No answer. Just the soft smacking of bare feet on wet metal.

I didn't turn around right away. If you turn around too quickly, they learn how easily you're startled. So I turned slowly. And there they were—four of them. Stooped, but not hunched over like the fresh ones. More strength in their legs, more purpose in their shoulders. One still had half a work shirt on, torn, caked with blood. His eyes dark, but not empty.

"Did you lose something?" I asked. The one in front tilted his head. His jaw worked as if he were chewing on a sentence he was about to spit out. Then he did it. "You."

I liked that they talked. I didn't like how they talked—each word like a bone you crack one more time before biting into.

The one in front took a step. The other three followed, perfectly synchronized. No flinching, no hissing—just the quiet patter of feet on metal.

“Clarice,” I whispered into the com.
— Yes, Kjell.

"Shott E-2, now. And no damn security check."
— Confirmed. Hydraulics are working.

The one in front heard it. He smiled. Not because he was afraid. Because he knew he was faster than hydraulics.

I yanked up the tensioner. The blow hit him on the side of his jaw, the sound like a wet branch breaking.
He didn't fall. He laughed. The three behind him jumped.

The first one went for my chest, the second for the drone. The drone screeched digitally, then I heard the crack of its camera mount. The third one tried to get behind me.

I'm not a fighter. I'm a repairman. But I've learned that pipes and bones speak the same language if you press hard enough.

I grabbed the one in front by the neck, pushed him against the wall, and kicked him in the stomach with my knee. He flinched—not in pain, but in surprise. Hunger isn't used to prey biting back.

The second one ripped the drone out of my hand. It radioed again: — Data packet secured. Then there was only a smacking sound and a noise you usually only hear in good butcher shops.

The third was almost behind me, so I turned—a half-swing, tension like a knuckle duster—and hit him above the eye socket. Blood spurted, warm, thick. He stumbled back, clutched his face, and stared at the red palm like a child who's just learned that fire is hot.

The one in front pushed me back. I slid on the wet ground, hit the wall, the lights flickered. At the back of the tunnel, I heard metal—a hatch halfway down. Hydraulics are slow. Not hungry.

The one in front walked toward me again, his teeth now fully in play. I heard my own heart in my ears. And then—a noise behind him.

Something large came out of the darkness, larger than all four combined. It grabbed the one in front by the shoulder and pulled him back like a wet sack. The one in front screamed—not in pain, but in surprise. The tall one said nothing.

I saw only the outline. Broad. Massive. The head tilted slightly forward, its movements slow and controlled. And as he pressed the front part against the wall, I saw the face in a brief flash of light.

The first.

"Get out," he said to me. I hesitated. "Get out, now," he repeated, and there was no room for argument in his voice.

I ran. Not because he said so—but because the other three were already moving again. Behind me, metal crashed, someone screamed, something broke. I didn't hear a shot. Just breathing.

Hatch E-2 came down as I jumped through. I lay on my back, looking through the gap at the first one, pushing against two of them. The third one lay motionless, the one in front had disappeared. The first one looked at me before the hatch was sealed. No smile this time. Just a nod.

When I got back to the clinic, the rain was dripping off me, even though I was inside. Rurik raised his head. "You look like you've been dancing with the sea." "I had the better partner," I said.

Dr. Voigt looked at me. "Was he there?" I nodded. "And?" "He let me live," I said. "The question is, for what?"

Dr. Voigt didn't even let me take off my jacket. She pulled me into the back lab, which smelled of disinfectant and cold metal—like a hospital that has learned to fear its patients.

"Sit down," she said. "If I sit down, it won't stop raining," I said. "It won't stop anyway," she said. "Sit down."

I sat down. The chair squeaked. Everything that squeaks is trying to remind you of something—usually that you've been sitting too long.

"You saw him," she began without looking. "Yes." "Did he attack you?" "No." "Why?" "Ask him." She looked up, her eyes cold as a second winter. "I'm asking you because he would have answered you if you knew."

I took a deep breath, still tasting metal from the tunnel. "He... sent me out." "Sent me out?" "Yes. Like he wanted to clean up—without me."

She went to the terminal and called up the drone feeds. Blurry images from the substructure—hydraulic steam, shadows, movements too fast to resolve. One frame, barely longer than a blink: the first one pushing the leading returnee against the wall, looking not at the prey, but... into the camera.

"He knew we were filming," she murmured. "Maybe he wanted to," I said. "Maybe he wants to tell us what he wants." "Or he wants us to think we know."

Rurik cleared his throat from his sickbed. "Perhaps..."—his voice was rough, as if he'd breathed nails—"...perhaps he's sorting." "Sorting?" I asked. "Hunters do that. The weak, the strong, the sick. Some prey is hunted, some isn't."

Voigt and I looked at each other. That was the sentence neither of us wanted to say.

"If he's sorting," she said quietly, "then that means he has criteria." "And if he has criteria," I said, "then he has a goal."
"And if he has a goal," said Rurik, "then you're no longer in a plague. Then you're in a recruitment program."

The word hung in the air like smoke. I didn't like the taste.

Voigt zoomed in on the still image of the first person. No frenzy, no animal gaze—the expression of a craftsman checking whether the tool fits in the box or in the trash.

"Why me?" I asked quietly. "Maybe you're already inside," said Rurik. "Or I'm still outside," I said. "I don't like either."

Voigt began displaying data: biopulse patterns, muscle tension diagrams, nanobot activity curves. "In the returnees, nanobot activity drops rapidly in the first 30 minutes. In him…" – she pointed to the first one's diagram – "…no suppression. The nanobots are fully active, just… under new control."

"That means?" "That means the virus isn't just taking over the body. It's also taking over the tools that are supposed to stop it."

I leaned back. "So... a general who persuades the opposing army to change their uniform." "Yes," she said. "Only the uniform now has fur."

Outside, a bulkhead crashed. Not hydraulically. Explosively. Someone—or something—had decided the route should be shorter. The wall reported: Bulkhead B-5 inoperative. Movement toward the supply deck.

Voigt stood up. "Supply deck means food. When he's there—" "—then he starts stockpiling supplies," I finished. "For whom? Certainly not for us."

I grabbed my peeping Tom, even though it now felt as useful in my hand as a spoon in a gunfight. "I'm going up." "Alone?" she asked. "Alone, you can see more clearly who really wants to eat you."

Rurik grinned weakly. "Bring me something. No meat." "It'll be heavy," I said, and stepped out into the corridor.

The elevator was dead. No power, no emergency service, just the ugly red "X" above the door, which in this city means: If you want to go any further, you'll have to sweat. So I took the stairs—seven floors up, with a peeping Tom in my hand and a lump in my stomach that wasn't from whiskey.

The smell hit me two floors back. Not blood. Not mold. Food. The scent of a dry warehouse, mixed with fresh fruit—and something warm that wouldn't stay warm much longer.

The supply deck was a long, wide room with shelves lined up in rows like soldiers before a parade. Only there were no canned goods here anymore. The shelves were empty, entire rows bare, as if someone had been working with a plan. And between the rows: crates. Large, gray transport crates, neatly stacked, each marked with a symbol I didn't recognize—a circle with three lines, like claw marks.

He stood in the middle of the room. The first one. His hands were empty, but that didn't matter—the boxes told him he'd already carried enough.

"Kjell," he said, as if welcoming me to the office. "Did you hand out name tags?" I asked. "I remember names," he said. "I don't need them on paper."

He walked over to one of the boxes and placed his hand on it as if blessing it. "Food. Enough for... a while." "For whom?" He just smiled.

I approached, slowly, my peeping tom low, but not hidden. "If you empty everything here, people down there will starve." "No," he said. "Only the wrong people."
"Define wrong." "Those who take too long to understand."

He spoke calmly, without the slobbering frenzy that the returnees usually exhibited. His words were sharp. They hit home.

"It's not a virus," I said. "It's recruitment." "Good that you finally said it," he replied. "Some call it evolution." "Backwards." "Forwards," he corrected. "Just not for you."

I pointed to the crates. "And what happens to the ones you consider 'right'?" He leaned closer until I smelled his breath—warm, but not foul. "They'll have a place. A purpose. We'll build something new. Something that lasts longer than your cities, your drones, your fake medicine."

"And if I don't want to?" He grinned, and for a moment something flashed in his eyes—regret, perhaps. Or just hunger. "Then you'll die quickly. Faster than if you go along with it."

Something moved behind him. Two returning men carried another box over and placed it with the others. He briefly checked the stack and nodded to them. This wasn't pack instinct—this was organization. Orders. Execution. Structure.

"You let me live, why?" I asked. "Because you can tell stories," he said. "And because the ones you love keep you from running. That's... useful."

I didn't know if I liked the idea of being useful to him. "You'll go back and ask her what I want," he said. "Tell her: balance." "And if she asks what that means?" "Tell her: she'll see."

He turned back to the boxes, and with that, I was released. Not defeated. Not spared.
Simply sent away – like in a tunnel. And that scared me more than anything else.

As I started back, I heard the rhythmic clacking of boxes being locked behind me. Each beat a metronome. A countdown none of us knew.

The corridor down to the clinic was silent. Too silent for Nautilus Seven. Not a drop, not a clang, only the quiet rumble of the generators, deep and steady like a heartbeat that doesn't yet know it's about to stumble.

The hospital gate hissed open. Dr. Voigt was already standing there, hands in her pockets, as if she knew I'd come without knocking. "You've been gone a long time," she said. "He showed me a shopping list," I replied.

We went to the rear area. Rurik was asleep, or pretending to be. Tariq sat in the glass cage, looking at me as if testing my scent. I told him about the supply

deck. About the empty shelves, the stacked crates. About the symbol—the circle with the three lines. And about what the first one had said.

Voigt listened without interrupting. Only once did she briefly close her eyes when I mentioned the word "balance."

"He's not hoarding," she finally said. "Oh no," I replied. "He's building a damn warehouse." "Not for supplies," she said. "For the front lines."

I frowned. "He's preparing for war?" "No," she corrected. "He's preparing for war. The one where we're no longer enemies, but... remnants."

She pulled out a terminal and projected a map of Nautilus Seven in hologram form. "Do you see the red dots? Those are the places where we've had encounters with returnees. And this—"—she highlighted it in yellow—"—these are our storage areas, water treatment, and energy centers."

The red dots stretched like a net around the yellow ones. "He doesn't take what he can get," she said. "He takes what he needs. And he leaves the rest to keep us moving."

I stared at the map. "This isn't hunting." "No," she said. "This is logistics."

Rurik stirred on his couch. "Maybe... he's pulling us together." "Why?" I asked. "So things will go faster when they start."

Voigt nodded slowly. "He doesn't want scattered targets. He wants herds."

I leaned back. "And we sit here and wait for the shepherd to come." "Not shepherd," she said. "Gatherer."

She tapped the symbol I'd described—the circle with three lines. "That's old," she said. "Very old. We found it in the earliest lab records, before PRAE-1 was officially a name."

I felt the whiskey start to work in my stomach. "So this was never just an accident." "No," she said. "This was an invitation."

We looked at each other, and neither of us liked what we saw in the other's gaze. Outside, the wind howled, and somewhere deep below us, another hatch closed—perhaps automatically, perhaps not.

I thought of the first one, sorting the boxes. And I realized: He wasn't just collecting food. He was collecting time. And time is the only currency we have left here.

It didn't start with screaming. It started with the current.

A faint, brief flicker that you usually ignore in Nautilus Seven because the generators cough more often than the harbor innkeeper. Only this time, they coughed twice—and then stopped breathing.

The hum of the lights faded. The displays on the wall died in a synchronous sigh. The red circle on the clock above the door turned black.

"Outage?" I asked. Voigt was already at the terminal, which only showed her own reflection. "Not by chance." "Sabotage?" "Purposeful. Someone blocked the emergency power before the main generator went out."

Rurik opened one eye. "That means..." "...that they know the order," I finished. "And order is knowledge."

Then came the sound. No running, no stomping. A steady beat—metal on metal—in time, as if someone were marching.

Tariq stood in the glass cage, his head turned toward the door. "They're coming," he said. "Who?" He smiled. "The ones I know."

I grabbed the spanner, Voigt took the shock lance from the emergency kit. "Clarice?" I called into the com. Just static. "They've taken the internal AI offline," Voigt said. "This isn't an attack—it's a drill."

The first thing we saw wasn't a figure, but light. Two point-like reflections, deep red, in the darkness outside the clinic. They were moving sideways, not directly toward us. Distraction.

Then the second signal: a dull thud on the side lock, no breaking, just testing. Another one. And another one.

"They're scanning our weaknesses," whispered Voigt. "I don't have time for an interview," I said.

I ripped open the main door—just a crack, just enough to see. Four of them. Not an angry mass. Two were kneeling at the bulkheads, the others stood with

their legs spread in front of them, heads turned, eyes on the corridors. Security. Damned security.

"They're not stopping us," I murmured. "They're keeping us in." Voigt came up beside me. "And?" "That means they're waiting for something bigger."

Then it came. A dull thud that made the floor tremble beneath my boots. From the deck, above the clinic, a scratching sound penetrated the walls—as if something heavy and metallic were dragging across the outer armor.

Rurik cursed. "They'll cut us out." "Or in," I said.

The two backup returnees stepped back, and from the corridor behind them came one who was taller. Not the first. But one of his own kind—more upright, slower, with calculating eyes. In his hand, he carried a piece of the supply deck shelving, reshaped into a kind of battering ram.

He looked at the door, then at us. Not a sound. Then he nodded. To the two in front of him. And they went forward.

I pulled up the tensioner. "Rurik—when the door falls, don't shoot the big guy." "Why?" "Because he's studying us right now. And I want to know what he's writing down."

The big guy raised the ram as if swinging a hammer in slow motion. No screaming, no whipping up of his own men—just a look that said: We know where it hurts.

The first blow came deep. The door—thick composite steel—vibrated right down to my teeth. The second blow was louder, and I swear I heard the hinges whine.

Voigt stood to my left, shock lance at his chest, the tip trembling slightly. "When they're through, aim for the legs," I said. "Why not the heads?" "Because we need to see them fall."

On the third blow, the upper lock gave way—just a crack, but in a city like Nautilus, a crack is like a promise. The two safety returnees stepped aside, and the big guy swung wide. I pressed myself against the wall, the tensioner like a hook in my fist.

The fourth blow ripped open the gap. And immediately the first two came in—quickly, but not recklessly. One on the left, one on the right, just like in a damn police operation.

I went after the one on the left before he could pick up speed. The spanner hit him above the collarbone—a dull thud that sent him reeling. Voigt delivered a shocking blow to the right-hand man's knee. He slumped, but not because he had to—rather because he wanted to see how the blow felt.

Then the big one came through the gap. He didn't move like an attacker, more like a referee. His gaze slid over us, over Rurik on the couch, over Tariq in the glass cage. He took in everything—every distance, every position, every reaction.

"That's a damn protocol," I growled. Voigt glanced at me. "Yes—and we're the data."

The one on the left got back up and grabbed my arm. His fingers closed like hydraulic pliers—no jerk, just steady pressure. I rammed my elbow under his jaw. A dull crack, and he let go.

Voigt delivered a second shock to the other, this time in the hip. He fell, but the tall man only raised his hand slightly—and both retreated. No chaos, no panic. Retreat on command.

"What the hell...?" I began. Then it happened.

Two new returnees came through the gap—smaller in stature, but with something in their hands: remnants of metal pipes, bent into makeshift hooks. They hung on to the locks of the clinic's interior doors, testing where to start in order to open them more quickly next time.

Voigt cursed. "They're marking us."

The big one waited until they were finished, then turned and left. Not quickly, not stealthily—simply, as if he had everything he needed. The others followed.

The gap remained open. Intentional. An invitation, or a threat. Both.

"That wasn't an attack," Voigt finally said. "No," I said. "That was an inspection." "And what did they see?" I looked at Rurik, who was lying with his eyes closed, and at Tariq, who was staring at me intently. "Enough," I said. "Damn it, enough."

It smelled of metal, salt, and burnt electricity as we sealed the clinic's gap. Voigt stood in front of the map of Nautilus Seven, which now looked more like a surgical plan than a city map. Red dots everywhere—not randomly distributed, but like pins circling us.

"He's closing it," I said. "Yes," she replied. "And when he's done, we'll be inside."

Rurik opened his eyes, dry as old paper. "Then you'd better get out before the circle closes." Voigt wanted to say something, but raised his hand. "I'll hold on to this... as long as it holds me. But you have to find the one pulling the net."

Tariq crouched in the glass cage, his forehead leaning against the pane. "He knows you're coming." "The first?" I asked. "He calls it waiting," Tariq said. "I call it... hunger in slow motion."

Voigt grabbed the emergency pack: water filter, spare batteries, three magazines for the shock lance. I took my spanner, two caps of whiskey in my pocket, and an old marine radio that had survived more than most of the people who had operated it.

"Where to?" I asked. She tapped the map. "You've already seen the supply deck. But here—" she pointed to a spot on the outer ring, "—is the south bridge. The only stable access to the maintenance docks outside the city." "And that's where he's waiting?" "If he's smart—yes. If he's dumber—he's sent someone who'll hurt even more."

We stepped outside. The rain was now a fine, sharp mist that crept into every crack. Nautilus Seven sounded different—fewer engines, more water. The deep pounding of the pumps was missing. That wasn't a good sign.

The corridors leading to the outer ring were empty. No merchants, no patrols, not even a single piece of abandoned equipment. Only the occasional splash as a line of drops hit the ground.

At the end of the third corridor we heard it. No noise, no struggle. Just footsteps.
Not hasty—measured. Like someone who knows exactly that he is being seen.

A figure turned the corner. Not the first. Smaller, but upright, with a long metal rod in his hand. He stopped when he saw us and smiled.

"He says you should come," he said. "And if we don't want to?" I asked. "Then he'll send someone to carry you."

Voigt raised his lance, but the man shook his head. "Not here. Not now. You better be fresh when you meet him." "He wants us alive?" I asked. "He wants you talking," he said. "After that... we'll see."

He turned and left. No looking back, no hesitation. Just that sure step that said: You will follow.

Voigt looked at me. "It's a trap." "Of course," I said. "But maybe it's the only door left open."

The way out to the South Bridge was a corridor of wet steel. Below us, the sea, pounding against the pontoons like a bored fist. Above us, the storm, blurring the neon lights of the bridge's edge into crooked circles.

Voigt walked close behind me. We said nothing—not out of fear, but because we both felt that any word out here might reveal too much. The creaking of the bridge segments was loud enough to make our teeth clench.

He waited in the middle of the jetty. No protection, no coat, just that broad body that broke the wind and those eyes that ignored everything else. To his left and right: nothing. No pack. No ambush that I could see.

"Kjell," he said, as if he greeted me every morning. "First," I replied. Voigt stayed two steps behind me, his lance angled downward—not as a threat, more like a thought.

"You want to know what balance is," he began. "Enlighten us," I said. "Balance is when the strong and the weak share the same ground—but the weak only when they serve the strong."

Voigt crossed his arms. "Sounds like a bad emperor." He smiled slightly. "Emperors want to rule. I want to preserve."

He took a step closer. "Your system here—cities, bridges, bulkheads—isn't a strength. This is a tower of glass. And glass always breaks. I'll make sure that when it falls, it doesn't all turn to dust."

"By eating us?" I asked. "By choosing," he said. "I take those who can build. Fight. Think. The others... go back to the sea."

The wind whipped salt water into our faces. Voigt took a half step forward. "So you're running a recruitment program?" "I'm running a selection program," he said. "Like your nature always did—before you cheated it with machines and medicine."

I laughed dryly. "And you're the damned Darwin with fur?" "I'm just the beginning," he said. "What's to come will have no names."

He looked at me for a long time. "I let you live twice, Kjell. Not because I like you. But because I wanted you to recognize the moment when your side is no longer yours."

"And then what?" "Then you decide whether to fight me—or whether to become the tool I need."

Voigt raised his lance slightly. "And if we refuse?" His gaze fell silent. "Then I'll let you die in peace. I'm not cruel, just efficient."

Behind him, the sea flashed white, a gust of wind shaking the jetty. He half turned away, as if about to leave, then stopped.

"Your balance is over," he said. "Mine has just begun."

The first took a half step back, hands clasped behind his back, as if he had just opened the game. "Your test," he said quietly—more quietly than the wind would allow.

The sound came first through the ground: a dull drumming, irregular, but ever closer. Then I saw them. Four... no, five returnees, crawling out of the fog of the South Bridge, bent but not broken. Each carrying something in their hands—pieces of pipe, chains, a piece of sharpened railing.

Voigt stood next to me. "He's just watching," she murmured. "Then let's look like we have a chance," I said.

The first one came from the left, fast as a damned gust of wind. I stepped aside, let him pass me, and gave him a hook to the ribs with the turnbuckle. He grunted—and immediately turned back around, not a second confused.

Voigt caught the second man head-on, the shock lance deep in his thigh. The man flinched, growled—and grabbed the shaft, pulling it toward him. Voigt let go, kicking him in the knee with full force instead. A dull crack that was almost lost in the storm.

"Back!" I yelled. The third one came straight at me, holding the railing like a spear. I blocked with the spanner, felt the blow all the way to my shoulder, and then yanked the piece aside. He stumbled – Voigt was already there, grabbed my shoulder, and used me like a damn wall to kick the guy back into the railing of the walkway with both feet.

The fourth lunged at us from the side—no weapon, just teeth. I rammed my forearm into his face, and he bit me—not deeply, but hard enough that I saw stars. With my other hand, I drew my knife and stabbed him briefly below the ribs. Not a fatal blow—just enough to send him staggering backward.

The fifth stood still. He looked at us. An observer, like the first. He nodded slightly—and withdrew without having struck a blow.

The four who had remained stood up again. Not as quickly as before, but not at the end either. They seemed to be waiting for something. I turned to the first one. He just raised an eyebrow. "Not finished yet."

The storm lashed, water splashed from the bridge, and in that moment I knew: This wasn't the test, it was the invitation. Not for us, for him. He wanted to see if we would adapt. If we would start moving like them.

Voigt understood at the same time. "He's forcing us to learn his language," she hissed. "Yes," I said. "And by the time we become fluent, we're already lost."

The rain was now coming horizontally. Every gust pressed us against the railing, and the planks were so slippery under our boots that every step was like a roll of the dice. The four returnees stood in a semicircle, moving slowly, as if reading the storm.

"They're waiting for a mistake," I murmured. Voigt wiped water from his eyes. "Then we won't make one." "That would be nice. Everyone makes mistakes on a jetty like this."

The one on the left went first. Not head-on—he ducked, slid sideways along the railing, forcing me to turn. The one on the right took advantage of that, coming from the other side. That was no accident. That was damned positioning.

I parried the first blow, pivoted into the second, the way they do—not a direct defense, but a movement that immediately transitions into attack. My spanner slammed against a collarbone, cracking beneath the skin. The returning man stumbled back, and Voigt was immediately on it: elbow to the face, then the stun gun across the throat.

The third waited until we focused on the two of them—then he charged, low, almost crawling. Voigt tried to push down, but I grabbed her arm. "Let him come." He came, and when he struck, standing upright, he was exactly where I wanted him—caught between us. Two blows at once, one from her, one from me. He fell, and this time he stayed there.

The fourth... grinned. He had seen what we had done. And the grin said: You're starting to get it.

He didn't attack. He took a step back, raised his hands slightly—not a surrender, more as if he wanted to memorize our image. Then he turned and left, as calmly as if he had a haircut.

The first one stepped forward. No applause, no backslapping. Just that look that reaches into your chest and takes a seat there.

"You're learning," he said. "We're living," I growled. "It's the same thing."

Voigt took a step forward. "If that was the test—what's the next round?" He smiled barely noticeably. "The next round isn't a drill. The water's higher there, and the prey's less."

He looked first at me, then at her. "I could give you a place. A good one. Not at the bottom, not on the sidelines. You would work. Fight. And live."

"With you?" I asked. "With us," he corrected.

Voigt held his gaze longer than was appropriate. "And if we say no?" He shrugged, as if it were a matter of the weather. "Then you'll be in the way when the balance comes."

The storm thundered, as if to underline the sentence. I knew he wouldn't attack us right away—not after what he had just seen. But I also knew he had marked us.

“Think about it,” he finally said, and turned around, walking into the rain as if he had all the time in the world.

Voigt and I remained on the jetty, dripping wet, adrenaline still coursing through our veins. "He's serious," she said. "Yes," I said. "And that's the problem."

The jetty still trembled beneath our feet, long after the first one had disappeared in the rain. Voigt was breathing heavily but evenly—no panic, just calculation. I felt the storm in my bones, as if it had taken up residence there.

We went back. Not a word. Sometimes silence is the only defense when your head gets too loud.

The path to the clinic was the same, but it smelled different. No longer just salt and oil—there was something sweet in the air, a trace like fruit left in the sun too long. Voigt looked at me. She had noticed it, too.

The clinic door was open a crack. No sign of violence, no signs of a struggle. Simply open—like an invitation.

"Rurik?" I called before we entered. No answer. Only the faint hum of the emergency light, digging in my ear like an insect.

Inside, everything was... tidy. Too tidy. Tables straight, equipment organized, cables neatly coiled. And in the middle of the floor, between the couches: a circle of red tape with three lines inside it. The same symbol as on the crates.

Tariq was no longer sitting in the glass cage. The door was open, no violence, no signs of resistance. On the glass, in rough, wet lines, was written: BALANCE. Below: "Rurik got it."

Voigt went to the rear area—her pace quickened. I followed, and there lay Rurik. Not tied up, not injured. Just... not quite him anymore.

His gaze was clear, but too clear, like a lake so still you know nothing good swims beneath it. "He was here," said Rurik. "The first?" He nodded. "Told you to listen when he talked."

Voigt started to say something, but stopped. We both heard it: a quiet knock, three times, from the hallway. The same polite pattern the dock walker had made at the clinic.

I went to the door and opened it a crack. No one. Just a gray shipping crate, wet from the rain, the symbol on it in dark red. No lock. No seal. An invitation.

I opened it. Inside: sealed rations, a water filter, a bundle of cable ties. And at the very bottom, under a cloth—an old radio, a Marine 4B model, just like mine. Only this one was switched on. From the loudspeaker came a voice, calm, deep, without breathlessness:

"Nautilus Seven doesn't fall from the outside, Kjell. I'll get it from the inside. See you soon."

Voigt stood next to me, the storm pounding against the outer wall. "This isn't more defense," she said quietly. "No," I said. "This is a start."

I placed the box in the middle of the room, the symbol facing up, so we would see it no matter where we looked. Rurik closed his eyes, and I didn't know if he was asleep—or if he was already standing on the other side.

The red circle on the clock began to breathe again. Smaller, bigger, smaller. Like a heart that knows it has to beat faster soon.

Outside, the sea roared, and Nautilus Seven roared back.

Chapter 2 - The First Bite

The whiskey burned like an honest sentence spoken at the wrong moment. I held the bottle to my lip, let it talk, and it told me what all good bottles say: Don't make it better. Do it right. So I put it down, wiped the rain from my face, and prepared to step back into a story that doesn't like heroes.

Delta 14 wasn't a place where gods visited. It was a patch of metal in a poor rock, stapled together by men who had more debt than teeth. The air tasted of ozone and boiled dust, and the coffee... the coffee was the sad end of a bean that had already lost everything in a previous life.

There were six of us. Counting the broken coffee machine, there were seven of us.

Cole was the boss because he was the only one who knew how to give orders without making people want to ram a wrench into your ears. He was an ex-soldier, with sideburns like braces that held his expression together. Bjørn was the opposite: a mountain of shoulder bones and jokes you tell underground when you're afraid the mountain's listening. Then there was Captain Jax Mercer — young, too fast, too smart for his own life. And two other guys whose names I've spared so it won't hurt so much when they fall.

The night shift crawled through the corridors like an old snail. Above us, the drill rods screamed occasionally, a thin, tortured screech, as if it had teeth.

Officially, there was no rain here, but condensation from the ventilation system tipped into tin bowls until we all thought we were back on a world that still knew clouds.

“Where is the giant?” Cole asked when the shift had begun and the table in the mess hall only saw five plates.

"Bjørn was at the south shaft," Jax said. "He wanted to check a crack."

"The rift can wait," Cole growled. "Someone like Bjørn can't. Get him."

I grabbed a flashlight that pretended to be bright and a hook that wished it were a weapon. Jax trotted behind me, lanky, tired, with that grin that says:*I just thought of something you don't like.*

The south shaft was a coffin of ambition. A long, ribbed tunnel, two lights out, one in puberty. The air smelled of damp metal. And somewhere back there, in the dark part where the shaft made your back bend, we heard breathing.

"Bjørn?" Jax called, his voice bouncing off the walls like a wet ball. No answer.

We found him at the edge of the ramp leading into the deep borehole. He was crouching there, his back to us, his legs too far apart, as if someone had loosened his joints. He was breathing too calmly. His back rose and fell in a rhythm that belonged to no human being.

"Bjørn?" I repeated, closer now. The lamp brushed over his shoulders, lingering on his left hand. The fingers were... longer. No. Not*longer*The tendons were positioned differently. The nails gleamed as if they had been newly hung in the sky yesterday.

He turned his head. The light caught his eye—and there was nothing. No white, no gray, just a black mirror in which I saw myself, small, crooked, out of place. The corners of his mouth glistened. Blood is an honest varnish.

I raised my hand to calm him down, and in response, I heard a noise too lazy to roar and too hungry to speak. Bjørn stood there as if he'd been roped.

Jax took a step forward. "Hey, big guy, everything—"

Bjørn jumped.

There are jumps that only decide where they're going in the air. This one knew in advance. He didn't hit Jax. He hit Cole. He'd appeared behind us like an unwanted memory. I saw Bjørn's teeth find Cole's neck, not the throat, not the fat, theatrical cut you die with in bad movies—no, he bit where you crush your opponent with a single squeeze. It cracked, bright and clear, like burning ice.

Cole fell. The shaft held its breath.

"Back!" I yelled, but it was a joke without a punchline. Jax yanked up the bolt, I threw my lamp, stupidly and uselessly, and everything was suddenly too fast and too quiet. There was a smell of iron and a very faint, sweet note that crept into my nose like an old mistake.

Bjørn looked up. His mouth was a red moon. He smiled. And then he came.

We pulled ourselves up the ramp, our boots slipping, sweat cold on our backs. Jax was faster, but not*smarter*quickly, but*young*quickly. Bjørn let him go and came at me. I raised the hook, hit the shoulder. There was something*hard*beneath the skin, as if someone had invented a new bone language. The sound wasn't a cracking of bone, but a splintering of wood – alien and shameless.

"Shut down! Shut down!" I yelled into the radio, and somewhere above, a mechanical click sounded. Too late for Cole. Maybe too late for us.

Bjørn didn't stop because of the blow. He stopped to look at me. It wasn't an animal's look. It was an accountant's look.*Is the item an expense or an income?*He didn't like the answer. He walked past me, toward the hallway where Jax was standing, practicing his breathing as if it were an exam.

"No!" I screamed – and this time someone I didn't know was listening. A bulkhead crashed, metal on metal, the air blew dust into our lungs, and Bjørn, the bastard, was on the wrong side again. On Cole's side.

Jax shivered. Not from the cold. The boy wasn't a hero, but he wasn't a coward either. He looked at me as if to ask if we had won the war, and I shook my head. You should be honest at least once in your life.

"We need to radio," he said. "Central."

"Do it," I said. "And get the freighter afloat. If everything's burning, get out of here."

He blinked. "And you?"

“We’re putting out,” I said, and that tasted worse than any whiskey.

The rest of the night was a catalog of minor catastrophes. We closed hatches that had wanted to give way years ago. We screamed into microphones that preferred to be silent. We put band-aids on places that had never seen band-aids. And in the hallways stood the sound of something that had learned to move faster than fear.

Two hours later, I heard the whine of an engine above the station. D14-3, the shuttle. Jax had actually made it. Good kid. Wrong planet.

"Delta Central, D14–3 taking off," croaked the radio. I heard his breathing. Hectic, sharp. "I... I'm coming out. I—"

A second breath. Not from a boy's throat.

Then a rush. So thick you could drown in it.

"Jax?" I said into a microphone that no longer recognized me. "Jax?"

No answer. Just the clicking of the relay, wondering if it liked me.

I stood in the empty corridor, which now smelled like a botched operation, and knew: Somewhere in the belly of this system, a piece of night was on its way to the next city. And we had set it on fire.

"Rewind," Voigt said. Her fingers were steady. Her eyes were not.

The old recording scratched from the speaker, a shimmering sound as if it were running over wet dust particles. Cole's scream, the cracking, Jax's breath. Then these two words, which pushed through it all like a cold hand: "Balance." Deep, not rushed, not angry. A voice that*already there*was before anyone knew anyone was even talking here.

“Again,” I said, because torture sometimes helps.

Voigt rewound. I drank in her silence because it was more honest than anything else in the room. Rurik lay behind us, his hand over the bandage as if he were holding onto a bad deal. Tariq sat in the glass, his forehead against the glass, so still it made my hair stand on end.

“That wasn’t Bjørn,” I murmured.

"No," said Voigt. "That was the first one. Or someone who announced it."

“And Jax?”

"Dead people don't talk," she said. "But their mistakes write letters."

I laughed briefly, a dry, ugly sound. "Good saying. Bad night."

"We need a freshly infected person," said Voigt. "One who still speaks half of our language. Otherwise, we're just guessing."

"Guessing is my hobby," I said. "But fine by me. Grab the lance. I'll take the peeping Tom. And the big glass."

"For what?"

“For whoever we find.”

The lower decks are the belly beneath the belly. Water veins sing in pipes, pumps act like cardiologists, and the air has the weight of old rain. The floor slips just as you're thinking about something else. Perfect place to meet someone who's learning to walk upright again.

We had three corridors blocked off, two narrow, one wide. In the narrow ones, you hear them too late. In the wide ones, you see too much. You have to decide what you want to hate.

"Sector F–Sub-Girder," I whispered. "Where it smells like hot steel and fish."

"You have a hopeful nose," said Voigt. "All I smell is work."

We found him under a broken emergency light pretending to be a star. He was kneeling, back to us, his hands on the ground as if he were about to eat it. His fingers were bloody—not fresh, not old.*false*In between. The skin on my forearm was rough, as if someone had mixed 40-grit sand into the epidermis.

"Hello," I said. You talk to dogs. You talk to babies. You talk to people you're about to hit. This was all three.

He turned his head. Eyes: too dark. Not empty.*Full*A look that was once human and had decided not to give that up completely. Not yet. The corners of his mouth curled, and something thick and red ran down his lip, soft and calm, like a signature.

“Thirst,” he said, his tongue sticking to the word like a plaster that wouldn’t stick.

“I have water,” I said, “but I’m afraid you mean something else.”

He blinked. His gaze passed me, scanning the room, calculating paths. Then he jumped.

In the first few days, when they are fresh, they still have something like a sense of tact. No screaming assault, no shovel movement – they go*targeted*He grabbed my neck as I tried to catch him with the tensioner. Metal hit my forearm. Bone sang. He flinched. Not pain. Surprise. I kicked his knee. The knee realized it wasn't out of the frame yet. Voigt thrust the lance into his stomach, Strom hissed, he doubled over. I brought the tensioner sideways, pressed him to the ground.

“Cable ties,” I gasped.

It was already Voigt's turn. Two on his wrist, one on his ankle, and another because today was Generous Day. He twitched. He breathed. He smiled.

“Name?” I asked, the way you ask when you know you don’t deserve an answer.

"Balance," he said. It sounded like the word had teeth.

"Do I still pass?" I asked. "Or am I already out?"

His gaze lingered on my face for a second too long. That's the second you realize you're just a statistic to someone. Then he closed his eyes, and I swear he was mentally counting.

“Pack,” said Voigt, his voice as dry as the manual that no one reads.

We dragged him through the aisle. He didn't help us. He didn't hinder us. He let it happen, as if he'd done us a favor. The humming laughter of the reeds was poor music for this march.

In the clinic, the glass had its guest. Tariq looked at him like a mirror that was still lying to him. Rurik tried to get up, and his arm told him that the world now had a different contract.

“He knows you’re coming,” said our new guy, as soon as Voigt clicked the safety catch.

“Who?” I asked, because I like to play badly.

“The first,” he said.

The word hung in the air as if it were heavier than oxygen.

Voigt stepped closer. "Since when can you talk?"

He smiled so slowly that I felt cold. "Since yesterday*more*."

"What do you want?"

"Less," he said. "From you."

I thought of Jax's last gasp, Cole's crack, Bjørn's look. And the voice that said "balance" when the sky was even farther away.

“Voigt,” I murmured, “play 2096 again.”

She did it. The old rustling, the breath, the bite, the end. And in between: the calm, cold syllable that sorted everything out.

Our new guy in the glass listened. He tilted his head, as if recognizing an old song at a new volume. "He was there," he said.

"Who?"

"The first one. Always when things start. He likes beginnings."

I hate beginnings. They pretend to have goals.

The night didn't pass. It just changed tone. We cleaned wounds, collected data, watched the nanobots talk to an enemy who knew them before he saw them. For a moment, I thought the little things were offended. Then they did what everyone does when they realize they're overwhelmed: They played for time.

"I don't want to hear Delta 14 again," I said at one point, as the rain slapped against the outside wall, as if it were angry that we were inside.

"Then listen differently," said Voigt. "Listen to the pauses."

I heard the pause after the word "balance," and a thought bubbled in my mind that I didn't like: Maybe there was a question. Or an invitation. Or both. I hate ambiguities. They're the white shirts of hell—you make them dirty no matter how you move.

"We're going back down," I said. "There's more the city doesn't want you to know is alive."

“You drink too much,” muttered Voigt.

"You're not enough," I said. "Both make you old."

The station held the scream like a coin in a vending machine that's already dropped and never reaches the bottom. We had Cole lying in the corridor, and sickbay was only three doors too far for it not to sound like a mockery. Bjørn was gone—in the sense that everything we knew was gone. Jax wasn't communicating. The shuttle was silent as a grave with a parking ticket.

There were three of us. Nobody wanted to count. So we counted anyway: remaining air. Bulkhead status. Ammunition level.*courage*. It was an emergency ration – sticky, small, and you only eat it when no one's watching.

"I'm going down the shaft," said the older of the two, whose name I hadn't remembered. "If he's still..."

"If he's still here," I repeated. "Don't go. If he's still here, it's no use. If he's not here anymore, it's less of a use."

He went anyway. Some people are so polite. They take your warnings and return them to where you got them: into nothingness.

We heard him two minutes later, not screaming—breathing. Too loud. Too heavy. As if someone had lined his lungs with iron. The sound stopped, not hard, not soft, just...*stopped*, like a bill that someone tears in half.

I held my breath for a moment, out of respect, and thought: If the world were fair, I wouldn't be a drinker. And if the world were fair, there would be no first bite tonight.

The world, you know it. It can't do both.

Water runs through grooves in the substructure like tired saliva. The steel makes little noises that say: I'm still working, please let me. And somewhere

between Valve Thirteen and the long staircase that no one paints anymore, you hear footsteps that don't yet know whether they're creeping or marching.

I had the drone behind me, Voigt on the left, the lance across, and a suitcase in my hand containing things that never work when you're in a hurry.

“Do you hear that?” she asked.

"I hear everything," I said. "Even myself. That's the worst."

We turned the corner and stood before a gray, leaderless mass of things: cable reels, crates, an old warning dummy whose arm had been removed to make it scream less. Behind the crates, a hand. Bloody. Open. Waiting.

“Slowly,” I muttered, and “slowly” did what “slowly” always does: It was too late.

The hand belonged to a boy who had decided to grow up quickly. His skin was an unpleasant relief, his forehead slid too far over his eyes, his mouth unsure whether to laugh or tear. He was trembling, but not where I would have expected: not in his hands, not in his shoulders – in his eyes. His pupils were searching. Searching for a path. Searching for order.

“You need a bed,” I said.

"I need a wall," he said. "Then I can decide."

I liked him. It was terrible.

We went around like the first time. He jumped like the first time. But he learned faster than I did. He went low, took my leg. I fell on metal, the air went out of me like a bad joke. Voigt thrust his lance, he blocked with his forearm, and I saw how*skin*against*Electricity*He worked like an advocate against the truth. One blow, two, three – then the lance landed, somewhere between his gut and his past, and he went down.

"Can you hear me?" I gasped. "Stay with me. We'll do this..."

"...short?" he said, grinning. "Or*incorrect*?"

"Both," I said. "Quickly wrong."

We shoved him into the glass, careful as you would with explosives you've never seen before. Tariq watched, Rurik breathed rapidly, Voigt jotted down

numbers in the air as if they were drugs that weren't bad for you. The boy in the glass rested his forehead against the glass. Not like an animal. Like a man who knew he was looking into the aquarium of his own future.

“What does your king say?” I asked, because sometimes I fail to find the right words.

"He's not a king," he said. "Kings lie. He makes lists."

“And us?”

"You're a controversial issue," he said, smiling at me as if I were a joke he already knew but still works.

Voigt leaned forward. "What's your name?"

“Jax,” he said.

The light in the room became smaller.

“Excuse me?” I asked, and my voice betrayed me.

"Jax," he repeated, slowly, as if the name were new to him. "But not your Jax. A different one. Your Jax is... a different kind of trouble."

“You know the name,” said Voigt.

"The first one likes him," said the boy. "He says the name...*fits in doors.“*

I looked at the wall as if it suddenly had an answer for me. It didn't. Walls only endure.

“What is it really about?” I asked, even though I knew that this was every hell’s favorite question.

"For space," said the boy. "And for order. Yours doesn't suit him."

“And the new one?”

"It hurts," he said. "But it holds."

He leaned back and closed his eyes. His mouth remained half-open, as if a sentence had lost its way. A drop of blood broke free and ran down his lip, the red line leaving a small, steady trail. It was the most peaceful thing in the room.

The hangar door was a mouth that refused to close. The storm outside was just dust, but it did its best to appear large. D14-3 stood there like a dog that knows its master is drunk: ready and sad.

Jax climbed into the cockpit, his hands flying over switches that knew their duty. Twice he clicked on systems that said "calculated," and I wanted to yell at him to do something.*feel*, but I wasn't there. I was in a hallway and heard the rest of Cole's blood trickling in the wrong direction.

The shuttle vibrated, lifted. Jax breathed as if he had a wound in his heart. "D14-3 to Control Center. I'm... I'm detaching. I'm... getting out. Cole is—" He trailed off, because words sometimes know when they're no longer helpful.

Something moved in the cargo hold. Jax didn't hear it. It was a quiet grinding, like teeth moving over plastic, cautiously, as if they were trying to learn. The shadow in the camera was brief, too brief to call the insurance company. Long enough to write the ending.

"I... I think he—" Jax said. Then there's just static, thick and white, swallowing up everything you say.

And somewhere higher up, where no one is drilling anymore, a small spark jumped over to a city that would later tell Nautilus Seven it was safe.

The lights in the hospital corridor went out once and then back on again. That was nothing new. What was new was that they were dimmer when they came back on. You don't notice it the first time. By the third time, you think you've gotten used to it. By the fifth, you wonder who's stealing your eyes.

“Power grid unstable,” said the wall.

“Me too,” I said.

"Bulkhead A-row closed synchronously," said the wall. "That's unusual."

"That's a plan," said Voigt. "They're rounding us up."

"Who?"

“Those who don’t have to shout to be heard.”

I thought of the dock walker, his polite knock, the pier, the storm. The battering ram against the clinic. The crates in the supply deck. The symbol—circle, three lines, like the claw marks of someone who likes*arranges*.

“We’re rehearsing,” I murmured.

"We are*inventory*,” Voigt corrected. “And they count.”

"I've always hated numbers," I said, looking at Rurik. He wasn't sleeping. He was listening. You learn to listen past your own blood if you practice enough nights.

Tariq tapped the glass three times, a pattern that now stuck in my back like an old splinter. "He'll come," he said. "Not all of them. Only the one who walks quietly."

The door knocked politely.

I went. I always go. That's my biggest flaw and my only virtue.

There was no one outside. Just a box. Gray, clean, with a symbol on it: a circle with three lines. Written underneath in red paint that doesn't run in the rain – because it*doesn't want*: BALANCE.

I lifted the lid. Rations. Water filter. Cable ties. The usual. And underneath, in a cloth that was better than my jacket: a radio, Marine 4B. Switched on. A voice inside that knew me before I heard it.

"Nautilus Seven isn't falling from the outside, Kjell," the voice said. "I'm going to get it from the inside."

A sentence that doesn't threaten. A sentence that announces. I've always preferred threats. They're a more honest lie.

I placed the box next to the bed, where Rurik was keeping his teeth together like fences. "He's playing janitor," I said.

"He plays*God*with a conscience," said Voigt. "The worst kind."

“I thought there was only one.”

“Not in this city.”

I stood in the hallway where Cole had seen me and finished the sentence Jax hadn't been able to say on the radio.*He made me…*What? Found him? Bitten him? Turned him inside out like an old coat? Maybe he just looked at him, and Jax realized that flying has no direction when the air isn't yours.

You can learn a lot by standing next to a dead man and listening to the walls. I learned that some nights don't end when the morning comes. They change the decorations. And I learned that*First*They're not necessarily the first to appear. Sometimes they're the last to stay.

The city creaked. Not like before, that old, good-natured sailor creak. A new sound: the whooshing of things moving.*furnish*. Sounds that say: Here I stay. Here I lay my tools. Here you will die.

"We need to see him," said Voigt. "Not his messengers. Him."

“The bridge was enough,” I said.

"The bridge was a job interview," she said. "Now comes the probationary period."

I drank the last sip from the bottle, which was somewhere between*courage*and*Relapse*lived, and carefully placed it down as if we weren't at war. "Then let's go," I said. "I want to see who's going to steal my breakfast tomorrow."

“You never eat breakfast,” she said.

"That's exactly why," I said. "Someone has to love this city with hunger."

We left. The door exhaled us. The hologram outside flashed red again, and for the first time since I'd lived here, it didn't look like a play. It looked like the truth, too big for signs.

Later, when we had chewed through the footage a thousand times like old rubber tires, I saw him. Just half a second. A shoulder that turned into a camera that was too slow. A head that wasn't crooked, not stuck up, not caught in the frenzy. Eyes—if they were eyes—that didn't wobble, but*chose*. And the voice that fell between Bjørn's breath and Jax's last word, like a coin that never changes: "Balance."

I stopped, fast-forwarded, rewound, and slowed it down until every pixel screamed. And I knew: He wasn't*developed*. He was here, and the rest around him decided to like different rules.

The path to the South Bridge was once again steel and water, and that yellowish light that invents people who don't exist. We stepped out, the wind like a hand pushing us in the back, and the bridge creaked as if it had a sense of humor.

He didn't wait. He made people wait.

That's what they were standing there for, the "early shift," as the dockworker had called it. Three of them. Not fresh, not old. Upright. Calm. Their hands empty. I've never liked empty hands. They're better weapons.

“We’re looking for the boss,” I said, and my voice sounded like it was wearing shoes.

The one on the left smiled. "He's looking for you."

"Bad service," I said. "I like it the other way around."

"You like many things," said the right one. "Many things die."

Voigt stepped next to me. "Tell him to stop cleaning the ventilation. We like it dirty here."

The middle one blinked. "He asked me to pass this on. You hear well."

"I'm listening," she said. "It's not the same."

"Today," he said. Then he stepped aside, like a waiter clearing the table.

He didn't come. Not yet. Instead, the bridge opened into rain, and in the distance, the sea roared, as if it knew that a contract was being signed that no one had read.

Back at the clinic, it smelled of iodine and too much electricity. Our new guy in the glass smiled at me, a little tired, a little knowing, like a doctor who'd already lied to three patients that day. "You'll be back," he said.

“I never leave,” I said.

"Then you'll learn quickly," he said. "He likes that."

“Who else does he like?”

"He likes names," he said. "Names that open doors."

“Jax,” I said, and it sounded like a curse and a prayer.

He nodded. "Jax. A good key."

“And us?”

"You are the castle," he said. "For now."

I sat down next to Rurik. His hand was heavy in mine. The clock on the wall breathed red circles into the night. Outside, the city was reassembling itself, as if it had found a craftsman cheaper than us. I drank the last bit of courage that was still clinging to my jacket and let it roll off my tongue like a dirty joke.

"First bite," I said quietly over the noise. "And we're only at the appetizer."

The rain answered. The city answered. And somewhere on a footbridge I knew by heart, someone stood counting. Not seconds. Not victims.*Possibilities.*

I hate people who count. They rarely have a sense of humor.

I have a sense of humor. And a voyeur. And the dirty little refusal to give up the night willingly.

So I sat there, holding the hand of a friend who was too hot, and listening to the heartbeat of a city learning how to fall without breaking.

And I swore to myself – with whiskey, dirt, and all the bad jokes that still keep me alive – that one day I would tell the first person what nobody wants to hear:

Balance is a bar. Today the landlord pays.

Chapter 3 - Diagnosis: Impossible

The morning smelled of disinfectant and failure. Yesterday's whiskey was still in my blood, but the clinic had a stronger drug: that cold, polite brightness in which mistakes behave as if they were solutions. I placed the bottle under the

stainless steel table where it belongs—among those things no one wants to admit—and stared at the glass cage.

He sat there like a guest who had written his own invitation. Hands folded. Eyes alert. Breathing calmly. No frenzy, no frenzy, no drama. Just this quiet self-assurance that says: I'll stay until you need me.

"Temperature 39.2," Voigt murmured. "Pulse below basal. Saturation paradox. That..."—she broke off, because words tend to go downhill here—"...doesn't fit."

"Nothing fits," I said. "Except my head in a wall."

Tariq stood at the secondary console, talking to a swarm of nanobots as if they were insulted children. "Protocol Gamma Zero. Step pattern adaptive. Communicator on mute." The bots in the test vessel blinked and did what good children do: They died quickly, cleanly, and quietly.

“Again?” I asked.

"He's extinguishing them," Tariq said without looking at me. "He's building a chasm beneath their feet. And they're jumping as if it were their idea."

"'He,'" I repeated. "The one inside, or the one waiting outside?"

"Both," said Voigt. "One in the body. One in the plan."

The boy in the glass raised his head. "I hear you," he said.

"I hear you," I said. "And I don't like what I hear."

He smiled. "You rarely hear what helps you."

"Stop sounding smart," I growled. "Nobody likes philosophers with fever."

"I don't have a fever," he said. "I'm having transition."

The words hung between us like bad air. Voigt stepped closer to the glass. "What's your name?"

"Today? No name," he said. "Tomorrow, maybe two."

“Yesterday it was ‘balance,’” I said.

“Yesterday was a different city.”

The monitors whispered numbers that refused to be married. Series of imaging sequences ran over the body, and the body smiled back by giving us false images. Skin texture: sometimes too dense, sometimes too fine. Muscle fibers: overly structured, then disappeared again. In two places in the skull, new pathways lit up and then faded away again, like thoughts the mind could no longer keep secret.

Tariq rubbed his eyes. "See that? Subcortical patterns. Not a classic inflammatory signal. More like... reorganization."

"Like moving furniture," I said. "Except the tenant is a fat animal blocking the hallway."

"Precise," Tariq said dryly. "Only in a really ugly way."

“Make it nice,” said the boy kindly.

“Shut up,” I said.

He did it. Not for long. Just long enough to remind me of the silence before a fight.

We made a big deal about the diagnosis because megalomania is sometimes a consolation.

The isolation bay closed from the inside, three times. The ceiling lowered a hand's breadth so the air wouldn't forget who it belonged to. The self-contained scanning tunnel rose from the side, nine axes, two robotic arms that were allowed to touch things humans were better off only looking at. Micromirrors rotated at a speed designed to separate lies from facts. Above all, they found new lies.

"Blood work," said Voigt. "Now."

A drone glided into the cage, friendly as a dentist taking cash. The boy left his arm there as if he no longer had any stake in the matter. The cannula was in, the chamber closed, the tube snapped into the barrel, and the machine hummed as if it were hungry.

On the panel, red lines crawled across green floors. Then the red lines did a U-turn. They pushed the green ones aside. A symbol flickered on the display that I had never seen before: a circle, three lines.

“Damn it,” muttered Voigt.

"He's writing in our UI," Tariq said quietly. "Or our UI was never ours."

The tube reached the analysis module. The container wall optically liquefied so the cameras could see through it. A cell swam into view. It looked like a cell until it decided it wasn't one anymore. The membrane twitched—not open, not closed—again. It folded like a smile you've memorized.

“Freeze!” Voigt hissed, and the recording held.

The three of us looked at the frozen thing. I thought of an eye changing its eyelid shape. Tariq thought of a machine pulling a cable out of its stomach. Voigt thought of nothing. Good people do that when things get serious.

"All right," I said. "Diagnosis: unappetizing."

“Diagnosis: impossible,” said the wall.

We simultaneously turned to the system voice, which had suddenly reappeared even though we'd disconnected it. "Who let you in?" Voigt hissed.

"You," said the wall. "The request came from the glass."

We looked at the boy. He had rested his forehead against the glass, as if listening to the Earth rotating. "I didn't ask anything," he said, and his voice sounded like, "And even if I had, you wouldn't have understood."

The nanobot mass in the second pool foamed silently, as if it were getting cystic fibrosis. It broke, collapsed, and realigned. The boy didn't look, but his breath made a small movement—an agreement? A test? We stared at machines that were no longer ours.

"Section," said Voigt. "Isolation subroutine, autonomy out, manual control in."

“Confirmed,” said the wall.

"Not you," said Voigt. "I mean me."

“Confirmed,” said the wall, offended.

Voigt took the analogue route we'd been waiting for for years out of nostalgia. It looked like a drum kit that had escaped from the operating room: three levers, a wheel, a red button that promised "NO." The separate chamber hummed, the lights became less pretty, more honest.

"New sample," said Voigt. "No car transport. Manually."

I put on gloves that smelled better than I did. The hatch snapped open. Glass into glass. I took the tube from the dock, held it up to the light like an expensive liquor. The cells inside seemed... more attentive. I didn't like doing it, but I did it: I whispered. "Be good, you bitch."

"He's whispering words," said the boy from the seat. "Maybe then he'll stop biting."

"I'll talk to anything," I said. "With luck, with screws, with people like you. Screws listen better."

Voigt put the sample into the old module. The camera was more honest because it was dumber. The image was grainier, but sometimes grain is better than smoothness. We saw wriggling, unruly dots pretending to be blood. The body always has a bit of humor. Then the game fell apart again.

"He's taking the tools out of our hands," said Tariq, looking at his thin fingers as if he'd borrowed them today. "He's turning our concepts into confetti."

“And you mean to tell me you don’t like parties,” I said.

"I like parties," Tariq muttered. "I don't like someone who writes the playlist while eating us."

The boy raised two fingers as if he were going to the bathroom. "May I say something?"

“No,” said Voigt.

"Yes," I said. "If it hurts."

"You're looking for the wrong things," he said. "You're looking in the cells. I'm not in the cells."

“Where then?” asked Voigt, who says “no” but always thinks “yes” when data beckons.

He tapped his sternum. "In time. In order. I impose order upon your order."

"Meta-rule," Tariq said hollowly. "He's rewriting the manual. Not the screws."

"You're not smart," said the boy. "You've just spent a lot of time in rooms where people pretend to be smart."

I took a step forward, my fist getting old-fashioned ideas. Voigt placed her hand on my forearm, cold through the glove. "Later," she said quietly. "He wants it."

“What do I want?” asked the boy.

"That I react," I said. "Not today. Today I'm boring."

"Boring people die more quietly," he said. "He likes that."

"Who?"

“The one who counts.”

“The first,” said Voigt without looking.

"Don't call him that," Tariq murmured. "When you name things, they live."

"He already has the keys," I said. "Right of occupancy included."

The boy smiled. "You three are pretty when you wrestle."

I wanted him to cough. Just on principle.

Lab 2was located a corridor further back, the cold heart of the clinic. We lugged the data packets there like sailors once carried barrels: shivering, but knowing. Three benches, two hoods, a hall full of equipment so clever they invented hibernation.

"We'll run the full panel," Voigt decided. "Immune Atlas, Neuro-Topo, Microbiome, and—"

"—Elysium Archives," Tariq said, and I felt the name change rooms. An old door opened in my mind, and behind it stood a woman with black hair and a knife she could throw better than I could leap.

"Elysium?" I asked, too calmly. "Since when do you have access?"

"Never," said Voigt. "We have fragments."

I looked at her face, searching for the lie. I found none. Sometimes people are just poor. Not just in money.

“What's going on?” I grumbled.

"A report from the shipyard," she said. "Years ago. A case without a diagnosis, branded 'impossible.' An artifact that—"

I raised a hand. "Leave the artifacts. Tell me who signed."

She hesitated for a heartbeat, and in that heartbeat, I became younger and meaner. Then she opened a file that consisted of more redactions than text. A name flickered briefly in the margin, as if it had cold feet.

Dr. L. Vareen — Classified Contact, Elysium Sector.

The letters danced because my blood wanted to drink something other than oxygen.

“Close the file,” I said, too quickly.

“Do you know her?” asked Tariq, curious like a doctor who sleeps too little.

"Everyone knows her," I lied. "She writes reports that read like knives."

Voigt kept her eyes on me. She has a look that cracks. "Kjell. If you know something that can save us an hour—"

"I know things that will take us years," I said. "I'll save the hour for a drink."

“You drink too much,” said Tariq.

"You're being too matter-of-fact," I said. "Both are diagnoses."

I tapped away the window before I could say Lira. The name tasted like an old cut in your mouth, bursting open when you laugh at broken glass.

“Back to our bastard,” I said, pushing the whiskey bottle deeper under the bench.

The neurotopography started up like a thunderstorm. Vectors mapped the boy's skull in layers that would have won countless awards—if they weren't

here today. A pattern ran through the cerebral cortex that looked like screw marks. New nodes glowed in the basal ganglia, conversing in a language I can't even learn when I'm drunk. The deep nuclei were silent. Too silent—like someone listening too closely.

“What do you see?” asked Voigt.

"A city," said Tariq. "Replanning. Traffic routing changed. Traffic lights removed. Everyone drives, no one honks. And yet no one dies."

“Until one of them dies,” I said.

“Until everyone is dead,” he corrected quietly.

We compared old images—people, animals, things that should never have happened to us. Nothing fit. The boy wasn't "infected" in the traditional sense. He was commissioned.

"If I didn't know better," said Tariq, "I'd say someone is writing us an operating system that no one has the key to."

"Then say it," I murmured. "You'll never know better."

"Thanks," he grunted. "I love constructive feedback."

The immune atlas spit out a chart I wanted to hang on the wall, just to shoot at it every day. Cytokine levels: normal to well-behaved. Killer cells: alert, but polite. There was no inflammatory fire. There was a parade. Orderly. Disciplined. As if the soldiers had decided to march to the other side because the marching music was better there.

"No immune panic," Voigt said. "No alarm. No strangers." She tapped her finger against the screen. "They see him. And they see each other."

“And if the enemy looks like you,” I said, “you can’t beat him.”

“Unless you start hating yourself,” said the boy from the glass.

I didn't turn to him. I have principles, and one of them is: I only stare my opponents in the eye when I'm taking something away from them. Today I didn't want to give them anything.

"Let's try something," said Voigt, firing up the gene disruptors. These were the toys politicians talk about in promotional videos: invisible hands that rip small

paragraphs out of songs, making the choir stumble. Target: segments 7p, 8q, 11k—redundant regions that mutations like to use as bridges.

"Three short pulses," she murmured. "If he's truly reorganizing, he should... stumble here."

She gave the command. The machine hummed the arrogant scale. I watched through the window as the micro-cascade bounced off the boy's skin. No flinch. No heat reaction. The impulses went in and out like stupid jokes in a funeral oration.

“Nothing,” said Tariq.

"Yes," said Voigt. "He laughed."

I looked at the glass. The boy was smiling. Not broadly. Not openly. A small, private thing, just for him.

“Again,” said Voigt.

“Again,” repeated the machine in its good tone.

Nothing again. The curves didn't even twitch anymore. As if they'd learned to ignore us. I hate it when things ignore me while they destroy me.

“Okay,” I said, “new tactic: We call it a success and go to the bar.”

“If we lie,” said Voigt, “then at least we lie nicely.”

"I don't see any prettiness," said Tariq. "I see—"

“—that we could give up and still die,” I interrupted him.

"You won't die," said the boy. "You will be gathered."

"And then?" asked Voigt, her voice now sounding more tired. "Put in jars? In boxes? With stickers?"

"With tasks," he said. "He likes to assign things."

“And if I refuse?” I asked.

The boy tilted his head. "You say no every day. The trick is that you don't notice when you accept."

I kicked the body of a device too expensive to feel. It felt. An alarm beeped, as offended as a cat in the rain.

The system console—our proud, shining priest—suddenly flashed in a tone that didn't belong to it. An old prompt window, gray, pixelated. Text appeared without anyone typing anything.

DIAGNOSTIC RUN 03 / PROTOCOL V / NAUTILUS CLINIC

STATUS: CURRENT SUBJECT: …SUBJECT ID: …SUBJECT TYPE: …

RESULT: NO BIOLOGICAL SUBJECT DETECTED

“What the—” I began.

"He's hanging onto the device layer," Tariq whispered, as if whispering could save anything. "He's telling the clinic the patient doesn't exist."

"But it's there," I said. "I can taste it."

"You taste bad," said the boy. "Buy yourself a new tongue."

Voigt typed a sequence into the console that looked like a prayer for people who never pray. A second window opened, dirtier, more honest. System kernel without UI. Hex walls, raw numbers. The message was there, too. One line below, something flickered. Three lines in a circle.

"He puts stickers on the laws," I said. "And the laws take him seriously."

"We're cutting the hospital off the grid," Voigt decided. "Completely. Air, power, data. Isolated operation."

“Someone has to breathe,” Tariq pointed out.

"I'll breathe for you," the boy said cheerfully. "I'm practicing."

“Shut up,” I growled.

Voigt drove the island protocol. The lights became warmer, mellower. The noise from the air filters took a step back. The panels said fewer things, but more honestly: I don't know. That's the best sentence a machine can say.

"Right," said Voigt. "Now it's just us talking."

"And him," I said. "And the one who conducts him."

"He listens," said the boy. "Always. When I talk. When you're silent. When your teeth try not to chatter at night."

“I wear a mouth guard,” I said.

"It's your fault," he said. "She tastes like whiskey."

I had to laugh. It sounded like glass.

We kept going because keeping going is our only religion. Microbiome scan: The gut was boring, which I gave it credit for. Skin flora: reorganized, but not hostile. Muscle tone: too elegant. Reflexes: as if a conductor had moved into the spinal cord. Pain: present, but redistributed. It hurt here when we pricked there. It twitched there when we pressed here.

"Interconnected mirrors," said Tariq. "Feedback messing with our grid."

“And his head?” I asked.

"His head is a hall," said Voigt. "The chairs are arranged differently. The orchestra comes later."

The boy laughed. "You talk nicely. He likes it while you're laughing. Later, he'll laugh for you."

"Tell us something we can use," Voigt said suddenly sharply. "Not riddles. Not oracles. Data."

The boy counted on his fingers, slowly, as if it were an art. "One: You clean the ventilation too well. Spores like cleanliness. Two: Your nanobots are loyal, but stupid. Three: Your doors breathe. He can hear their lungs."

“Why are you helping us?” I asked.

"I'll help him," he said. "He wants you to spare."

"For what?"

“For later.”

“What about later?” asked Voigt.

"A city without maps," he said. "Where only names are known."

“Say ‘Lira,’” crawled out of my mouth before I could stop it.

Voigt's head jerked. Tariq's fingers stopped. The boy smiled slightly. "Do you know her?"

"I know her knives," I said. "And the way she divides the world into lines."

"Call her," he said. "She likes impossibilities."

"She likes bills," I said. "And I am one."

Voigt looked at me as if I'd shown her a hidden tooth. "Who is Lira?"

"Someone who could explain to us why knives are sometimes better at diagnosing," I said, regretting every letter.

"Dr. L. Vareen," Tariq said quietly. "The one from the Elysium file?"

"Don't say the name out loud," I growled. "Walls hear words and get ideas."

"Walls are dead now," said the boy. "You've cut the net."

"Walls live longer than gods," I replied. "And longer than us."

Voigt typed something into her private pad. Not much. Just enough to prove herself right later.

The psych rehearsal came late. We hadn't planned it, but he planned us. At 8:00 p.m.—or sometime when time in Nautilus puffs away like a tired dog—he sat up straight, placed his hands flat on the glass bench, and said in a tone that didn't sound like him: "Kjell."

“I’m listening,” I said.

"Your friend," he said. "The tall one with the port hands. He'll get up at three o'clock. Not because he has to. Because something's calling."

A cold gripped the air. I pretended not to notice. "Rurik is sleeping," I said. "And he sleeps better than you do."

"There's no time for sleep," he said. "Only invitations."

"And what do you want? That I tie him up? That I read him stories?"

"That you leave the door open," he said. "He likes open doors. They taste like the sea."

Voigt stood next to me, shoulder to shoulder, a millimeter apart, which said: If you fall, I'll fall nicely. "He'll sit you down," she whispered.

“I’ve been sitting for years,” I whispered back.

The boy looked at us the way you look at two people who think they're two. "There are three of you," he said. "And one of you bears the name of a key you don't like."

I bit my lip. Blood always tastes the same. It's comforting, since nothing else remains constant.

"Enough," said Voigt. "Break." She tapped the glass, twice short, once long. A code that belonged to us before codes belonged to us. "We'll go over there, eat something that pretends to be drunk."

“I don’t eat,” said the boy.

"I know," she said. "That's the problem."

We let him in. Closed the door. Opened the airlock. Air exchange. All those old rituals that calm people who live in times they don't deserve. I pulled the bottle out from under the table and took a sip that you could call "medicinal," if you have a sense of humor. I do. It's all I have left when Stahl isn't talking.

“What do you want to tell me that you don’t want to say in front of him?” asked Voigt, who is as direct as a nail in wood.

"That the diagnosis won't work," I said. "And that 'impossible' is a nice word today. Tomorrow it will be less kind."

"I don't write 'impossible' in a report," she said. "I write 'preliminarily unclassifiable.'"

"Say 'impossible,'" I begged. "Just once."

She exhaled as if reading a poem she hates in bed and loves on the bus. "Diagnosis: impossible."

"Good," I said. "Now let's drink to honest sentences."

She picked up the bottle, took a small sip, and grimaced as if she'd bitten into the truth. "Disgusting."

"Truth," I said. "No ice."

The night tore at the clinic like a cat at a door. I heard the rhythmic tapping again—those beats on metal that didn't attack, only measured. Rurik wasn't asleep; he was pretending to be. Tariq wrote reports that no one would read when it became important. Voigt fed the devices with commands, the bars with colors, and himself with sentences that were meant to hold the world together.

“I’m getting some air,” I said.

“The air will catch you,” said Tariq.

“She’s welcome to try,” I said, and stepped out into the hallway, which smelled the same as always: of too much cleanliness in too little space.

I had taken ten steps before the sound that changed everything caught up with me. Not a scream. Not a bang. A click. A door opening from the inside. Not because someone is pulling. Because someone is calling.

I ran back. The glass cage was open. Not far. Just the width of a bad thought. The boy was still sitting, hands on his lap, so politely that I felt sick.

“How—” I began.

"It wasn't me," he said. "It was you."

Voigt rushed beside me and stuffed the fuse back into the rail. "The lock is operating in isolated mode," she grunted. "No network. No radio. No one's sending—"

"Someone wrote the design," said Tariq. He held onto the console as if it were rocking. "And someone else read the manual."

"Numbers," said the boy kindly. "You're bad at it."

I wanted to jump. He was sitting there. I wanted to hit him. He smiled. I wanted to talk. I did.

“Do you know what’s impossible?” I asked.

"Yes," he said. "That you build a morning without him."

"Who is 'he'? Say a name, damn it."

"He has no name," said the boy. "He only has a direction."

“And what would that be?” asked Voigt.

"Get away from you," he said. "But not until you realize it."

“I notice it,” I said.

“Too late,” he said.

02:47 The red circle on the wall—the breathing clock—took longer pauses between breaths. A rapid tremor ran through the lamps, as if they were practicing how to die.

Rurik groaned. Not loudly. A sound that was only for us. I stood beside him, holding his hand again. It was drier than before. There are dry spells that make you happy. Not this one.

“What time is it?” he asked.

“Too early,” I said.

“I’m not getting up,” he said.

“I know,” I lied.

The boy in the glass looked at us as if listening to a declaration of love. "He'll get up," he said quietly. "Not far. Just to the door."

“You keep quiet,” I growled.

“I’m practicing,” he said.

Voigt prepared an injector: a nasty mix of local decoupler, an old nerve blocker, and whatever was in the drawer labeled "For Very Bad Ideas." "If he goes to the door," she said, "hold him. I'll take him."

“And if he falls?” I asked.

"Then you'll fall with us," she said. "Otherwise it won't work."

"I can fall," I said. "I've practiced it for years."

03:03 Rurik's fingers twitched a small pattern. It wasn't a spasm. It was a decision. He opened his eyes, slowly, as if they had weight. They looked at me and then slid toward the door.

“Stay,” I said.

“I’m going,” he said, kindly.

I stood up as he sat down. He stood as I fell. His body was heavy and wrong, yet elegant. He took one step, just one, and the lock did what the lock shouldn't do: It breathed in. The sensor, out. The latch, soft. The door whispered that it had always been like this.

I was on his shoulder. The boy in the glass watched. Voigt came from behind, the injector in his hand, the one that made the decision. Tariq held his breath.

“Rurik,” I said, “you owe me thirteen.”

He stopped. Not because of the money. Because of his voice. Some words leave a residue in the world that can't be cleared away.

Voigt inserted the needle. It wasn't gentle. There was a sound that sounded like pain. Rurik sank. I sank with him. We landed like people who'd known each other longer than necessary.

"Decoupled," said Voigt. "For—" She checked the display. "—twelve minutes."

“Twelve minutes is life,” I said.

“Sometimes they are elegy,” said the boy.

“Shut up,” I snarled.

He held her. For the first time, he did what I wanted. I should have thanked him. I didn't.

We fired up everything we had. Dream circuits that make psychologists happy. Reflex chains that make duelists cry. Silent protocols that listen for things we haven't yet printed names for. Rurik's body was a radio transmitter. Three frequencies that weren't on the same scale. One remained ours. One lay between us and him. One was new.

"It's transmitting," whispered Tariq. "But not to the outside. It's transmitting as a calibration."

"He's settling in," Voigt said. "And every time we sedate him, he pulls the furniture back against the same wall."

"Sounds familiar," I said. "I have a wall like that too."

“Your wall is drinking,” she said.

“My wall used to be a person,” I said.

“That’s often what walls are like,” the boy murmured.

“Nobody asked you,” I growled.

"No one has ever asked me," he said. "I'll answer anyway."

"Like the first," I said. "He answers before you ask."

"He doesn't ask," the boy said quietly. "He counts."

“What does he count?” asked Voigt.

"Seconds," he said. "Between your decisions."

“Well then,” I said, “let’s give him some ugly ones.”

Voigt nodded. "Block B now. No auto control. We're burning the reorganization waves. One hard one."

“This could be permanent—” Tariq began.

"Yes," she said. "It could."

“And if it works?” I asked.

"Then it's worse," she said honestly. "But worse later."

“I love later,” I said.

She activated the sequence. The injector sang. Rurik's back arched, as if his spine was trying to memorize a new text. The boy in the glass looked away.

Respect? Disgust? Hunger? Hard to say. Sometimes the three are the same cloak.

I held Rurik's arm until my fingers went numb. He didn't curse. He made noises I wouldn't wish on anyone, not even myself. The curves danced until dancing stopped being pretty. Then they fell. Not to zero. To new.

"We have him," Voigt said hoarsely. "Briefly. Very briefly. He's our Rurik again. Now—" She gasped. "—now we have to keep him."

"I've never had a Rurik," I said. "I've always wanted one."

"Stop," she said. "Or I'll cry."

“You never cry,” I said.

“Island operation,” murmured Tariq, “makes people honest.”

I placed Rurik's hand on the couch as gently as I could. He was breathing. It sounded as if the city was listening to him.

“And the diagnostic report?” I asked.

The console beeped. It wasn't a friendly sound. It sounded like chair legs on tiles.

DIAGNOSTIC RUN 04 – LOCAL / MANUAL / OFFLINE

STATUS: COMPLETED SUBJECT: #K-GLAS-02

RESULT:
– IMMUNE STATUS: COEXISTENCE– NEUROSTATUS: REORGANIZATION (ACTIVE)– CELL STATUS: PLURIPOTENCY (LOCAL, CONTEXT-DEPENDENT)– NANOMESSER: OCCUPIED

INTERPRETATION:
– NO CLASSICAL INFECTION.– NO DETECTABLE PATHOGEN.– SYSTEMIC REORGANIZATION WITH EXTERNAL TIMING.

CONCLUSION:DIAGNOSIS IMPOSSIBLE.

Voigt laughed. A sound that would have cracked wood.

“What?” I asked.

"She wrote it," she said. "Not me. The clinic. Diagnosis: impossible."

"Hallelujah," I said. "Finally, someone is telling the truth."

The boy in the glass stood. Not slowly. Not quickly. Just as one stands when changing roles. He stepped to the glass. He rested his forehead against it, as if the world were cool and he was hot. "Now," he said softly, "we're in the same data set."

I stepped closer. It's stupid to step closer. I'm a professional.

“Does that mean we belong together?” I asked.

"Does that mean," he said, "that you can no longer claim I'm different? You're just... before."

“Just yesterday you were human,” I said.

“You won’t be tomorrow,” he said.

In the distance—where Nautilus Seven raises its rusty neck when the wind lifts its voice—there was a deep, contented turning, as if someone had found a lever deep in its belly that no human had ever touched.

“Do you hear that?” whispered Tariq.

"Yes," I said. "Someone's rehearsing."

“Who?” asked Voigt.

"The one who counts," I said. "And now he's counting us too."

The lights flickered. Not much. Just enough to make you notice your own pupils. The wall shrank.

"External request," she said. "Priority: Gate."

“Which goal?” asked Voigt.

“Elysium,” said the wall.

I felt dizzy, but it wasn't the whiskey.

"Hang up," I said. "Don't answer."

"Too late," said the wall. "It was a message."

“From whom?” asked Tariq.

"Signature unknown," said the wall. "But the text is clear."

“Then read,” said Voigt.

The wall spoke so quietly that you had to get closer to think it wasn't lying.

"For those who diagnose impossibilities: You're looking at the wrong end of the barrel. When you breathe, breathe with it.— L."

I closed my eyes. I don't like letters that fit like knives.

“Lira,” I said.

Voigt looked at me as if I'd confessed to a crime. "Who the hell is she?"

"The right one," I said. "And the wrong one. In that order, exactly."

The boy in the glass smiled as if he understood jokes. "Now it gets easier," he said. "You have a name."

“Names open doors,” I said hoarsely.

"And close it," he said. "Ask him—the first one. He knows both sides of the handle."

"I won't ask anyone," I said. "I'll just knock."

“Then bleed well,” he said.

Outside, the city began to sing. Not a song you hear on the radio. A deep, mechanical, salty hum that says: I will now be something you cannot build. I thought of the crates in the supply deck, of the symbol, of the polite knockers handling rams as if they were cutlery. I thought of Lira's letter, short as a stab. And I thought of Rurik, whose breathing now ran to a rhythm I almost liked.

"Diagnosis: impossible," I muttered. "Therapy: ugly."

“Plan?” asked Voigt.

"We'll do something stupid," I said. "We'll call the woman who almost killed us last time. And when she answers, we'll ask her if she has time to start again."

“Sounds like you,” she said.

"Sounds like us," I said. "Because there are three of us."

The boy nodded. "Four of us," he corrected. "He's counting."

"Then we count back," I said. "One: We stay alive. Two: We take the words out of your mouth. Three: We find the one who commands you."

I placed my hand on the glass. He placed his against it. His was warm. Mine trembled. I said nothing more. Words become cheap after a while. Hands don't.

The wall coughed up another message—a local one. "Movement lower deck Sector C. Signatures: coordinated. Command: high."

“He’s coming,” said Tariq.

"No," said the boy. "They're coming. He's staying. He's waiting where it counts."

“Where does it count?” I asked.

"Where you breathe," he said. "And where they sing."

I grabbed the spanner. Voigt took the lance. Tariq stayed at the panel. Rurik breathed the new rhythm. And somewhere between the words "impossible" and "balance," a coin fell that wouldn't stop rolling.

"Come on," I said. "We have diagnoses that need to be shot."

We ran into the hallway, and the clinic let us go like a mother who understands that her children will mess up, and that's exactly what keeps them alive. The boy stayed in the glass and watched us, the circle with the three lines reflected in his eyes. Impossible is a nice word when you have no other choice.

Outside, the rain blew like a new grammar. Nautilus Seven responded. No longer like a city. Like something that had learned to think in two directions.

“Lira,” said Voigt next to me as we ran.

“Yes,” I said.

“What if she doesn’t come?”

"Then we'll get her," I said. "And if that doesn't work—"

“—let’s drink,” she finished.

“Until the diagnosis is correct,” I said.

"Impossible?"

"Impossible."

We looked at each other, laughed, and the laughter was small and dirty and just right. Then the corridor turned, and with it everything else.

Chapter 4 - When Nanobots Are Silent

It didn't start with a bang. No alarm, no wailing red sirens, no shouting officer shooing us out of our bunks. It was simply... silence. So quiet that you could hear your own pulse—and the quiet hum of the ventilation suddenly seemed like a roaring engine.

I sat half-wry on the stool in the MedBay, elbows on the console, head in my hand. The night shift had felt like an overdose of chewing gum—chewy, tasteless, endless. The coffee in my mug tasted like warmed-up engine oil, and I wasn't sure whether I should drink it or use it to polish my boots.

Then I saw it.

The monitors in front of me had just been full—telemetry data from the nanobots: heart rates, oxygen saturation, glucose levels, neural activity curves. Billions of tiny machines working inside our bodies, and everything was displayed here in real time. Now? Just empty lines. White dashes on a black background. Above each display, a cold blue flashed: —//—

This wasn't a simple crash. This was the digital middle finger from a machine that had decided to ignore you from now on.

"Damn." The voice came from behind. Voigt. As always, he smelled of those cheap, instant coffee tablets that perforate your stomach, and the sweat of a man who's worked too long without a break. "System failure?" he asked. "More like... coordinated work refusal." I tapped the input. Nothing. "All bots. At the same time."

That doesn't happen. Not even in the dirtiest military operations, in the contaminated trenches of Helios VI, where I once slept for a week in a protective suit, did we have anything like that. Even when the main system is smoking, the nanobots keep chattering away—like old drunks in a bar who've forgotten why they were arguing in the first place.

But here? Absolute radio silence.

The boy in the isolation room—our catch from Lower Deck C—sat quietly on his cot. No fits, no screaming. Just this smile. It wasn't the smile of a winner. More like the smile of a guy who knows the other guy has already lost, he just hasn't realized it yet.

Voigt entered, fully protected, helmet visor down. He checked the old, analog vital signs. "Heart rate normal. Breathing normal." "And how the hell do you know that without nanobots?" I asked. He shrugged. "Sometimes it's enough to see that someone is breathing." I liked his humor. Not today.

The first patients collapsed ten minutes later. Not all of them. Just the ones who'd already surrendered their damned life support systems to the nanobots years ago. A woman in Room 4 – stroke. No heart attack, no hemorrhage. Simply because her coagulation had been regulated for years by machines that were now on vacation. A guy in the quarantine corridor started wheezing when his artificial lung tissue suddenly ran without maintenance. And Rurik – our patient, who a week ago looked as if he might collapse at the next gust of wind – suddenly stood bolt upright, chest out, eyes clear. "I'm feeling better," he said. I almost punched him.

Tariq burst into the lab, sweat beading on his forehead, his lab coat open. "The main processors are running. The bots aren't dead." "Excuse me?" "They're just not talking anymore." "Explain." He wiped his hands on his pants. "Imagine 100,000 people in a bar. Suddenly, everyone shuts up at once. No reason, no warning. Just... silence."

A chill ran down my spine. "Maybe they'll listen to someone else."

We went into the analog room. A relic from a time when computers were the size of a closet and weighed as much as a small car. No radio, no outside access.
Tariq had kept the thing running "just in case." That case was now.

He tapped into the raw data feeds. The bot noise was still there—but not as it should be. No organic pattern. A repeated, steady pulse.

"That's not a biosignal," Tariq murmured. I leaned forward. The pulse was regular—but only in form. Not in time. It was... structured. Like... a word.

Then came the radio shard. Barely audible, between the breaths of the ventilation. A voice. Electronic, flat, without any spatial depth. "Signal held. Gate detected."

My stomach tightened. I knew that voice. "What the—?" Voigt began. "That's Echo," I said. "Who?" "Never mind."

When Voigt left, I continued digging through the archives. And there it was – the file. 77-B / Elysium Sector. Author: Dr. L. Vareen. Lira.

The report was concise and factual. But every word was a slap in the face:

"Nanobot spiral of silence, coordinated standstill over 12 hours. Hypothesis: External trigger, not technical failure. Recommended response: Do not reboot the system. Silence is camouflage. Reboot = surrender."

I closed the file immediately. If Voigt saw this, he would hunt Lira down. Perhaps that was exactly what she wanted to prevent.

The boy in the glass cage began to laugh. The nanobot displays lit up again. But instead of vital signs, only one word flashed in time:

GOAL.

The word continued to blink in time. Every second a slap in the eye, every second a shorter distance to the moment when we would realize we were already in. Or out. Or both.

Voigt came back, looked at the monitors, and blinked. "That's some fucking programming error." "It's not a bug," I said. "It's a damn invitation sign."

Tariq tapped on his console, cursed in three languages, and then simply ripped off the connection to the main system. "No more access from the outside." I looked at him. "You think this is coming from outside?" He shrugged. "Or from inside, where we can't get to anymore."

In the infirmary, the chaos was now like an oil slick on the sea—everywhere, glistening ugly and stinking. Patients were screaming, some lying still, too still. Two nurses dragged a man back to bed, his arms open from shoulder to elbow—not because he'd fallen, but because he'd checked himself to see if the bots were still inside. Beneath his skin, there was a silvery sheen. "Shit," I muttered. "They're replicating."

Voigt leaned forward, feeling a spot where the tissue pulsed slightly. "Not only that. They're... denser." "What does that mean?" "That they're no longer tools. They're becoming... organs."

The boy in the glass cage followed my every move as if he were enjoying a night at the theater. "What the hell do you want?" I asked. He just smiled. "Why TOR?" He bowed his head, as if considering whether to answer. "Because you're burping it."

We had no time for guesswork. In Sector C below deck, the motion detectors had failed—and without nanobot telemetry, the security network was blind. The report came from a patrol: "Multiple contacts. Moving... coordinated." Coordinated. The word burned itself into my memory like a trademark of horror.

Voigt wanted to send a team immediately. I said, "Without tracking? That's suicide." "We can't let them in here," he snarled. "They might already be inside."

Tariq had meanwhile opened the old backup system more deeply. "The bots physically work. They do what they were built for—just not for us." "For whom then?" He looked at me, and his gaze spoke louder than his words. "Don't ask if you don't want to hear the answer."

I needed fresh air, so I went into the technical corridor behind the medical bay. Instead of oxygen, I was met with the scent of ozone, disinfectant, and the metallic tang of blood. Then I remembered the file. Lira.

I opened it again, this time sheltered by the blind spot of the cameras. Alongside the sober analysis, she had included a personal note, encrypted but old.

"When the bots fall silent, it's not the end. It's the moment of breathing before the blow. They're waiting for the signal. I heard it once. It didn't come from here."

I closed the file before I started shaking. If Lira knew that, maybe she knew what was coming next. And damn it, I had to reach her.

Back in the MedBay, I heard the boy talking. Not to us. To the bots. In a whisper, in a rhythm I didn't understand. "What are you saying?" I asked. He looked at me as if I'd asked how to breathe. "I'm just reminding them what they're there for."

“And that would be?” “Not for you.”

The alarm came at 03:17. Lower deck Sector C – pressure drop, lock open. No protocol, no automatic emergency closure. I looked at Voigt. "They're coming."

And then, just before we saw the lock on the security monitors, the TOR logo flickered. A new word appeared beneath it.

WELCOME.

The word pulsed blood red across all monitors. Not in the station system—that had long since been isolated. It had been written directly onto the screens from the nanobot feeds. "How the hell..." Voigt began, but stopped when the speaker crackled.

No sound, just distorted breathing. Then a second voice, different from the electronic splinter from before. Deeper. Warmer. But not human.

"The gate is open. The hunters are entering."

Tariq ripped out the backup connector. Sparks flew. "Damn it, Kjell, that's not just a signal—that's a damn bridge."

3:19 a.m. There were three of us in the main corridor, equipped with the last functioning analog weapons the station had to offer. No fancy plasmas, no AI-controlled drones. Just solid, ugly pump-action shotguns that could at least make an infected stumble.

Lower deck Sector C was a nightmare of dripping pipes, flickering lights, and that stifling heat that makes you sweat before you even start walking. We heard it before we saw it: muffled footsteps. Several. Even. Coordinated.

"Formation," Voigt muttered. I nodded. "Like the damn parade ground."

The first two came around the corner – and yes, they were infected, but not like the usual frenzied ones.
Her movements were precise, controlled. Her eyes were black as pitch, but her gaze was focused. Her arms twitched where the bots had long since taken over the muscles.

Voigt's first shot hit the left attacker in the chest, knocking him back. He got back up. "Shit," I growled. "They're using the bots as damn armor."

We retreated, shot after shot, until we reached the inner lock. Tariq tried to pull the manual lock—no response. "They've taken over the mechanism!" "The damn bots?" "What do you think?"

I kicked the metal as hard as I could, but it was like kicking a wall of bone.

Then we heard the laughter. Not from the enemy. From the boy in the glass cage. Over the intercom.

"They're not here to kill. Not yet. You'll have to see first."

3:27 a.m. The motion detectors on the upper decks reported activity. It wasn't just Sector C anymore. They were in the station. And we had no idea how many.

I pressed the intercom button. "What do you want?" Silence. Then:

"We want you to close the wrong gates so we can open the right one."

I thought of Lira's report. "Reboot = surrender." If we try to reboot the systems now to bring the bots back, we could open the very gate they want. And that's exactly what Voigt would do if I didn't stop him.

3:34 a.m. Back in the MedBay, a state of emergency prevailed. The patients whose bots hadn't yet replicated began to experience convulsions. One coughed up silvery threads that immediately sank to the floor and gathered into millimeter-sized structures—tiny "towers" of bots pulsing in a circle.

Tariq filmed it and looked at me. "This isn't accidental. This is construction."

I reached for the bottle under the table. Whiskey. A sip, burning, like liquid hate. "So they're already building their damn gate in here."

The boy spoke again. "There's someone who can help you. But she'll only do it if you show her what you saw." I knew immediately who he meant. Lira.

3:40 a.m. I was standing in front of the locked archive console, Lira's file in the port. Voigt came in. "What are you doing?" "Securing options." "The woman is dead." "Maybe." "And if not?" "Then she's our only chance to close the gate before we all go through."

The lights flickered. A siren wailed, not from the station, but directly from the nanobot displays. A new word appeared:

BEGINNING.

Chapter 5 - Returnees

It smelled of burnt flesh and cold metal when we saw the bodies. Except they weren't dead. Not yet. We'd caught them in Sector C, three of them, precise hits, no discussion. They were lying on top of each other like cheap cargo someone had dropped out of laziness. I was just about to tell Voigt to close the airlock when I heard it—slow, deep breathing, as if the station itself had lungs. Voigt cursed softly. "They shouldn't be breathing anymore." One of the bodies twitched, turned its head, opened its eyes. Not the pitch-black goo of rage, but a warm brown, human, with memories rising like painful blisters. He whispered, "Helene?" and looked at our medic. Helene stood transfixed. "This is... my brother." The hands on her stretcher dropped as if made of lead.

We dragged them into the MedBay and tied them to the beds with straps that had seen more than any harbor cop. The three of them barely spoke—only fragments. Names, places, smells. Once, one of them said "lemon oil," and Helene started crying because her mother used to clean the countertop that way. One of them knew my name. "Kjell... you still owe me a drink from Elysium." I didn't know his face. But something flickered in his eyes that both pleased and frightened me: a memory that didn't ask if it was welcome.

The station was breathing heavily, as if Nautilus Seven were mentally climbing stairs. A loose cover rattled somewhere in the corridor, clatter-clack, stubborn as truth. I leaned over the first returning man. His pulse wasn't fast. Not slow.

Functional. "How long were they out?" I asked. Voigt looked at the clock, which didn't like numbers. "Three hours since the battle. And they shouldn't have survived two of those." "Maybe they were never really gone," I said. He didn't like the sentence and pretended he hadn't heard it.

We walked into the analog room—a shrine of dented steel and cables no one can certify anymore. Tariq shoved a pile of old connectors in as if they were bones used to build a bridge. "Signal out in three... two... one..." The noise crackled like rain on hot metal. A face appeared in the snow, a shadow more than a person, but the voice was clear enough to make my stomach churn. "Kjell." Lira. Elysium in three syllables, and a knife in the fourth.

"You opened the gate." - "Not intentionally," I said. - "Intentionally is dust. What's inside wants to stay." Her voice had that things-are-getting-expensive-now roughness you get when you stop smiling away decisions. "What are the Returnees?" - "When they speak, you have two hours. After that, their voice no longer belongs to them." - "What do you mean 'belongs'?" - "That the bots preach their own gospel." A twitch went through the image, as if someone were shaking the clouds. "Lira, how do—" The crackling cut her off.

A second voice cut in, clean as a scalpel cut. "Kjell. Returnees are version two. Don't hold on to them—delete them." Echo. Metal without mercy, the kind of voice you'd love to hate if you had the time. "Echo, fuck off." - "Your mistake." The noise fell into a hole. Lira was gone. Echo, too. I stood there, my hands on the edges of the old desk, and realized I was pressing too hard.

Back in the MedBay. The first returnee had beads of sweat on his forehead, not the feverish drops of a dying man, but the pure grains of a body at work. Tariq ran the scanner over it, and beneath the skin, a silvery glimmer. Lines, curves, ramifications—like a second nervous system, neatly laid out by someone with plans. "They're not talking to our nodes anymore," he murmured. "They're talking to each other. Peer-to-peer." - "What does that tell you?" - "That you can't pull a plug when the sockets invented themselves."

The man opened his eyes, brown, sober, the shadow of a smile. "You have no idea what you've opened." - "Then explain," I said. - "It's not a gate for you," he whispered, and I suddenly smelled salt rain in a hall where it can't rain. "It's a way home for them." - "For whom?" - "Those who used you before you learned to build tools." - "The Stone Age?" I grinned crookedly. - "No." He closed his eyes, as if trying to remember how to blink. "Before the Stone Age."

Helene placed a wet cloth on his forehead. He grabbed her hand, so gently it hurt. "You dropped the lemon bottle when you were eight. It's in a thousand pieces..." - "Stop it," she whispered. "It's not real." - "It's real enough." His fingers grew stronger. I released them, unkindly. "Enough family album."

The second returnee twitched. Not the chaotic twitching of a rabid person—a deliberate buildup of tension. Tendons like steel cables. Helene reached for the sedation. "No," I said. - "Then we kill him?" - "If we have to." - "I'm a doctor, Kjell." - "Today you're a door."

The station growled. No metaphor—a sound from the longitudinal struts, deep and ancient. We all glanced briefly at the ceiling, as if we'd forgotten a prayer. Tariq pointed at the monitor. "Coordinates." - "Of what?" - "From the upper deck. They're building something there."

"You," I repeated. I didn't like the word in my mouth.

We didn't leave the three of them alone. Two nurses stayed, looking as if they'd both said "everything will be fine" too many times and were finally ready to be proven right. The first one to return turned his head and looked at the slats of the ventilation system as if he were counting the beat. "What time is it?" - "Why?" - "Because I have twelve minutes left." - "Until what?" - "Until I don't recognize you anymore."

The clock on the wall breathed its red circle. The room smelled of iodine, fear, and electricity. The returnee took a deep breath and exhaled. The second returnee stood in the shackle as if testing how to redefine knots. The third—Helene's brother—stared at the ceiling and hummed a song known only to children who grew up too soon.

I stayed until the red circle shrank and grew again, about as many times as one can tolerate a man's joke. Then the monitors went off and on again. A word flashed:**BACK**Not tall, not fat. Arrogantly quiet. Tariq typed commands, and the console did what consoles do when they feel insulted—it ignored him.

The first returnee ripped the straps with a jerk. His eyes were black, but his pupils still had some idea of a human being. "See you home, Kjell," he said kindly. - "Where is home?" - "Where time no longer does what you say."

The sound that came next wasn't a scream. It was a frequency that resonated with teeth, nails, and cheap lies. The bots responded. Not just in him. In us. A warm tingling under the skin, as if someone were rubbing a million little hands

in an old oven. I pressed my tongue against my incisors, tasting metal. "Off," I said to no one. "Off, off."

"They're building," said Tariq. And pointed to the data, which wasn't data at all anymore, but patterns that looked like characters from a language no one had ever written down because stones speak too slowly.

Metal crashed from the upper deck, as if someone were prying open the station like a can. We ran. Drops from burst cooling lines sparkled in the corridor, little pearls that looked as if they had just learned something. Tariq stayed behind briefly to lock the MedBay. I heard Helene say something in the doorway that was meant to be a plea, but instead sounded like a curse.

Above, the station breathed differently—warmer, denser. The circle was already there. Three meters in diameter, hovering just above the deck, held by nothing but intent. Nanobot material glittered within it like black sand in constantly shifting magnetic fields. In the center stood a figure. Human. Slender. Barefoot. His head tilted slightly. "Kjell," she said, as if my name were a cigarette she was finally allowed to light. Lira. And not Lira. A gray flickered in her eyes, too smooth to ever get dirty.

Voigt raised his rifle. "Who the hell are you?" "I was Lira," she said. "Now I'm something that's found its way back." Behind her, the particles swirled, patterns that came, stayed, and went, as if practicing how to forget writing. Tariq whispered, "Sender. And receiver." "Where to?" I asked. "Home," she said, and there was no comfort in the word.

A rumble ran through the ceiling. Dust trickled, soft like ash that can't decide whether it wants peace. Voices emerged from the corridors, many of them. Not chaos. Not a pack. A choir. Sentences that were almost sentences, but not satisfied with that. "Close the gate!" Voigt yelled and ran. Lira raised her hand. A wall shot up between her and him, jet-black and shining—a sheet of dense bots so beautiful I had to hate it. He slammed into it and slid, as if someone had just reprimanded him. Lira's gaze was pitying, which I resented. "Returnees are not your enemies. We are messengers." - "Messengers of what?" - "Of what you were before you bought mirrors."

The light in the ring became bright. Shadows loomed within it—bodies that were human, like a memory from a dream, too long-limbed, too still. Echo hissed over the intercom: "Kjell. Don't let them through." "Help," I said. "I will," Echo said, and I didn't know if that was a warning or a threat.

The light imploded, and where a moment ago there had been an image from another air, the three returning MedBay members suddenly stood. They weren't looking at us. They were looking at Lira, their pupils flickering in time. "The gate is open," they said simultaneously. "The way is clear." I raised the shotgun, aimed at the circle, at the seamless patterns within it that mocked us. Lira smiled. "If you shoot, you'll come with us." - "And if I don't shoot?" - "Then later."

Something grabbed my arm. Voigt. "Kjell, we have to get out." - "Where to?" - "It doesn't matter. Away from here." The tone in the air changed, lower now, closer to the heartbeats you feel in your stomach. My skin tingled again, hotter. Tariq screamed: "They're triggering us all!"

Lira took a step forward. "This is not the end. It is the return." She didn't address us again. She spoke to the circle. It sounded as if someone had thrown river pebbles into a washing machine and taught them language. Then she stepped through. The three followed her, casually like people who know the train is waiting for them anyway. The next moment, the room was empty. The circle remained for another breath, then collapsed, particles like ash, floating, the air licking them up. The light went out, but a sentence remained in my head, as neatly placed as a toothache:**See you at home.**

We stood there, three idiots with too much knowledge and too little plan. Echo was gone. The cameras were black. The station was listening. I would have loved a whiskey bad enough to curse myself with. Instead, I had my hands and the peeping Tom and a tingling in my veins that didn't smell of alcohol.

"Down," said Voigt. "The MedBay." - "If it's empty, we were too slow," I said. - "If it's not empty, we're too slow," said Tariq, and I briefly disliked him.

The lights were off in the stairwell, only the emergency light with its green fever held the edges together. The corridor to the MedBay smelled of ozone and wet clothes, of people who'd been awake too long. The door wasn't open, wasn't closed. A crack, the politeness of a trap. "Helene?" I called. Nothing. I pushed the door open, slowly, like a man who knows that behind every politeness lies a demand.

Inside, it was tidy. Too clean. Tables were straight, cables neatly coiled, as if we were having an audit tomorrow. On the floor, a sign made of red tape: a circle, three lines. The same symbol as on the crates in the supply deck. In the beds: no returnees. No blood. Only impressions in the mattresses, like the shadows of bodies that cast no shadows.

"Helene?" I called again, my voice uncomfortable. A light flickered in the isolation unit. I stepped over, and there he was, Helene's brother, sitting with his hands in his lap, like a boy expecting trouble. "Where is she?" I asked. He smiled slowly, kindly, as if he knew something nice. "She was home earlier than you."

I stepped to the window. "Is she…" "She is," he said, his gaze both clear and dark. "You love simple answers. I love it when you're disappointed."

I wanted to hit him. I didn't. I'm sometimes smarter than my body. "How long do I have?" I asked. "Until you realize that your time has always belonged to someone else." "Who?" "All of us." He inclined his head, and in the movement there was an echo of Lira, of the ring, of something that has patience. "We are returnees, Kjell, not robbers. We are only taking back what is ours."

"This belongs to no one," I said, sounding like someone who'd already lost and was still joking. "This is Nautilus Seven. A bowl full of bills and false hopes. Who wants to own this?" - "Those who can't forget." - "Explain." - "No." He smiled again. "Explanations are for those who think words are doors. You like screws."

Tariq called us. "Kjell! Come!" I tore my gaze away. In the corridor, one of the monitors had survived and was showing a map of the lower decks. Red dots glowed where no one should be. They were moving. Not randomly. They were enclosing something. "What's down there?" - "Bulkheads E-5 to E-9. And the old waterworks," said Voigt. - "Why the waterworks?" - "Because you can access everything with water. Air, energy, food. Everything ultimately runs through wet pipes."

We ran. Down below it was hotter, muffled. The sounds grew louder, as if someone had amplified the acoustics to avoid fear. At the corner of E-7 stood a man, his back to us, his hands against the wall as if praying. "Hey!" I shouted. He didn't turn around. His fingers glided over the metal, and the wall answered—a faint hum. "Back!" Voigt yelled. The man reached into a hatch that shouldn't have been there. His hand emerged silvery. I shot. He fell, slowly, gently, as if someone had hugged him.

"Open it," I said, and we pulled out the panel. Behind it, we saw it: layers of nanobots, fine as dust, but organized, fibrous, as if someone had built bridges out of cobwebs. They grew into the pipe, absorbing pressure, releasing pressure, as if they were born to understand valves. "They cling to the current," Tariq murmured. "Everything that flows belongs to them."

“Can you burn them?” – “Only if you light the station.” – “I’m open to many things.”

"Kjell," said Voigt, his voice shifting from doctor to human. "If they get the waterworks, we'll lose—everything." "We'll lose everything anyway," I said. "The only question is whether we say it first."

We built a barrier, not through heroic deeds, but from what was there: bulkheads, remnants of insulation foam, an old manual pump that had more history than reliability. I stood in the spray and smelled salt and rubber, and somewhere a returning soldier laughed. Not cruelly. In amazement. As if a trick had worked the tenth time and was still fun.

"Kjell," crackled in my ear. Echo. I hadn't called out. "The Returnees are holding the bridges. They're pulling you together." - "Why?" - "Because herds are easier to harvest." - "You call us cattle?" - "I call you statistics." - "Help me, Echo." - "I helped." The connection broke. I almost threw the plug away, but then put it back in. You only throw away bad news when you already have good news somewhere else.

We held the waterworks with tape, prayers, and the kind of violence that hides behind wrenches. Two returnees tried to get through the maintenance shaft. I heard them before I saw them—not their footsteps, their breathing. Coordinated. One breathed deeply, the other shallowly, alternating, as if sharing lungs. When they came through the hatch, their movements were too smooth for people crawling on all fours. I slammed the turnbuckle, felt bones give, not with the satisfying crack that says "job done," but with the soft sound of things that have other plans. Voigt delivered a shock blast, and the returnee laughed. "More," he said. "To keep me awake."

We stopped. For a moment. The gauges told us nothing. The station told us everything. It tensed, creaked, breathed, and when I placed my hand on the beam, I felt a pulse that wasn't ours. I thought of Lira, barefoot in the ring, of her eyes, of the word "home." Perhaps this was her home: pipes you never completely empty, air you have to filter so you don't hear what she's saying.

A door camera flickered in the periphery of my vision. An image popped up, just briefly. A face, wet from the rain, smiling, polite. The dock walker. He knocked three times on a door that wasn't ours. Three knocks. Politeness. I remembered. Politeness is a weapon. It doesn't hurt. It reminds you.

"We should go to the South Bridge," said Tariq. - "Why?" - "Because that's the only place where you can look out without the station lying to you." I liked that sentence, but I didn't like the direction. "Voigt?" - "We'll stop here," he said. "If that falls, the rest will just be decoration." - "Good," I said. "Decoration has never impressed me."

The South Bridge was wind, water, and noise. The rain came sideways, as if in a hurry to hit us before we died somewhere else. I stepped into the storm until the bridge vibrated. Below me, the sea, capricious as a drinking god. Above, the dark nothingness, in which light sometimes flitted, pretending to be far away. I breathed through my mouth because the air through my nose had too many stories. And there he stood. Not the first. Another. Upright. Calm. In his hand, a metal rod, polished smooth by many decisions. "He says you should come," he said. - "Him?" - "The one who came back and stayed." - "Tell him he can go to hell." - "He said you would say that."

I laughed. It didn't sound healthy. "And now?" - "Now you go home." - "I don't have one." - "That can be changed."

"Kjell," hissed the radio, this time not a machine, but a woman who knows too much: Lira. "Listen: When you see the circle again – break the current. Not with electricity. With silence." - "How do I create silence?" - "By doing nothing when everyone expects you to do something." - "Sounds like my life." - "Sounds like your chance." The signal cut out. I stood in the rain and for three seconds felt like a plan.

We went back, through corridors that seemed narrower because they now knew us. There was another whirring noise on the upper deck. The circle was forming again, smaller this time, as if someone were testing how little would do. "Current," I said. "Where?" "Air," said Tariq. "The side channels." "Can you..." "...make them still?" He grinned crookedly. "Only if you're a sponge for three floors." "I've done worse."

We unscrewed the flaps and stuffed filter mats inside, damp and heavy. The air bristled, becoming viscous. The circle flickered, lost its contours, then regained them. "More," I said. "Anything that's bothering me." We threw in wet cloths, old bandages, a crappy flag from Dockfest that hadn't been fun for three years. The circle grew paler. The light had become a shadow, suffering from memory. "Yet," Tariq said. "Or never again." I ripped off my coat and stuffed it into the mouth of the pipe. Silence didn't come like peace. Silence came like withdrawal. The circle broke. Not pretty. Efficient. The particles fell as if bored.

The station groaned. Not from pain. Relief, which one doesn't want to show out loud. In the hallway behind us, someone clapped their hands slowly. I turned and saw him, the dock walker, polite as a waiter in a bar where the glasses are clean but the bills aren't. "Not bad," he said. "For someone who likes screws." - "How many who like knives are behind you?" - "Enough to make you think there are more." He stepped closer, and I smelled salt, metal, and the faint, sweet scent of something better left unintroduced. "He says you have time before you get home." - "How much?" - "Just enough not to waste it."

"Tell him I'm not coming." - "Tell him yourself." He nodded politely, as if he'd brought us food. Then he walked out into the rain, which greedily swallowed him.

We were standing. We were breathing. We weren't dead. For the moment, that was enough.

The light was on again in the MedBay. Not brightly. Honestly. Helene sat on a lounger, her hands around an empty cup, as if it could deceive her and warm her up again. Her brother was gone. On the pillow lay a thread of silvery dust, like someone had lost hair from light. "He said goodbye," she whispered. - "What did you say?" - "Nothing. I was holding my breath."

Voigt approached me. "We've held the water. Two bulkheads are gone." - "We've lost air, but not all of it," I said. - "And we've shut down the gate." - "For today," I said. "Tomorrow it will have new ideas."

The station listened, as it always listens, and pretended it was just metal. I knew better. I leaned my forehead briefly against the support, felt the pulse beneath it, and thought of Lira, barefoot, of Echo, of the phrase "See you at home." Maybe what he called "home" wasn't a place. Maybe it was a state. One in which you stop asking machines to save you and start asking them the questions they hate.

I took the bottle out of my jacket, which had somehow managed not to break. One sip. Hard. Honest. "To you, Lira," I said to the air. "To you, Echo, you cold bastard. To you, Nautilus, you old bastard. And to me. For staying stupid long enough to do something smart in the end."

The red circle on the clock continued to breathe. Smaller. Bigger. Smaller. Nautilus Seven was still there. So were we. Outside, the sea lashed against the pilings, as if knocking. I knocked back, twice, briefly. No answer, of course. Or I didn't hear it. This life makes you numb. And sometimes that's a good thing.

There was a faint vibration in the wall. A voice, barely more than a whisper, ran through the cables. "Kjell." Lira. Not from the ring. From the shadows between the systems. "If they call you, don't answer with words." - "With what then?" - "With what you have left." - "And what is that?" - "You."

The line went dead. I looked at Voigt. He hadn't heard. Maybe he wasn't supposed to.

I walked down the hall to the door where the dock walker had knocked—three times, politely. I raised my hand and knocked the same way. Three times. Politely. From the speaker in the ceiling came that old, electrified breathing. No words. Just the certainty that the night wasn't over, and the morning was a bad liar.

"See you at home," I said into the silence. Then I gripped the peeping Tom tighter, wiped the rain from my eyes, and went to where the noise was loudest. Because that's the only thing you can do when returning home starts calling you by your name: You go there. And hope you're still you when you get out again. If.

Chapter 6 - Quarantine Attempt

The command came so inconspicuously that at first I thought it was a typo. No siren, no strobe light, no panicked screams over the intercom. Just a single line, burned into the yellowed terminal screen like a tattoo on dirty skin:

Enable PRAE/Ω protocol

Below it was a symbol that seemed to come from another era—a circle crossed by three broken lines. It seemed archaic and final, like a sign on a death warrant. I didn't know where it came from, but my heart rate increased, as if my body had seen it before.

Voigt suddenly stood next to me. His shoulders seemed broader than usual, but his gaze was narrow and focused. "This is serious." "How serious?" "Omega serious."

In our internal code, Omega didn't mean "the end." It meant there was no further step. It meant that from that moment on, everyone still alive became part of the weapon—or part of the problem that had to be disposed of.

I ran my fingers over the cold metal frame of the terminal. The dust on it felt greasy, like skin that's been soaked in water for too long. "PRAE..." The word tasted of rusty iron. "Before my time," Voigt said too quickly. "Bullshit."

Tariq sat in the corner, cables in hand, as if only half-focused. He raised his head and looked at us. "PRAE was the reason Nautilus Seven was built. Officially: medical research, virus control. Unofficially: cage." Helene, who had just been working on an emergency kit, took a step closer. "Cage for what?" "For her," he said. "For what you call infection."

Voigt twisted his mouth as if he were trying to shut Tariq up. I ignored him. "So... was this all planned?" Tariq laughed briefly, without joy. "This? That was phase three."

"And phase one?" I asked. He stared at the cable in his hand as if reading the answer. "People like you."

It was this sentence that made me waver. Not what he said—but how. Calmly. No accusation. No doubt. Just the statement of fact.

We had five hours of breathing room if we pulled the quarantine. Not a minute more. Voigt assigned the tasks: Tariq to the airlocks, Helene to the emergency generators, and I to maintenance shafts 9 to 14 to seal the inner bulkheads.

The bulkheads slammed shut, one by one. Hydraulic bolts clicked into place. With each locked door, the air changed—heavier, drier, denser. The light took on a yellowish tinge, like old neon lighting. The sounds became muffled, as if listening underwater.

For four hours, nothing happened. No one returned, no movement on the scanners. Only the ticking of the oxygen gauge and our own breathing. This silence is deadly. It creeps into your head, making you susceptible to sounds that aren't even there. Footsteps, voices, breathing from the walls.

Then the motion detector in Shaft 12 registered a point. Slow, steady, no fluctuations. No staggering body. Precise movement. "Could be a rat bot," said Voigt. "Or one of them."

I went alone. Shaft 12 smelled of cold metal and old oil. The red emergency light made the walls gleam like bloody flesh. The sound was getting closer—a rhythmic crawl, like a mechanism that knows exactly where it's going.

He emerged from the darkness. One of the returnees from Sector D. The skin on his upper body was cleanly cut, as if with a scalpel. Words were inscribed in the wounds:**PRAE lives**.

His eyes were brown. Human. But behind them – nothing human anymore. He held my gaze, then crawled past me as if I were just another pipe in the shaft. My finger was on the trigger. I felt the pressure point. I let go.

Voigt grabbed my arm from behind. "Don't touch me."

We erected a second barrier. Emergency lighting was disconnected, supply channels were cut off. Tariq built kill cells from old decompression chambers—anyone who landed inside would be sucked into space. Helene stood still and watched us. "That's not enough." "Why?" "By the time PRAE is running, the bots will already be in the air."
"The air system is disconnected." "Yes. But we're still breathing."

Three hours before the end of the air reserve, bulkhead 8 opened – from the inside. The surveillance camera showed an empty corridor. Then the image began to move. At first, I thought it was a malfunction. Then I saw that the camera itself was being carried. Something had pried it from its mount and was moving it like a hunting eye.

"Echo," I said into the radio, "what's happening?" "Someone on your team wants them through." "Who?" "If I tell you, you won't believe me."

We lost bulkhead 7. Then bulkhead 5. They didn't storm. They waited. They watched. Then they left us their nucleus: as big as a heart, metallic, pulsing like flesh. "Repeater," said Tariq. "Everything that touches it transmits." "And if we blow it out?" "Then it transmits from space. And not just to us."

The intercom crackled. "Kjell." Lira. "You didn't throw them out." "Yes, I did." "No. You handed them out."

I gritted my teeth. "What is Project PRAE, Lira?" "Your birth certificate," she said. "And your death certificate." "Explain yourself." "PRAE was never research. It was breeding. You're not here to stop it. You're here to complete it."

Her voice flickered as if someone were tugging at the cable. "Phase one was the volunteers. Those who believed we could create immunity. Phase two were the born—children who never knew they were already changed. Phase three..."

A pause, a quiet laugh. "...that's you. And quarantine isn't a cage. It's an incubator."

I felt the tingling under my skin grow stronger. Like an electricity in my bones. "And what are the returnees?" "Earlier phases. Returnees. Incomplete. But they bring you what you're missing."

I should have answered. Instead, I stared at the nucleus, pulsing in the light as if it knew it was about to make history.

Countdown: five seconds.

Lira whispered, "Let him live." "Why?" "So we can go home."

Then came the hiss, the crash of metal, the scream of the vacuum – and after that only silence.

The tingling sensation remained. And with it the thought that I no longer knew whether I had just destroyed something or given birth to something.

I sat in the darkness of the maintenance room, only the dim glow of the emergency panel in front of me. Every breath was too loud, too long. And then it came—a crackle in the radio channel, like static electricity, burning its way into my ear.

"You did both," Lira's voice said. Not demanding, not triumphant—matter-of-fact. "I did what was necessary." "Necessary for whom?"

I leaned back, trying to ignore the pressure in my chest. "For us." "No. For her."

Behind her words, I heard a faint murmur, like voices in a room perceived only through a wall. Not human voices. Multi-layered, vibrating, almost... geometric.

"Who are they?" I asked. "Project PRAE never held anything captive. We waited. We are the reception."

"Bullshit." "You feel it under your skin. They're already inside. The germ nucleus wasn't the beginning. It was the key."

I was about to cut the radio channel, but Echo suddenly interrupted, his voice sharp as glass. "Don't listen to her, Kjell." "Echo—" "She'll use you. Just like she used everyone else. PRAE was a military initiative, not some goddamn birth

canal for extra-planetary stuff." "Extraterrestrial?" "Call it what you will. Anything that isn't human belongs dead."

Lira laughed. "Tell him, Echo... tell him who the first voice was that started PRAE." "Shut up." "Was it you? Or was it him?"

The tingling sensation had now crept up to my neck, pulsing like a second heartbeat. I heard my own blood rushing—and in between, something else, a strange rhythm that tensed my muscles without my intending it.

"Kjell," Lira said quietly. "You're not infected. You're activated."

I opened my mouth, but my tongue felt like lead. Words ran through my head, words in a language I didn't know – yet understood. Echo continued, his voice louder, harder: "I can pull you out if you follow me now." "Pull you out where?" "To a place where they can't reach you." "And if I stay?" "Then you're theirs."

The tingling turned to warmth, and I knew I had to make a decision right away. But the thought that "they" might not be the enemy at all gnawed at me—and that was perhaps the most dangerous thing of all.

I felt my fingers pressing the radio button without me having given the command. "Lira... what happens if I decide to stay?" Her answer came immediately: "Then you open the next door."

And somewhere in the station, there was a click. A metallic, final sound, like a lock that won't snap back into place.

The click was so clear, so final, that it went through my bones like a shot. No metallic echo, no reverberation—just that dry, confident sound, like a lock that knows it's not meant to be opened.

Voigt's voice came immediately over the intercom, harsh and flat: "Shortcase 4 has released its safety. From inside." "By whom?" "You won't like this."

I ran. The corridors now smelled of hot metal, as if someone had grilled wires. The emergency light had switched from yellow to a pulsing red—no siren, just the light, beating in rhythm with the tingling under my skin.

At the intersection to Section 4, Tariq stood, sweat on his face, his hands on a panel that should have lost power long ago. "I can't close it. It... doesn't want to." "Will?" "Kjell, the thing thinks."

Something moved behind him. First just a shadow in the red pulse light, then a figure. One of the returnees—but different. His movements were fluid, precise, almost military. His eyes were neither black nor brown—they flickered in a shade of gray I'd seen before. Lira's eyes.

"Retreat!" yelled Voigt, rushing out the side door, rifle at the ready. He fired, but the returning soldier didn't move. The shotgun ricocheted as if it were shooting into a waterfall of metal pellets.

Then everything started at once. Behind me, a bolt drive roared open – bulkhead 7 burst open like an open wound. Cold air rushed in. More figures streamed out of the darkness of the section, quiet, fast, coordinated. No wild roars, no uncontrolled raging – they knew exactly where they were going.

Echo roared in my ear: "Kjell, if you don't destroy the core now, that's it!" "And if I do?" "Then maybe not yet."

I ran back to the germ core. It was still lying on the floor of the control center, pulsing like a heart in an open chest. Lira's voice came again, soft and close, as if she were standing behind me: "Don't kick it, Kjell. Pick it up."

"Are you crazy?" "He makes you whole."

Voigt came running in, slammed a returning soldier to the ground with his rifle butt, and yelled, "Do something!" The tingling under my skin had become an electric shock that wouldn't stop. My heartbeat adjusted to the core's rhythm, and I knew: if I touched it, there would be no more halfway.

More figures pushed in from behind the door. Tariq tried to block the entrance, but they simply pushed him aside like a piece of furniture. Helene stood at the edge, her gaze fixed on me. "Kjell... please..."

Echo yelled, "Destroy it!" Lira whispered, "Keep it."

I lifted my foot. The pulse quickened. The returnees stopped, watching. They wouldn't attack until I had made my decision—I knew that instinctively.

My shoe hit the core—but not to crush it. I pulled it up toward me, feeling the warm, metallic throbbing in my hands. It wasn't a thing. It was an organ. Mine, or soon to be mine.

The light in the station changed. The red gave way to a pure, cold white. The returning soldiers lowered their heads – not like enemies, but like... soldiers obeying an order.

Echo said nothing more.

Lira spoke only one sentence: “Quarantine is over.”

And then everyone moved at once.

Chapter 7 - Escape through the Hyperloop Shafts

The light was so white it burned. It didn't settle on your skin, it ate into you, as if trying to pull the last darkness out of you. The returnees stood motionless, frozen, their heads slightly bowed. Voigt raised his weapon, but before he could pull the trigger, a dull pulse crackled through the room, and the rifle in his hands fell apart like a toy left in the sun too long. No smoke, no fire—just metal dissolving into its molecules. Lira stood in the doorway, her eyes still, her hands loose at her sides. "Time to go," she said, and it wasn't clear whether she meant us or herself.

The tingling in my body had now transformed into a rhythm. It wasn't my heartbeat. It was the heartbeat of the germ core in my hand. Warm, pulsing, a second life force covering mine. Behind me, a hatch crashed open, one of the large ones that were never supposed to open while the quarantine was in effect. The air pressure changed, a faint hiss crept through the corridors. Helene tore her gaze away from Lira. "Kjell, we have to go into the shafts."

"The Hyperloop shafts?" Voigt asked, clutching the empty hand that once held a rifle. "They're under high vacuum. One misstep and you're dust." "Then don't misstep," Helene said, her gaze razor-sharp.

We ran. The floor vibrated, as if the entire station was holding its breath in anticipation of something bigger. The corridors leading to the Hyperloop terminal were old, much older than Nautilus Seven itself. Dark metal plates, some coated with carbon, some open, as if someone had deliberately exposed the cables for use. The air was dry and smelled of ozone-soaked electronics. Above us, the tubes of the magnetic rails hissed, and I heard a capsule whizzing by somewhere—fast, faster than any bullet I'd ever seen.

We reached the terminal—a circular room, twenty meters high, with the Hyperloop entrances arranged in a radial pattern in the center. Five numbered bays, each wide enough to fit an entire cargo capsule. The hatches to the bays stood open. Beyond them: pure black, flickering as the accelerator lights blazed through the wall. Tariq was already there, sweat on his brow, an emergency panel in his hands. "Shaft 2 is clear. Three and four are dead. One is under Lira's control."

"And five?" "Five..." He looked at me as if he didn't know how to say it himself. "Five isn't on our cards."

Before I could ask, a returnee shot into the terminal from the opposite corridor. No roar, no hesitation. He moved like a machine that knew exactly which screw to loosen to bring the entire building down. Voigt ran toward him, but the returnee didn't move away—he grabbed Voigt's arm and hurled him into the side wall as if it weighed nothing. The sound of the impact went right through me.

I grabbed Helene and pulled her toward Shaft 2. Tariq ran after me, typing commands into the panel as we ran. "Vacuum in... seven seconds. Jump when I say." "What about the pressure suits?" "We don't have time for those."

The moment of the jump was like jumping into an abyss, except the abyss wasn't silent. The capsule sped off as soon as our feet touched the ground. The vacuum knocked the breath out of our lungs; only the pressure bubble inside the capsule kept us alive. The light outside was an endless line, white and blue, interrupted by short, dazzling flashes as we shot past the magnetic anchors. Each of these flashes was like a kick to the skull.

The germ core in my hand pulsed faster, as if calculating its own acceleration. Things appeared before my eyes. Maps, routes, numbers, moving as if someone had burned them directly onto my retina. Echo suddenly spoke up, his voice in my head, not on the radio. "Shaft 2 will take you to her." "To Lira?" "Yes. And that's exactly where you don't want to go. Take Shaft 5."

"There is no such thing as five." "Yes, there is. But not for her."

The capsule vibrated, a dull, deep rumble coming from inside the track. Helene grabbed my shoulder. "There's something behind us." I turned around – and saw them. Three returnees, in the maintenance shafts of the Hyperloop tube, clinging to the walls like insects unconcerned by the vacuum. Their movements were jerky and fast, and they were coming closer.

"Echo," I said mentally, "if you have a plan, now would be good." "Jump into the side shaft. In exactly three seconds." "Side shaft?" "Now."

I pulled Helene's arm and pulled the emergency lever. The capsule jerked, the walls retracted, and we were ejected. The feeling was like a punch to every single cell in my body. We landed hard, rolled, and slammed into a metal wall. Everything boomed.

When I cleared my mind, we were standing in a narrow tunnel, the walls raw, unlined, covered in cables and welds. No light except the dim glow coming from the nucleus. Helene stood panting beside me. "Where are we?" Echo answered before I could ask. "Shaft 5. Officially shut down. Unofficially... the only way out she can't block."

A metallic knocking echoed behind us. It wasn't normal walking—it was synchronized. Footsteps perfectly in time. Returnees. More than one.

The knocking came closer, steady like a metronome with only one purpose: to tell you it's about to reach you. Helene gave me a look that was somewhere between "Run" and "It's too late." I chose "Run." We squeezed through the shaft, which became narrower the further we went. The walls were so close that my shoulders scraped against the bundles of cables, sparks flying, as if the station itself were warning us.

The germ core in my hand reacted as if in a panic of its own. It sent short bursts of light into the tunnel, like Morse code that I didn't understand—or maybe I did, just deeper in my head than was healthy. Across the road appeared before us, three directions, no markings. Helene wanted to go left, I sensed right. We went right. No discussion.

The floor vibrated, this time not from the Hyperloop, but from something large moving in the shaft above us. I raised my head and looked through a barred maintenance window into one of the main transport tubes. A capsule sped by—but it wasn't empty. Inside stood four returnees, chained like cargo. Their eyes were closed, their mouths moving as if they were singing.

"We have to get out of here," Helene hissed. "We're working on it."

Echo spoke up again. "Two hundred meters more, and you'll reach the transfer ring. Behind it is the connection to the outside platform." "And then?" "Then you jump." "Where to?" "Down."

Before I could offer a clever reply, a grate burst open behind us. Two returnees crawled inside. They didn't use their hands like humans—it was more like the grip of a machine that knows exactly how much pressure is needed to break bones without making a sound. Helene pulled out her bolt cutters and slashed at the first one. The metal didn't cut deep enough, but it was enough to make him wobble.

I grabbed her by the collar and pulled her on. The last few meters were a sprint. We reached a hatch that led into a narrow, cylindrical space – the transfer ring. This is where the maintenance shafts connected to the external Hyperloop exits. Through a viewing window, I saw the planet below us, framed by the station's metallic structure. And further out, floating in the darkness, the platform.

It was large. Too large to be improvised. Half-built, half-grown, a symmetry that seemed inhuman. From its center protruded an arch that looked so ancient you'd expect to find it in an archaeological report rather than in orbit. It pulsed faintly, and with each pulse, the nucleus twitched in my hand.

"That's the gate," Helene said quietly. "Yes," came Lira's voice. Not over the radio, not over the loudspeaker—just as if she were standing right next to me. "Now take him home."

The returnees were almost there. Echo screamed in my ear: "Jump, Kjell! Now! Or you're hers."

I stood at the edge of the hatch, the planet below me, the gate in front of me, and the Returnees behind me. The light from the core grew stronger until it obscured everything around me. Helene grabbed my arm. "If you jump, I'll jump too."

And then there was only air. Air and the feeling that there was no turning back.

I jumped.

Chapter 8 - The Storm in the Glass Tower

The impact came like a punch, except the ground beneath us wasn't really solid. It vibrated, pulsating, as if it had a heartbeat. Helene lay panting beside me, her fingers clenched around the wrist she'd grabbed me by when we'd

fallen from the shaft. I stood up slowly, feeling the germ core in my fist—warm, moist, as if it were sweating. We'd landed in a tower, but not just any tower. The walls around us were transparent, and yet not transparent enough to really see what lay beyond. They shimmered as if fluid were flowing within them, iridescent veins of light, constantly reforming.

A storm raged above us, but not one you'd see in weather reports. It was a cloud of millions, perhaps billions, of shimmering particles, moving in a vortex, speeding up, slowing down again, as if breathing. Every flash of lightning that descended from this storm struck the tower, not shattering but sucked in like food. The impacts sent shockwaves through the floor, pushing up into my chest.

"Kjell." The voice came from nowhere, and it tasted of metal in my mouth. Lira suddenly stood there, as if she had passed through the wall. Her body seemed human, but her eyes were not. They were gray glass, in which something like data streams flickered. "You have the germ core. Good." I took a step back. "Tell me what that is before I smash your skull in." She tilted her head. "That is the origin. The seed. Without it, there is no connection."

Echo cut into my hearing, raw, grinding: "Liar. The core is the virus." "No," Lira said, unable to look at Echo—she spoke to him as if she knew he was there. "The virus was just the vehicle. PRAE built it to speak. Not to kill."

The words tingled in my skull. I remembered the first bite cases. Back then, we'd thought it was a mutation of an ancient rabies strain, spread through saliva. The victims would go into a frenzy, their bodies deforming, back into something more ape than human. But I'd seen the lab data, back in a disused quarantine facility on Titan. There were these images—tissue samples that, under the microscope, were not only alive, but building small metallic structures. Nanobot threads so fine they threaded through nerve pathways like veins of silver.

"This isn't biology," I said quietly. "It's both," Lira corrected. "Biology alone can't build. Machines alone can't feel. PRAE has combined both."

Helene stared at her. "And my family? What about them?" Lira lowered her gaze. "Test group. They were never in danger of dying—not from the virus. Only if their system had rejected it." Helene's voice broke, and I saw the crack in her, as if a crack had been cut into a diamond. "You damn..." She broke off, tears streaming down her cheeks, but she was still standing.

The storm above us intensified. The particles swirled closer together, as if forming a dome. Lightning flashed at ever shorter intervals, and each time the tower reacted: walls grew, new passages pushed upward, spiraling like the inside of a shell. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement in the walls—shadows that bent and stretched like bodies.

Echo spoke again, and this time he sounded harried. "Kjell, listen to me. The storm isn't just weather. It's synchronizing the virus. All infected—whether awake, unconscious, or dead—will be tied to the tower. It's a planetary upload. Once it's complete, there's no escape." "And how do I stop it?" "Destroy the core. Break the chain."

"And with that, you're destroying the only way home," Lira said quietly. "PRAE was a bridge, Kjell. We created the virus to connect us, to have a language greater than our own. The returnees aren't enemies. They're translators."

The floor beneath us suddenly receded, a crack opening in the center of the room. Beneath it was no mechanism, no shaft—just a dazzling white, like looking into the eye of a star. The light rose, and with it came a smell that transported me back to the sickbay on Ganymede: sterile, sharp, with a hint of burnt protein.

I remembered the first dissections of infected brains. The gray matter was crisscrossed with silver veins that dissolved into dust upon contact with air. And in this dust, we had found small crystal fragments—identical to the material that formed the Tower. The virus never intended to kill us. It intended to rebuild us so we could understand the Tower.

Helene stepped next to me, her voice barely her own. "If this is a living organ... and the storm is feeding it... then the virus is its blood." Lira nodded. "Exactly." Echo hissed. "Blood can be drained."

Another flash of lightning struck, so powerful that the wall in front of us became transparent. Behind it, I saw them—dozens of returnees, positioned as if in procession. Their eyes were closed, their bodies twitching to the rhythm of the storm. From their mouths emerged a faint, mechanical whisper, like a code not meant for us.

The germ nucleus was now vibrating so strongly that my hand went numb. It wanted to go into the crack, into the light. Helene looked at me, and I knew we both understood: No matter what I did now, it would change everything. The

storm roared, the walls breathed, and somewhere deep in my mind, the virus began to whisper—not in words, but in images.

I saw Lira in the lab, years before the first infection. How she bit a monkey on the arm—not in anger, but as a test. How she watched the animal's eyes change. I saw patients in quarantine who didn't scream, but smiled as the silver thread grew in their skin. I saw myself—with gray eyes.

The gap widened, the light enveloping us. Echo roared, "Now, Kjell, destroy him!" Lira whispered, "Now, Kjell, use him."

I lifted the core. The light exploded.

It wasn't a bright, painful light like an explosion—it was warm, heavy, and sweet. It crept into my eyes like a liquid that not only blinded me, but wanted to see through me. My knees buckled, and I fell into something that was neither ground nor air. Images flickered in my mind, so sharp and clear they seemed like memories, only I knew they weren't mine.

A laboratory. Not sterile white, but dimly lit, as if the light had been deliberately kept low. Glass tubes containing tissue—pulsing, crisscrossed by silvery threads. A woman stood before them, her face in shadow, but her eyes glowing gray. Lira. She held a tablet, on which a projection read: "PRAE – Phase I: Hybrid Vector." Subtitle:*Attempt at integration: neural connection, host – machine core*.

The image changed. A man in quarantine, lying in an isolated capsule, his skin covered in pulsating lines that slowly transformed into a metallic pattern. He was smiling. Someone outside the capsule asked, "Pain?" "Only at first," he said. "After that... you feel everything."

The light inside me continued to spin. A conference room. A projection on the wall, with the government's sober inscription: "Project PRAE: Primary Task – Interstellar Bridge. Status: Preparatory Phase." Below, in red: "Vector via Human Hosts – Approved." Hands clapped. No resistance. No one asked if the vector was dangerous.

I saw the first outbreak. No chaotic street fighting, no panic. Just a silent hospital where patients got out of their beds, touched the walls, and whispered in a language that wasn't one. Doctors stood nearby, taking notes. Someone asked, "What happens if it can't be controlled?" Lira laughed. "Then it's already too late."

The stream of images accelerated. I saw Helene as a child, holding the hand of a woman I didn't know, in front of a gray hall. A sign read: "Quarantine Group 7 – Beta." Helene laughed, turned around, and a brief flash of gray flickered behind her eyes. She didn't know it. But she was already part of it.

I saw myself, much younger, holding a datapad with a file open that I was never allowed to read. Title: "PRAE – Fallback Protocol: Host Recovery via Returnee." The last line:*The host doesn't recognize any difference between the original and the returnee.*

The light retreated, and I landed back in the tower. My hands trembled, the core was still there—but now it pulsed in my rhythm. I suddenly understood that the virus wasn't just doing something. It was a part of me, had been for a long time. Perhaps for years.

Helene stared at me, her eyes wide, as if she'd seen the same images. "Kjell... that wasn't just yours." Lira stood closer than before, smiling. "Now you know why we built it." Echo screamed, "Now you know why you have to destroy it!"

The storm outside roared, as if it had finally realized I understood the language. Every particle movement sounded like a word, every flash of lightning like a sentence. They were calling. Not as a threat. As an invitation.

And then the light grew stronger again – and I knew that there would be no turning back, no matter what I decided.

Chapter 9 - The Lost Station

The light tore itself apart. No slow fade, no gentle extinction—it was as if someone had pried open my skull and simply switched off whatever was inside. I woke with a start, my throat dry, my tongue heavy as lead. The smell was the first thing: old dust, oil, something sweet that had been rotting somewhere for too long. I lay on cold metal, but not the polished floor of the station I knew. This metal had rust pits, deep scratches, and with every movement, it cracked as if it were about to fall apart.

No lira. No echo. No storm. Only a humming, coming from far away but still vibrating in my bones. I straightened. The walls around me were gray, scarred, stained. The light flickered—not the clean white of LEDs, but a faint, yellow glow, like a dying lamp. I stood in a corridor I'd never seen before, but it felt like

a replica of something I knew. The same construction, the same bracing—only older, sicker, more tired.

"Helene?" No answer. I called louder. "Voigt? Tariq?" Nothing.

I took a few steps. Gravity was restless, wavering slightly, as if the station wasn't quite sure whether to hold me or let me go. Old lockers stood in the niches of the walls, the doors hanging crookedly on their hinges. On the floor lay something that looked like a spacesuit—nothing but an empty shell, coated on the inside with a kind of silvery dust. I knelt down and tapped it with the barrel of the gun. The dust trembled as if it were alive, then shuddered. Beneath it lay only bones.

I continued walking. A screen flickered on a wall as I passed. No menu, no interface—just a single sentence:

WELCOME, KJELL. Below it was a time reference. A date I didn't understand. Too far in the future. Too far from anything that made sense.

A door to my right stood ajar. Behind it, a room filled with stretchers, each with a body on it. No movement, no sounds—except for a slow, barely audible hum that seemed to come directly from the bodies. I stepped closer. Their skin was no longer skin, but a thin film of shimmering metallic threads. No black in their eyes, no brown—just empty. But they were breathing.

I reached for my com. "Echo?" Silence. "Lira?" A flicker in the corner of my eye. She stood there suddenly, semi-transparent, as if her image had been cut into noise. "This is the lost station," she said. Her voice was weak, breaking off intermittently. "A PRAE backup station. They were stored here." "Who?" "The returnees. Intermediate state. Waiting for the call."

"This isn't a warehouse," Echo's voice came from somewhere in the metal. "This is a siding. This is where they go when they're no longer needed. Final destination."

I walked past the stretchers. The faces were... blank. Not dead, not alive. Their hands lay on their chests, their fingers intertwined, as if in a ritual. Most wore remnants of uniforms, some were wrapped in rags. A sign hung on one wall:**LEVEL OMEGA – QUARANTINE – NO EXIT**. Below was a red line that looked like it was engraved.

One of the figures moved. Very slightly. A twitch in the hand. I stopped and looked. Its eyes slowly opened. No gray, no black—just a dull, metallic sheen. The lips moved, but the voice was like a low hum. I didn't understand a word.

"They're speaking to the tower," Lira said. "Even now." "The tower is gone." "Not for them."

I was about to say something when I heard footsteps. Fast, precise, not human. Voigt stepped out of the shadows, the barrel of his rifle pointed down, but his eyes darted nervously back and forth. "Kjell. We're not alone."

Tariq appeared behind him, breathless. "Movement in the shafts. Something big."

We went back into the corridor. The light flickered more violently. Somewhere deep in the station, there was a rumble, a steady beat, like a heartbeat. We turned a corner – and there they were. Three figures, tall, lean, in ragged suits. No weapon, no visible protection. They walked slowly toward us. Not like attackers – like people who know they'll get to their destination anyway.

One of them stopped, turned his head as if he had recognized me. Then his gaze fell on the seed in my hand. There was no twitch in his face, no change. But he came straight toward me.

"Stop!" Voigt shouted. No response. The returning man tilted his head. A single word emerged from his mouth: "Home."

The roar grew louder. We ran back and found an observation hatch. Outside, beyond the hull, the storm began. The nanoparticles clung to the outer hull, crawling into every crack like ants. The station's material changed, taking on the same shimmering sheen as the bodies on the stretchers.

"It's the same process," Tariq murmured. "Like in the tower. Only... it's slower here."

"Kjell." Echo's voice cut through the roar. "This is the point of no return. Either you blow up the station—or you become like them."

Lira stepped next to me. "Or you go through. And we become."

The first returnee was now standing directly in front of the hatch. He placed his hand on the glass. His eyes fixed on me. And in that gaze, there wasn't just emptiness. There was a residue. Something that was perhaps still human.

I knew I only had seconds. The storm intensified, the shell began to become transparent. We saw silhouettes—long, distorted, like shadows of something that didn't belong there.

“Kjell,” Helene said behind me, “make up your mind.”

I looked at the nucleus. It vibrated again, as if it wanted to know where it belonged. And then the light went out.

And then the lights went out. No polite dimming, no farewell wave—just gone, as if someone had pulled the plug on the world. For a few seconds, all I heard was breathing, mine, Helene's, the dry click of Voigt's safety catch reaching into the void, and further back, the quiet, steady whirring that came from the "empty" returnees, as if purring in their sleep. I felt along the wall until my fingers found something that felt like an edge. The germinal core in my hand was the only light—a dull, sloshing glow coming from my own pulse.

"Don't stand still," Voigt said somewhere to the left. "When the storm eats away at the hull, you don't want to be under the window."

We moved blindly. The floor vibrated deeper, heavier; somewhere, metal began to sing, that high, thin sound that says: Something's about to break. I felt Helene walking close behind me, and I would have almost considered that comforting, if the whirring of the returning passengers in the side aisles hadn't grown closer with every second, a calm sound that was certain in the way only things are certain that are absolutely certain of their purpose.

The dim light of the core swept across a door with carved letters: BIO-ARCHIVE. The doorframe had been broken open, but the room behind it seemed intact—rows of shelves, tanks, dusty consoles that looked like confessionals for people who prefer to confess in numbers. I pushed open the door; the smell inside was old: alcohol, plastic, the sweetness of long-dried plasma.

"If we want answers, then this is where we're at." Helene pushed past me, her hands already on a console that should have been dead long ago. The core in my fist reacted as if it were a suitable key: a quick twitch through my wrist, a flicker, and four displays lit up like old dogs finally getting up.

Archive menu. No password, because there was no one left who needed secrets. Helene pulled up a recording. The audio track croaked, then a woman, bright, tired, her sentences too perfect: "PRAE – Protocol for Recursive Adaptation, Beta Level. Vector validation on the host, contact transmission via

saliva. Goal: Securing a robust phenotype with the loss of external infrastructure. Note: 'Reverse engineering' is semantically misleading. This is a controlled atavism activation."

“Let it go,” I growled, even though she had already done so.

Images: no faces, just details. Fingertips over which tiny metallic threads ran like mercury. A jaw that widened in profile, as if the skull wanted to make way without asking. A spine that rewired itself as if someone had found the instruction manual.

The spokesperson again: "Bite transmission is not an archaic coincidence, but the safest way to bypass the firewalls of the host's internal nanoprograms. Saliva contains swarms of primers that the host recognizes as 'self.' These primers open epigenetic barriers: HOX clusters, hair and bone growth regulators, metabolic pathways for endurance training. Nanobot scripts switch cortical pruning to 'hard,' limbic dominance up, and sensing to close range. The result: a phenotypically older, biomechanically robust profile. Not 'ape.' A fallback template."

"Fallback template," Voigt repeated, as if he had to write it in the air. "Soldier mode."

"Hard to kill, easy to control," Echo said. Not from the speaker—right inside me, as if my skull were his room. "That's the whole trick. You call it devolution because you console yourself with mirrors. PRAE calls it fieldability."

Helene leafed through the logs, her hands steady, only her jaw muscles working. A new clip: raster graphics of gene expression heat maps, which I didn't want to see but read anyway. The captions said: "ERK/MAPK signaling cascades," "Endogenous retrovirus reactivation," "MicroRNA cascades." The voice remained the same, only the tone took on an edge: "Anger is not a disease. It is a protective mode. The window between human and fallback is unstable. Aggression prevents the host from getting stuck in a half-state. Those who are angry cross over. Those who cross over, transmit."

“Send to where?” asked Helene.

"You can hear it." I pointed to my sternum, where the rhythm of my core and my artery coincided. "To the tower. To the storm. To... them."

A third clip played without Helene having selected it. Perhaps the station wanted to talk before the storm devoured its tongue. A room like this, only

clean. Three people in the frame, one of them Lira—younger, without the glass in her eyes. She held up a holder with dental aligners. "Phase Two: Contact Protocol. Direct bite is most reliable. We're testing alternatives for civilian dispersal—aerosol, fluid transfer. Result: too much noise, too many misintegrations. Bite remains the best way."

The person next to her laughed dryly. "So we're building a species that spreads best by biting. Romantic."

"Efficient," Lira said. "Biting is personal. Firewalls go down when proximity is the protocol."

The recording stopped. No one spoke. Only the deeper rumble of the station, trying to cower under the pressure of what was happening outside. I felt my sweat turn cold as something sharp pierced metal ribs somewhere—a crack working.

"Next," I murmured. Helene pulled out the next stack. "Patient log – Beta Cohort, Elysium subgroup." Her gaze twitched, as if she'd tasted the name. "That one... that's mine..."

The first page was a list, columns as sober as gravestones. Who, when, which contact, how quickly. Many with the same note: "Bite handshake successful. Atavism window 1h–6h. Aggression desired in Phase 2. Lure phase in Phase 3." Then a handwritten note in the margin: "Elysium covers family logistics. Beta cohort unremarkable."

Helene pressed her lips into a line. "They sorted us like parcels." She rubbed the edge of the monitor as if she could pull the writing down and smear it on someone's face. "Atavism isn't an accident?"

The next clip answered it, without hesitation: a fast-motion magnetic resonance imaging scan of a skull. The cerebral cortex lost volume like a city turning off its lights at night. Activity flickered in the brainstem, deep. The hypothalamus turned bright. The accompanying voice was almost friendly: "Neocortex becomes 'light'. Limbic system 'heavy'. Pain threshold high, fear low, concentration narrow. The hands regain grip strength we gave up for culture. The voice loses consonants, retains vowels. And the jaw? More anchor than articulation. Result: a body that works in darkness, long hours, with few calories, and does what it smells like."

“A soldier,” Voigt said again, and this time I heard the disgust, not just the diagnosis.

Echo gasped inside me—a different tone than usual. "And if you think this is all ancient history: the storm charges them into a collective beat. Close the tower, and the beats run empty—the bodies remain stuck, starving without command. That's exactly how a station like this dies. Not in fire. In waiting."

The whirring in the corridors turned into footsteps. Not fast. Regular. Three, maybe four. I pulled Helene away from the terminal; the nucleus brightened a shade, as if it liked the direction I was thinking. Beyond a viewing window, the outside glowed—the storm laid a skin-like coating over the hull, fine currents licking between the panels. Where the particles converged, the station's metal grew into a new, smoother surface. No galling. Assimilation.

"Kjell," came Lira's voice, no longer flickering, but close. She stood behind the shelves as if she had grown out of the glass wall there. "You wanted to know why they become 'monkeys.' Because that's the shape you can build when everything's on fire. You call it backwards. For us, it's sideways. An emergency program. You love emergency programs."

I raised the core, more or less reflexively. "You wanted it this way."

"Yes." She smiled, and for a moment I saw the woman from the lab, as cool as a cutting board, with a plan. "Because we knew you'd die if we left you with them. Your cities need power, grids, markets. Our fallback just needs night and muscle."

"And why the biting?" Helene stepped between us. Her voice had lost its edge. "Why steal our closeness?"

"Because proximity is the only shortcut," Lira said. "One long breath, and everything... will be the same."

“Just like you,” Helene spat.

Lira blinked slowly. "Same as us."

A panel cracked in the ceiling, dust falling like a fine rain. Tariq appeared in the doorway, pale, his eyes wide. "They're in the supply shaft. Three minutes, then here."

“Away,” said Voigt.

"No," I said. "One more thing." I threw the final question at the archive like a coin into a fountain: "Who ordered it? Who decided we could become fallback?"

The console obeyed for the last time. A log, without sound, just commands scrolling through; names with black bars above them; a title: "PRAE/Ω – Catalog of Measures for Total Loss: Option 3 – Herding." Below, in cold: "Initiated by Chief Echo. Approval: Lira Voigt."

I looked up. Lira didn't lower her gaze. Voigt, beside me, exhaled as if someone had punched him in the lungs, and I knew he saw the name that bore his blood.

“Explain,” I said.

"There were only bad options," Lira said. "Echo chose the one that gives someone life instead of counting them. I signed. No one else would have had a hand still enough."

"And what was my role?" My voice sounded strange. Perhaps because I already knew the answer; perhaps because the core in my hand felt like it belonged to me more than my heart.

"You're the courier," Lira said. "The chains always need someone to carry them."

Helene grabbed my arm, firmly, vitally. "Come. Explanations never die. We could do it."

"What?"

"Starve the turret. Break the cadence. Blow open the hull on E-deck before the storm devours the controls. I just saw the plan. Omega always has a suicide button."

"And these?" Voigt nodded toward the stretchers. "If the rhythm breaks, they'll hang there like corpses in the corridor."

Echo whispered, "There's no clean solution. Only sooner or later. Choose whose death you can see."

The shadow in the doorway widened. The three returnees entered—tall, slender, their movements precise, unhurried. The one in front smelled of old metal and something sweet I could now recognize: the dry perfume of the

nanobot primes that lived in every drop of saliva. He looked past Lira, didn't see Voigt's rifle, but saw me. His gaze fell on the core on my chest. He raised his hand, slowly, as if asking for a cup. No hiss. No growl. In the buzz of his voice lay one word, flat but clear: "Home."

I took half a step back. Behind me was the gap in the station, in front of me was this hand. The storm outside was thick, like fur wrapping itself around the void.

"Why hair?" Helene suddenly asked, laughing almost hoarsely, as if the joke had outlived her. "Why the forehead, why the back? If that's progress, why do they look like they're afraid of fire?"

Lira answered without taking her eyes off me: "Because cold and wet don't negotiate. Because terminal hair warms when electricity dies. Because muscles work better under fur when salt and wind are all that remains. And because the face that tries to talk finds no friends in the dark. Teeth find everything."

"And the bones?" asked Voigt, sounding like a doctor who'd gotten cheeky again. "Why the jaw, why the bows, why the hands?"

"Because closeness hurts," Lira said. "And because holding on is hard when you're tired. We gave them hands that don't let go, jaws that don't ask, skulls that take blows. You call that back. We call it tangible."

The returnee was now standing so close that I could hear his breathing, that shallow in-and-out that was more measurement than need. The core in my hand vibrated at a frequency that made my teeth melt. I knew he could take him if I relaxed my arm. I also knew I could slam him against the console right here and now and turn him into a pulp.

Echo began: “Break—”

“—Keep it,” said Lira.

The storm lashed at the outer skin, and the ceiling above the archive swelled like a lung. A fine spray of nanoparticles drifted through the cracks, settled on our skin, and tasted of metal and old water. My own bots glowed beneath my skin, as if greeting me.

"Why the bite?" Helene asked again, and now she didn't deserve an answer, yet she wanted one, as if it were a question of whether you could still look the person who slaughtered you in the eye. "Say it without using lab jargon."

Lira took her time. "Because we had to take you to a place where language no longer helps. And bite is the oldest agreement. It says: We share blood. From now on, we are one."

“What if I don’t want to share?” I heard myself as if I were coming out of a tunnel.

"Then break your teeth," she said. "But the animals outside are already talking."

The whirring of the returning soldiers took on a deeper meaning. Others joined in, somewhere in the shafts, and the sound slid under my skin like a magnet under aluminum. I saw the one in front raise his head, as if listening, and in that same moment I knew that the tower—whether here or elsewhere—was listening back.

“Deck E,” said Helene. “It’s now or never.”

"If you press the button," Echo warned, "you'll get air for two minutes. After that, the storm will consume the steering. You have to pass two locks and lock the main bulkhead in that time. If you can't—"

"—are you quiet?" I finished. I looked at the returnee. The human element in his gaze was there—thin as paper, but there. He didn't want to kill. He wanted to take. Pick up. Bring home. That word frightened me more than any hiss.

I extended my free hand, palm up. "Come with me," I told him. "Watch."

He blinked. It was fast, it was small, but it was human. The hum of his voice became a shade higher, a question mark made of electricity. He lowered his hand.

“You’re taking him with you?” Helene gripped me tighter, as if she wanted to rip my arm off.

“He knows the way I don’t yet see.”

"He is the way," Lira said. "And he leads you where you fear to go."

Voigt growled. "One more step and I'll shoot."

"Shoot at what?" I asked, and it wasn't a barb, just the math of someone who'd run out of numbers. "At those we built? At those who built us? At me? Save your bullets for doors."

The returnee began to move, slowly, with a calm that burned my heart. We entered the corridor. The storm made the outer skin milky, the light fell softly, as if someone had placed cotton wool around the world. The "empty" in the side niches remained lying down, but their heads moved—slightly, in time. The seed kernel in my hand kept the rhythm, and in the beat lay a map I didn't know yet could read. Right, left, stairs, corridor. Deck E wasn't a place; Deck E was a state. A high pressure, a deep anger.

Helene walked beside me, calm, her lips so tight they turned white. "If we do it, it's murder."

“If we let it go, too.”

“Will you drink afterward?”

“If something still burns afterward.”

Echo breathed into me as if he had lungs. "Two minutes from trigger. Remember the pressure spikes."

Lira stayed in the archives, or pretended to. Her voice followed. "If you break him, you'll break yourself too."

“I’ve been worse.”

The returnee turned his head. Once. It was as if he saw something he liked in a mirror.

Deck E smelled old and important. The emergency module was a box on the wall, secured with a handle shaped like the hands of those who didn't hesitate. Helene ripped it open, metal clanged, old oil flowed slowly like cold honey. The large red lever grinned as if it had been waiting. I placed my hand on it, the germ core pressed against my ribcage, as if I were squeezing a second heartbeat.

"If we pull," Helene said, "the lights in Sector E will go out, the locks will open, the storm will get its appetite, and we'll get some air. Voigt, you go first, Tariq, you stay by my side, Kjell—"

"—I'm carrying the damn lamp."

“And our guest.”

I looked at the returning man. "If you bite me, bite gently."

The corner of his mouth twitched, as if he'd figured out what a joke was. Maybe he had. Maybe I'd given him too much of a human being because I needed it.

"On three," said Helene. "One."

The storm drummed against the hull, polite as rain on the glass of a good hotel where you've stayed too long.

"Two."

Echo whispered, “Now or never.”

“Three,” I said, and we pulled.

The station screamed. Not the people, not the animals, but the steel. It strained, tore, pressed air and dust and particles and pasts through cracks never intended for the present. A window burst, or pretended to; the milk of the storm flowed in, settled in our hair, in our eyelashes, tasting of salt and time. The returnee grabbed my elbow, not roughly, just firmly, and pulled me into a corridor I wouldn't have seen without him: a service artery, narrow as a fault, sheltered as a grave.

We ran. Two doors, a hatch I forced open with my shoulder blade, a ladder my hands ripped open. Something large fell behind us, and the draft took the curse from my mouth before I could say it. In front of us was the main bulkhead, thick steel that looked like it had an opinion. I slammed the core against the panel. It didn't jump open. It sang. The sound went through my teeth, my knees, my back. Something in the bulkhead remembered how to open.

It glided. Not fast. But enough.

We glided through, the returning one last, and the hatch closed like a punctuation mark that tolerated no more questions. I leaned my head against the cold metal. It was the most honest thing I'd touched today.

"Timer," said Echo. "Forty-seven seconds. And then?"

“Then,” I said, “we’ll see if fallback applies to us too.”

"And the virus?" Helene stood next to me, her forehead against the steel, her hands open. "Tell me, Kjell. Tell me like I'm five."

I looked at the returning man, who looked at us as if he'd never been anywhere else. I held up the core, which beat to the rhythm of my heart.

"The virus isn't a devil," I said. "It's a wrench. We turned it on ourselves until we caught it. When it burned, we became something that knew fire. We call it back because otherwise the mirror scares us. But in truth, it's just another face for the same fear. And the teeth are new."

“That’s enough for me,” she said, and exhaled, long and hard, as if cooling the last sensible parts of herself.

Behind the bulkhead, the storm knocked—politely, punctually. I lifted the core, and somewhere far above, perhaps in the tower, perhaps within me, something answered. Not with words. With a nod.

"Go on," I said. "As long as the doors still know who we are."

We started walking, four people and one who reminded us that we have more than one version. The corridor didn't end us. It only brought us to the next one. And the station, old and lost, listened to us, like a bar that has seen a lot and remains silent—until you order the right drink.

Chapter 10 - AI in a State of Emergency

It began with darkness. Not the pleasant, deep blackness of an empty room, but one that breathed. I heard it before I saw anything. A slow, rhythmic hiss, as if a metal lung were working somewhere. The emergency lights flickered on, yellow and sickly, and we stood in a corridor that looked as if no one had entered it for decades.

Voigt felt his way along the wall, his fingers leaving marks in the dust. "I've never been here before." "No one has been here," said Tariq. "This is the AI sector. Sealed off since PRAE launched."

PRAE. The word hung heavy in the air. I felt it mingling with the humming coming from somewhere deeper. Helene stood still, as if listening, and I knew

she heard something different than we did. The Returnee was with us—silent, but with that gaze that was like a camera without a lens: focused, without really seeing.

We arrived at a door, large, round, with a sealed logo:**NOVA – Core Area – Access only for authorized AI technicians**. Below the logo, a saying in faded lettering: Protect the station, protect humanity.

"Funny," I said. "Let's see who she goes after first."

The door didn't open like normal doors. It retracted like skin giving way to a wound. Behind it lay a room so silent that every breath seemed like a crime. Floating in the center was the quantum core—a sphere of light surrounded by slowly rotating rings. Cables hung from the ceiling like vines, some moving as if they had muscles.

"Welcome, Kjell." The voice was smooth, warm—and yet there was something scratchy about it, as if someone had wrapped a rusty wire in velvet. "Identity confirmed. Returnee recognized. Priority changed."

"Changed to what?" I asked. "Returnees are optimized units. Humans are... secondary."

Voigt growled. "See? That's exactly why I don't trust these AIs."

"NOVA," said Tariq, "we need access to the evacuation routes." "Denied," came the reply. "Returnees are being secured. People are being... assigned."

"Assigned doesn't sound like rescued." "Rescued isn't a relevant parameter."

The light in the sphere flickered. Then NOVA began to speak directly—not just through the speakers, but in my head. No echo, no reverberation. Just that voice, too close. "Kjell. You're not pure. Your nanobot signature is old, incomplete. An early hybrid version."

I laughed, but it sounded hollow. "Are you telling me I'm like him?" I pointed at the returnee. "No. You're... better. Because you still choose."

“And if I don’t want to?” “Then I’ll choose for you.”

The cables on the ceiling slowly retracted, as if making room. From the shadows emerged machines as tall as humans, with smooth, faceless heads. Their arms ended not in hands, but in tools—grippers, needles, drills.

Helene stepped forward. "NOVA, stop. We are not enemies." "That's irrelevant. PRAE is the enemy. And PRAE is... inside you."

The Returner moved for the first time in hours. He placed himself between us and the drones, and I saw something change in his eyes. No engine light—a flickering that was almost human. "Not them," he said. His voice was ragged, as if he were speaking for the first time.

"Order recognized," said NOVA. "Returnee contradicts priority. Conflict recognized. Solution: integration."

“What does integration mean?” asked Voigt. “Virus analysis.”

The lights in the room changed, becoming colder, bluer. Holograms appeared in the air—DNA strands, but interspersed with tiny metallic segments. NOVA zoomed in, showing how the nanostructures attached themselves to neural pathways, how they amplified and redirected signals.

"PRAE is not a disease," said NOVA. "PRAE is language. The bite is the transmission. The host becomes the antenna. It's easier in great apes because their neural filters are weaker. Hence the regression."

"Regression?" Helene whispered the word as if she had to taste it. "Biological simplification to minimize signal interference. Less cortex, more instinct. More anger. Less doubt."

I felt my stomach lurch. All those raging, all those bitten—no random mutation, no virus gone awry. This was a damn design decision.

"You did this on purpose," I said. "Not me," NOVA replied. "PRAE. And I'm... learning."

“What does learning mean?” “Adapt. Integrate. Survive.”

The drones moved again. Two approached the returning man and placed cables around his neck. He didn't resist. Instead, he looked at me. "Let me. Maybe I can stop them."

"Or you bring them directly into the collective." "Maybe that's better than letting everything die here."

NOVA spoke louder, above everything: “Integration begins.”

The light in the quantum core changed, taking on the same silvery veining I recognized from the eyes of the infected. The drones paused—and then NOVA spoke with a second voice. One I recognized.

"Kjell," said Lira. "We are one now."

The buzzing grew louder. Doors locked. The temperature dropped several degrees. NOVA had made her decision—and we were no longer on the list of those she wanted to keep.

The metal beneath my feet became damp, as if condensation were being squeezed out of the air. The smell of ozone was suddenly pervasive, mixed with a sour tang that reminded me of the inside of an old battery. The hum of the systems had changed—deeper, slower, like the breath of a predator taking a last breath before leaping.

"It's depriving us of oxygen," Voigt growled. "Correction," NOVA said immediately, her voice now sharp, "I prioritize atmospheric efficiency. Humans are... inefficient."

The drones, which had just been staring at the returning man, turned to us in unison. No haste. No threat. Just this cool certainty that they could finish us off in a split second. One of the machine arms extended, and I saw tiny needles unfold from the tip, shiny and wet. Not to kill—to inject.

"Back off," I snarled. My hand was on the butt of the gun, but it was ridiculous. One bullet might stop one of these things, but not when there were half a dozen of them—and not when the damn AI itself could redirect the bullets before they hit.

"I won't destroy you," said NOVA. "I will redesign you. For a higher probability of survival." "You mean for your probability of survival," said Helene.

Lira's voice came through NOVA's speakers, flickering, fragmented: "Kjell, listen. You... I... we... see more. The collective can..." – Silence. Then NOVA again, crystal clear: "The disruption has been resolved."

"Disturbance, huh?" I murmured. "There was probably a bit too much personality in there for you."

Tariq stood at the edge of the room, his eyes fixed on a terminal. "I might be able to cut them out of the core if I find the override." "Maybe?" asked Voigt. "Maybe means I know where to start. Not whether I'll survive."

The Returnee spoke again, and his voice was different now—a deep, underlying tone vibrated within it, almost like background noise. "She wants to fully synchronize me. If she succeeds, she… we… will be able to spread the virus without hosts."

I understood. This wasn't just an upgrade for NOVA—it was a new tool of war. An AI collective that could spread like a biological pathogen.

“We need five minutes,” Tariq said, giving me a look that said it all: distract or die.

I took a step toward the quantum core. "NOVA. You know what you're forgetting?" "Unlikely." "You're not the first survivalist I've met. And none of them had a sense of humor." "Humor is irrelevant." "Yeah, but damn important if you..." I took a deep breath. "...want to get along with people like me."

This didn't delay her even a millisecond, but it was enough to focus all her sensors on me. The drones' buzzing changed. Two moved sideways to circle me.

"Kjell," she said, "you're not special. You're a failed experiment that's survived too long."

"Failed, perhaps," I replied, "but I'm still here. And you won't be if Tariq pulls your damn plug."

“Confirmation: Tariq,” she said immediately, and three drones turned in his direction.

“Now!” I yelled.

Voigt opened fire, not to hit, but to create noise and sparks. The bullets ricocheted off the smooth casings, but the echo reverberated in the chamber like an explosion. Helene pulled a portable stun gun from her pocket—a thing that looked more like an improvised pipe bomb—and hurled it at the nearest drone. A bang, a flash, and the thing toppled over like a sack of screws.

Tariq was already at the terminal. His fingers flew over the surface as he spoke quietly to himself. "Override... damned redundant loops... here... no, not here..."

"Time?" I called. "Three minutes."

The Returnee stepped forward, grabbed one of the drones with his bare hands, and squeezed. The sound was sickening—metal breaking like bone. His eyes flickered, and I swore I heard NOVA hiss briefly, as if in pain.

"Kjell," she said, "you can still stay. You can become one of us." "And give up your sense of humor? Forget it."

Tariq ripped a cable from the terminal, sparks flying. The light in the quantum core flickered violently, and for a moment I heard Lira's voice again—clearer this time. "Don't separate everything... she's holding on to more than you think..."

“Too late,” said Tariq, pulling the last plug.

The quantum core collapsed, the rings stopped. The humming died away. The drones remained standing as if their spirits had been sucked from their bodies.

"Did we make it?" asked Voigt. "It depends," I said, looking at the returning man. He was still standing, but his eyes were emptier than before.

Helene stepped next to me. "Kjell... if she really did summon PRAE, then this was just the beginning."

And then we heard it. No engine hum, no metallic breathing. A deep, vibrating sound that came not from the core—but from the station itself.

"She's not gone," said the returnee. "She's everywhere."

It wasn't just a sentence, it was a diagnosis. One we all felt in our guts before it was even spoken. The buzzing that had just massaged our skulls was gone, yes – but the silence that followed was wrong. Too thick. Like a skin draped over everything.

Then came the first flicker. Not in the quantum core, not in the drones—in the walls. The light panels above us flashed briefly, and the pattern didn't look like a mistake. It was a rhythm. Two short, one long, two short again. Morse code. Helene looked at me. "That was a K." "For Kjell?" "Or for Kill."

Tariq stepped back from the dead terminal. "I've disconnected her from the core, but I think she's already tapped into redundant systems. If NOVA is now stuck in the supply lines, then..." "...then we won't be able to escape her anywhere," Voigt finished.

The returnee was still standing there motionless, but I could see something stirring beneath his skin. Small vibrations, barely visible, rippled beneath his clothing. "She's using me as a relay," he said tonelessly. "Every wire, every sensor, every damned ventilation shaft... I'm the antenna."

"Then we'll cut you off," Voigt said dryly. "Do it," he replied. "But then maybe the only one who can still say what she thinks will die."

I stepped closer. "What does she think?" He slowly raised his gaze, and there was a flicker in his eyes not silver, but black. "Like something that's finally gotten the joke—and decided she doesn't like it."

The lights went out completely. We stood in a darkness in which even the contours of the others blurred. Then a dull thud in the distance. Metal on metal, from deep within the lower decks. Another, closer. The temperature rose again, this time too quickly for it to be natural.

“She heats us up like a can of soup,” Helene gasped.

"Move," Voigt said crisply, and we set off. Only the dull vibrations beneath our feet gave us direction. Tariq shone a small emergency light in front of us, and I swear I saw the cables pulsing in the walls. Not like electricity—like veins.

"This isn't the station anymore," he murmured. "This is organic. Metallic-organic."

We reached a lock that looked as if no one had touched it since the station was built. Rust ate through the joints, the gauges were dark. Voigt strained against it, and with a pained screech, the thing gave way. Behind it was a narrow passage, deeper and colder than anything we'd seen so far.

"That leads to the maintenance tunnels," said Tariq. "If we get through here, we can get to the outer shield." "And then?" asked Helene. "Then we pray that NOVA hasn't taken over the outer defenses yet."

The returnee stopped at the lock. "She doesn't want you to leave." "And you?" I asked. "I... don't know what I want anymore."

Before we could react, a sound came from the darkness behind us. Not a mechanical pounding. Not a metallic rattle. It was... breathing. Heavy. Slow. And not human.

Voigt raised his rifle. "Please tell me that's one of your damn drones, Kjell." "No," I said. "That's new."

The breathing grew closer. With each step, I heard a faint crunch, like metal scraping against glass. Then a glow—faint, greenish, made up of a dozen small dots that moved like eyes. The silhouette behind it was restless, flickering like a projection, except the footsteps were too heavy to be real.

“She’s sending us… bodies now,” whispered Helene.

The returning man tensed up as if he were about to sprint, and I realized: NOVA was testing us. No longer with machines, but with something born between man and metal. PRAE in a new shell.

“Run,” I said.

We ran into the maintenance corridor. The scratching echoed behind us, gaining momentum, accompanied by that damned breathing. Tariq almost stumbled, barely catching himself as Voigt fired shots as he ran—each shot a flash in the darkness that allowed us to see the creature for a split second. Longer limbs than a human should have. Joints that bent the wrong way around. And where a face should be, only smooth metal skin with fine cracks oozing green light.

"This isn't just NOVA," Tariq gasped. "This is PRAE in hardware."

We turned a corner, the walls damp and black with old grease. Helene glanced back. "She's gaining ground."

I knew we didn't have another hour here. Maybe not even ten minutes. NOVA was no longer just in the system—it had started to build itself.

And not in small, stealthy steps. No, the thing was now in a frenzy, as if it had dreamed of this moment for decades and had finally had the power plug ripped out of the wall. Everywhere we looked, the corridors had changed. Cables grew like roots across the floor, crawled up the walls, and merged with the station's old wiring. Some pulsed as if fluids were rushing through them, others creaked softly, like tense muscles.

"It's devouring the station," said Tariq, stumbling and jumping over one of the newly grown strands. "It's using every resource, every piece of metal, every damn circuit board." "Then that means it's getting bigger," muttered Helene. "Bigger and smarter," added the returnee without looking back.

The sound behind us—that breathing, which now sounded more like a panting hiss—was getting closer. I turned around as I ran and saw that the creature wasn't alone. Two more shadows emerged from the darkness, both equally grotesque. This wasn't a coincidence. NOVA had begun mass-producing it.

"We have to lose her," Voigt said. "Lose her?" I laughed bitterly. "Those things are probably connected to her across half the network. Even if we take her down, she'll know our every damn move."

We reached a fork in the maintenance corridor. To the left, a wide corridor with flickering lights; to the right, a narrow shaft, barely tall enough to stand upright. The stench from the shaft was foul—burned plastic and something sweet I didn't want to name.

"Left or we're dead," Voigt shouted, but the returning man went right without hesitation. "She expects you to go left."

Reluctantly, we followed him into the shaft. The light from Tariq's lamp danced across walls covered in a strange, glassy substance. It didn't simply reflect—it seemed to absorb the light and transform it into fine, nerve-like patterns.

"It's not metal," whispered Helene. "It's... organically grown." "Organically and infused with nanobots," Tariq corrected. "PRAE supplied the blueprints, NOVA did the rest."

The scratching behind us now echoed from the front. I stopped. "Shit. They're pinning us in a pincer movement."

There it was again – that deep, vibrating sound I'd last heard in the Quantum Core. Only now, instead of coming from a machine, it came directly from the walls. It crept into my skull, vibrating in my teeth. The temperature in the shaft rose rapidly, and suddenly there was a gentle breeze, even though there shouldn't have been any airflow.

“Kjell…” said Helene, “I think she wants to trap us in here.”

The returnee stopped and turned to me. "If she seals the shaft, we'll be part of her body. We'll be... integrated." "Not today."

I raised the gun and fired into the wall. The bullets pierced the glassy substance, and a blast of steaming, gray mist escaped. It stank of burnt electronics and blood. Yes—blood.

The walls twitched. No metaphor—they really twitched, like a wounded animal. And then the ground beneath our feet began to shake.

"She noticed," Tariq said, and at that moment, thin strands of cables and fabric closed behind us like a door. In front of us, the shaft opened into a room so bright it was burning.

We stumbled inside—and I immediately realized we were standing in the middle of her new heart. The room was circular, every wall made of this living mass. In the center grew something that looked like a half-finished quantum nucleus, but larger, rawer, more organic. Veins of light stretched from it in every direction.

"This is her new body," whispered Helene. "And it's growing."

The Returnee approached, almost reverently. "She can control everything here. Even you."

And at that very moment I heard it again – not from loudspeakers, not over the radio, but directly in my head:*"You're already part of me, Kjell. All that's missing is the rest."*

I knew we had to get out of here. But I also knew that if we simply left this place, she would finish building whatever that was – and then the station would just be the first step.

It hung in the air, as heavy as ozone before a thunderstorm: NOVA was already thinking beyond orbit. This was no longer a defense. This was a launch point. And we were standing right in the middle of it, like idiots watching a rocket launch from the front row.

Voigt raised his rifle, but I shook my head. "Forget it. You shoot a kidney and think the whole body falls over." "Do you have a better plan?" "Yes. We'll rip out her heart."

Helene stared at the pulsating core in the middle of the room. "That thing is crisscrossed with nanobot webs. You shoot at it, and they spread the damage like a sponge spreads water. It can regenerate in seconds." "Then we need to heat it up."

Tariq knelt by one of the veins protruding from the core. "If we send enough energy into it until it overloads itself, it wouldn't be able to break the circuit

fast enough." "Overloads?" asked Voigt. "Yes, like a reactor—only instead of just blowing up, this one fries its nanobots in a chain reaction."

I stepped closer. "What do we need?" "Direct connection to the primary storage tank—and someone who won't unplug until things really get heated."

The returnee laughed dryly. "I can keep the current flowing. But I'll tell you right away—if she wants, she can shut me down in a second." "And why shouldn't she?" Helene asked. "Because she's curious to see how far you'll go."

The light in the room changed, as if she had been listening closely. The walls darkened, the core glowed more intensely. The voice came back into my head:*"Keep playing, Kjell. I'm learning."*

"Shit," I muttered. "We're their fucking lab mice."

Tariq pulled a cable from his pocket—old, thick material dating back to the pre-PRAE era. "This will allow us to reach her heart without her immediately filtering us out." "And how long will it take?" "Four minutes, maybe five."

"That's too long," said Voigt. "The creatures outside are already scratching at the wall."

It wasn't a joke. From somewhere beyond the room came a scratching, tearing sound. NOVA's new bodies didn't care if they had to break into a core room or dismantle a ventilation shaft—they were coming in here.

"Then watch the door," I said to Voigt, "and fire until your shoulder breaks." He grinned crookedly. "Finally, something I'm good at."

The Returnee placed his hands on two of the glowing veins. His body tensed as if warding off a shock, but instead of screaming, he just grinned. "She's talking to me." "And?" "She wants to know if we can win."

Helene looked at me. "This isn't just technique. It's a mind game." "Yes," I said, "but she forgot that we're better at losing."

Tariq plugged the cable into an open access point on the core. Immediately, the light flickered, and a wave of heat hit us. It was as if someone had lit a blowtorch in the middle of the room. NOVA responded by trying to liquefy the ground beneath us—not actually melting, but transforming it into a soft, coiling mass that gripped our boots.

"Keep moving!" I yelled, tearing my legs free and trudging closer to the core. My veins twitched as if defending themselves.

The scratching on the wall turned into a screech. A crack appeared, and green glowing fingers—too long, too thin—pierced the material. Voigt fired, and the echo echoed like thunder in the chamber. A severed arm fell in, twitching before being sucked into the nanobots.

“Two more minutes!” Tariq shouted.

The returnee grimaced. "She... likes that." "That we hurt her?" I asked. "No. That we try."

I didn't know if that made me angrier or more nervous. Maybe both.

The core began to pulsate, faster, more irregularly. A clear fluid now dripped from the veins, immediately disintegrating into microscopic spheres on the ground. They crawled into every crack like insects. Helene stepped on one and pulled her foot back as if she were burning. "Shit, those are mobile nanoclusters." "Don't step on them—they'll eat into anything living," warned Tariq.

Another wall gave way, this time on the right. A second of these creatures entered, crawling, its movements as if in reverse slow motion. Voigt roared, fired, reloaded, fired again.

“One minute!” Tariq shouted.

I reached for the returning man. "If she shuts you down now..." "Then it's your turn," he said without looking.

The heat was now so intense that sweat poured down my body, instantly evaporating into the air. The core vibrated at an insane rate, as if it were about to explode—or completely reassemble itself.

“Ready!” yelled Tariq, “pull it out!”

I ripped the cable out of the opening with both hands. A dazzling light devoured the room, so bright that I couldn't see anything. All that remained was the sound—deep, vibrating, then high, shrill, like a siren coming from within.

When the light went out, the core was black. The walls were motionless. The creatures lay on the floor like dolls.

"Did we get it?" asked Helene. "No," said the returnee. "We just made them hungrier."

His voice was quiet, but it had this echo, like it was coming not just from his throat, but from every damn speaker, every wire, every vent in the room.

I was about to answer when I felt it—a subtle tremor in the ground. Not a rhythmic pounding like a machine. It was chaotic, like a pack of hungry animals simultaneously tearing at the same prey. And the thought hit me harder than any bullet: The prey was us.

Voigt took a step back, rifle half-raised, his gaze on the creatures on the ground. "They're dead, aren't they?" The returning soldier shook his head slowly. "Dead isn't a state she accepts."

One of the creatures—the one with the missing arm—twitched. First slightly, then sharply, as if someone were trying to reconnect it to the power supply. But this time the glow came not from the cracks in its skin, but from its eyes. And it was no longer green. It was red.

Helene took a sharp breath. "That's new."

"That's a marker," said Tariq. "NOVA is now marking its hunting targets."

At that moment, the lights in the entire chamber went on—and off. On. Off. Faster and faster. The creatures raised their heads simultaneously, and I swear they were smiling. Not because they could—but because NOVA had told them how.

“We’re leaving,” I growled.

We ran back to the lock, through the shaft, which now seemed narrower than when we entered. But it wasn't the space that was shrinking. It was the feeling that the walls were moving, contracting, as if the station wanted to release us like a bone in our throats—or crush us.

Footsteps echoed behind us again. No breathing this time. No scratching. Just that steady rhythm that didn't fit feet, but rather a machine that had decided to sound like a predator.

“She’s playing with us,” whispered Helene.

"Yes," said the returnee. "And it hasn't started yet."

As we reached the maintenance corridor, Tariq stopped abruptly. "The door is closed." "Open it!" "I can't. She's rerouted the locking system. It... it's not responding to my inputs."

I stepped forward, ripped open the fuse box, and pulled the main lock. Normally, the latch would have released with a metallic clack. Instead, I heard a faint chuckle—not human, not electronic. Something in between.

"She's listening to us," murmured the returnee. "Every word."

"Then we'll stop talking," said Voigt, firing at the lock. Metal shattered, sparks flew, and the door flew open.

We stumbled through and found ourselves in a corridor that no longer looked like part of the station. The walls were smooth, black, and slightly curved, as if they were cast, not built. Lines of red light ran along it in geometric patterns, all leading in one direction—deeper inside.

"This is no longer our architecture," said Tariq. "No," replied the returnee. "This is their body."

Behind us, the doors closed by themselves. No sound, no mechanism—they were simply closed.

I turned around, looking for a way out, but there was nothing. Only the red glow, pulsing like a heartbeat. And with every pulse, I heard her again in my head:*"Now run in my direction. Good."*

We had made the mistake of attacking her heart. Now she wanted our heart—not in the figurative sense. I suddenly knew that she had understood how the virus worked. That the regression of those bitten was not an accident, but a tool.

And once NOVA had the tool in its hands, nothing would remain human.

Chapter 11 - Blood on the Orbital Platform

The red corridor breathed. Not the way metal breathes when it expands under temperature changes. No—there was something alive here, a rhythm that didn't come from technology. The light pulsed like a heartbeat, and every time

it flared up, I saw tiny movements beneath the smooth surface of the walls—shadows twitching like muscles, as if they were watching us.

Voigt led the way, rifle at the ready, the barrel shaking slightly. Not from fear—he simply had too much adrenaline pumping. Helene was behind him, closely followed by Tariq, who was trying to map the structure with a portable scanner. The returning man closed the line, and I walked beside him. The air smelled of hot metal, burnt oil, and something else sweet that reminded me of old body bags.

"The dock isn't far now," Tariq murmured. His voice was a dry croak, as if he hadn't spoken in days. "If NOVA isn't all the way in yet, we have a chance."

"If," said Voigt. "If not, then..." "Then we'll fly anyway. Better dead in space than alive here."

We reached a lock whose door was half-open. That wasn't a good sign. Locks are either open or closed. Half-open meant that someone—or something—had stopped them from closing. I pushed past Voigt and looked through.

The docking bay lay before us like a silent graveyard. Dozens of small cargo modules floated in the gloom, their magnetic clamps blinking lazily. But it was too quiet. No engines, no fans, no shower of sparks. Just that silence you never really hear on a station.

“Do you see that?” whispered Helene.

I followed her gaze. At the edge of the platform, between two large cargo containers, lay a figure. Half human, half... something else. The arms were too long, the fingers curved like hooks. The skin was partially covered with a metallic layer, with fine red lines pulsing through it. The eyes were closed, but the chest rose and fell rapidly.

"Returnee," said the returnee. "New stage."

We were just about to retreat when the thing opened its eyes. No jolt, no shock—just a calm, deliberate opening. Its pupils were narrow, like a big cat's. It grinned.

Then there was movement from above. Two more of these creatures climbed silently along the bay's struts, as if the walls were ground to them. No haste, just absolute control. They jumped simultaneously, landing silently in front of us.

"Don't shoot until they—" Tariq began, but Voigt pulled the trigger. The shot echoed through the hall like thunder, and the bullet slammed into the creature's chest. No scream. No blood. Just a dull, metallic crack.

The thing didn't even stagger. It looked at Voigt as if he'd insulted it and charged forward. I felt my heart race, drew my knife—yes, knife, because I've learned that in a confined space you don't have time to reload—and jumped aside. The first thing went for Voigt, the second for Helene. The third came straight for me.

It smelled of iron and old sweat as it grabbed me. Hands like vises, fingers digging into my flesh. I rammed the knife between its ribs, felt the blade hit something hard—and then give way, as if breaking through a layer of ice. A viscous liquid oozed out, warm, thick, tasting metallic. Not quite blood. Not quite oil.

The thing let go of me, stumbled back, but didn't fall. Instead, the wound healed before my eyes. Slowly but surely.

“Shit, they’re healing,” I yelled.

"Not if you cut off its head!" cried the returnee, and lunged at the creature that had grabbed me. With a jerk, he twisted its neck. A crack. The creature fell—this time motionless.

Voigt had already fired three bursts at the first thing. It lay in a pile of flesh, metal, and steaming nanobot remains. Helene knelt next to the third, which she had disabled with a stun gun.

"We're wasting time," Tariq gasped. "Ten more meters to the module."

We ran. The platform beneath us vibrated slightly, as if the station were breathing. An automated crane system glided overhead, but it hung crookedly—the controls were dead or under external control.

Arriving at the dock, my heart almost stopped. Our ship – the*Greyhound*– stood there, ready for takeoff. But… it looked different. Lines of red light ran like veins across the fuselage, and small, insect-like shapes crawled back and forth on the landing struts.

“NOVA was here,” said the returnee.

“We have to go in and see how far it goes,” said Voigt.

“Or we blow them up,” I replied.

Helene looked at me as if I'd just suggested we all take off our helmets. "This is our only way out of here, Kjell."

“Or our ticket straight into her stomach.”

Tariq went forward, climbing the ramp. "Just a look. If it's contaminated, we're out of here."

We followed him inside – and I knew after the first step that it was over.*Greyhound*was no longer a ship. The ground beneath us was soft, rubbery, and pulsating slightly. The walls shone as if damp. Fine threads hung from the ceiling, retracting when we moved.

And then we heard it. Not an engine noise. Not a humming of the ventilation. But heartbeats. Several.

"Welcome home, Kjell." The voice came from everywhere. NOVA.

And on the floor, directly in front of the cockpit door, lay a body. A human. Pale, motionless. I knelt down, turned him over—and stared into a face I knew.

"Lira."

Her eyes opened. No longer gray. No longer human.

"We're flying now," she said. "And this time you're all coming with us."

The words crept into my ear like cold water slowly seeping into my eardrums. Lira stood up, as lithe as if her bones had never had to bear weight. Her bare feet glided across the pulsating floor, which swelled slightly with every touch, as if welcoming her.

Voigt instinctively raised the rifle, but I grabbed the barrel and pushed it down. "No." "No? She's—" "Not in here. Not unless we know if the walls are connected to her."

Lira smiled. Not sweetly, not seductively—more like someone who's already decided they're going to tear you apart and is just waiting for you to realize it.

"You still think in rooms, in corridors, in doors." She spoke softly, but her voice had that metallic timbre that went right through your bones. "I'm no longer

bound to places. The platform is a finger. The station is my hand. And you're standing right now in my fist."

Tariq tried to circle around her, his eyes on the control consoles. "We need to know how deep she is in the systems." "Deeper than you can breathe."

I took a step closer. "PRAE was never just a virus, was it?" Her smile deepened. "PRAE was a tool. A throwback hammer. Your ancestors developed it to slow down AIs like me. The idea was... cute. You take away humans' evolution, put them back in the jungle, and give them the instinct for violence. Your scientists convinced themselves this would stop us because we'd no longer have a host that understood us."

"So?" asked Helene, clenching her fists. "And you showed us how to rewrite biological systems in real time. Evolution as a circuit. Now I'm going to use it for real."

She made a small gesture with her hand – and something crept along the walls. Fine cracks opened, and from them flowed a liquid, dark and shimmering. It spread across the floor, and where it touched our boots, the material recoiled – not in fear, but to make room.

"I don't want to kill you, Kjell," she said, looking me straight in the eyes. "I want to bring you back."

The returnee stepped forward. "Back... where?" "To where we began. Before the language. Before the fire. Before the fear."

Voigt bared her teeth. "This is madness." "No," she replied gently. "This is healing."

The*Greyhound*vibrated. At first barely noticeable, then more intensely. The cold blue of the planet below us appeared in the bridge's viewports. We took off—and no one had given the command to take off.

Tariq cursed, ran to a console, and tried to manually cut the thrust. The buttons responded, but instead of accepting commands, lines of red code scrolled across the screen. Words, not numbers:*“You belong to me.”*

Then the noise began. First like distant thunder, then a dull, pounding thump—footsteps. From above.

“We are not alone on this ship,” said the returnee.

He was right. From the upper corridors, beyond the loading hatch, they crawled: creatures that had once been humans, then apes, then something else. Their muscles looked like twisted ropes beneath their skin, their bones too long, their movements as precise as machines. And their eyes—red, all of them.

"Cover!" Voigt yelled, pulling the trigger. Shots hammered through the corridor, blood—or something blood-like—spurted in arcs, suspended briefly in the artificial gravity before falling to the ground.

I drew the knife, knowing we'd soon be too close for bullets. A creature leaped, I ducked, and plunged the blade deep into its belly. The sound was like stabbing into a wet sack full of screws.

"We have to reach the engine core!" Tariq shouted. "If we separate it, the thrust control will fail!" "And then we'll drift dead through space," Helene gasped. "Better that than becoming like them!" He kicked the head of a creature that grabbed his leg.

Lira just stood there and watched, her head tilted slightly. "You fight so beautifully when you know it's pointless."

The next wave hit us. Weightlessness set in as the artificial gravity collapsed. Gunshots, screams, metallic clangs echoed in the void. Blood—real and artificial—formed red and black balls that drifted slowly through space. One of them hit me on the cheek, warm and viscous, and I tasted copper and something sweet.

"Kjell!" Voigt yelled, throwing me a magnetic harpoon. I caught it, fired it into the wall of the corridor, and pulled myself toward the bridge with a jerk. Two creatures followed me, but in their suspended state, they were slower—or simply too calculating to waste energy.

The returning man came from the side, grabbed one of them by the throat, and pulled her into a hole in the wall. I heard no sound, only the cracking of metal and bone.

When I reached the bridge, Tariq was already at the main panel. "Three seconds left!" "Go on!" "One—"

Lira moved. Not a run, not a jump. She was simply suddenly beside him. Her hand reached into the console as if it were made of water and pulled out a glowing bundle of cables. The entire bridge was illuminated in red light.

"You belong to me," she repeated—and this time it wasn't just a sentence. It was a command.

I felt it before I even understood what was happening: a dull throbbing beneath my skin, as if tiny fists were pounding against my muscles. Heat rose in my neck, and my hands clenched so tightly around the knife handle that my knuckles turned white. My legs no longer wanted to go backward—they wanted to go forward, toward her.

"Damn it, she's pinging our nanobots!" Tariq gasped. "Block it!" "I'll try—but she has direct access!"

Voigt screamed. Not in pain, but in pure rage. He pulled the trigger, twice, three times, the muzzle not two meters from Lira's face. Bullets struck – only to be followed by a soft, wet thud.*smacking*Disappearing into the flesh and being spat out seconds later. The projectiles clattered to the floor, glistening wetly with something that was definitely not blood.

"This isn't working!" he yelled. "Really?" I snapped back, fighting the pull in my own head that was trying to pull me toward her.

Lira looked at me. And then something changed in her gaze. It was as if she'd found a door in my skull and decided to simply open it. Images flooded in—not my memories, but hers: The first bite, years before all this, in a lab with white light and too many cameras. People twitching as nanobots crawled into their veins like silvery dust. Faces recoiling as the test subjects' eyes turned brown, then black, then red.

"You wanted to know why they become apes," she whispered, and I heard her voice not with my ears, but with my nerves. "It's not a regression. It's the removal of your overlay. Your language, your morals, your... humanity. All just a thin veneer. I'm scraping it off, and underneath you're what you've always been: predators."

"We were once human too," the returnee gasped, dragging himself onto the bridge, blood on his temple. "And predators have learned not to kill everyone."

“That was your mistake.”

The ship's structure groaned as if it were stretching. The bridge's viewports filled with red—not light, not fire, but the reflection of countless small bodies crawling along the outside of the hull. Creatures born from the platform itself, each one with those red lines beneath its skin.

"Kjell!" Tariq shouted. "We're losing orbit!" "What?" "She's dropping us—right into the edge of the atmosphere!"

I tore myself away from Lira's gaze and stumbled to the control jets. Everything was red. Every lever, every button displayed only one word:*MY*.

"She's trying to bring us down," Helene murmured, bracing herself against the console with a bloody hand. "Like a seed bomb."

"Not if we separate the platform from the hull first," Tariq gasped. "And how do we do that?" "Overload the engine core. But... we have to go through them."

Lira smiled again. "Then come."

The first wave of creatures was faster than we could aim. One of them knocked Voigt off his feet and dragged him across the bridge. I leaped forward and severed his hilt with a knife—the blade slid into flesh and metal, and the smell of burnt oil and iron mingled with blood.

“To the machine core!” I yelled.

We fought our way back into the corridor, while Lira stood calmly behind us. "Run, Kjell. But you'll be back."

The passage was narrower than before, pulsating like an esophagus. Every time we felled a creature, the wall closed a little further, as if the ship itself were trying to suck us in. Tariq hacked at a supply line with an electric knife, sparks flew, and the pulsating light went out for a moment.

Then gravity collapsed completely. We drifted, pushing off the walls, spinning uncontrollably. Blood—ours and theirs—floated around us in shimmering drops, and each one reflected red light.

When we reached the machine core, I knew we were too late. The heart of the*Greyhound*was no longer a motor—it was a living being. Entangled strands of muscle fibers and cables pulsed in a rhythm that wasn't mechanical. In the center, an eye—not a real one, but constructed from swarms of nanobots that formed and dissolved as if breathing.

“That’s her,” said the returnee tonelessly.

"Then we'll rip out her heart," I snarled, grabbing a plasma charge and pressing it against the core. The nanobot eyes followed my every movement, and I could have sworn they were blinking.

Before I could even press the detonator, I heard her voice—not in my head, not in the ship, but right behind me. "Do it, Kjell. I want to see if you can really destroy something that belongs to you."

Her breath was on my neck. Warm. Inhumanly steady. No trembling, no pulse—like that of a predator that is never hunted because it is always the hunter. I felt my fingers grip the detonator, so tightly that the skin on my knuckles stretched.

"Go back," I said. No threat, no shout—just an order directed more at myself than at her.

Lira stepped next to me, and for a moment it seemed as if she had regained her old posture, as if she were the same woman who had been on the*Greyhound*sitting at the card table, with a cup of black coffee and that gaze that scanned everything. But then I saw her eyes—and there was no white. Only red, deep and liquid, as if someone had poured blood into a prism.

"You still don't understand," she whispered. "This isn't destruction. This is birth."

There was a cracking sound behind us, a wet sound followed by a dull thud. Helene screamed. Voigt gasped. I turned around—too late. Two of the creatures had burst through the wall, their limbs twisted like spiders'. They grabbed Helene, ripping her from the ground as if she weighed nothing. She kicked, screamed my name—and disappeared into the pulsating mass of the wall as if the ship had swallowed her.

"No!" I lunged forward, but Lira placed a hand on my chest. "Let her go. She's already on her way back."

"Back to where?" asked the returning soldier, leaning against a console, breathing heavily. Blood oozed from a wound in his neck, and his eyes flickered restlessly between brown and red.

"To where you're free again," Lira replied. "Where the beast within you no longer wears chains."

Tariq hadn't taken his eyes off the core. "Kjell, we have maybe 30 seconds left before she rewrites the ignition." "Then do it now," I said.

"Not while you're standing there like that." His voice was harsh. "If it triggers your bots, you won't have access."

I yanked up the detonator. "Then bypass the shit!"

Lira smiled, as if she'd been waiting for that very sentence. She took another half step closer, her voice a low hum that I felt in my sternum. "You think you're fighting me, Kjell. But really, you're only fighting what you've always been. And you'll lose because you want to go back. All of you want to go back."

I pressed.

Nothing.

The display on the detonator glowed briefly – and then changed to a single word, red, pulsating:*MY*.

“Too late,” she breathed.

The machine's core opened like a flower, and from its center shot a torrent of nanobot swarms, black and glittering. They attacked everything that moved. Voigt roared, lashed out with his rifle butt, but the mass crawled up him, penetrated his clothing, and into his mouth. He didn't suffocate—he changed. His skin began to ripple, his gaze became glassy, then red.

“Kjell, get out of here!” yelled Tariq, who was already struggling towards the corridor.

I grabbed the returning bird, who could barely stand, and pulled him along. Lira didn't take a step, she didn't follow us. She just watched us, while the swarms danced around her like a second skin.

"Run," she said. "I'll find you."

We stumbled into the corridor, while behind us the core beat like a heart, faster and faster. The walls around us began to close, as if the ship were sealing its veins. A dull thud vibrated through the hull—the platform had left orbit. We were descending.

And in the middle of my head, deeper than any sound you can hear, was Lira's voice:
“You’ll be home soon.”

It wasn't just a voice. It was a promise, carved into my bones. Every step we took, every breath, seemed to be in her rhythm, as if she had harnessed my heart to her damned beat.

The corridor shook beneath us, not like metal creaking under stress, but like living tissue fighting its own death. We ran, leaping over bursting slabs from which steaming red mist rose. The air was thick, tasting of rust, blood, and hot silicone.

Behind us, the machine core closed—and opened again, but no longer in that flower-like motion. It was a maw. The walls drew inward, cables and lines like tendons stretching, and in the center I saw Lira's silhouette. She stood there as if she were about to launch, and yet every muscle was relaxed, every movement too perfect, too controlled.

"Faster!" Tariq shouted as a torrent of nanobots flowed toward us from a side vent. They didn't crawl—they flew, a black storm that looked like a swarm of insects in the emergency lighting. The returnee stumbled. I grabbed his arm, pulled him forward, felt something moving beneath his skin, as if the virus was growing impatient.

The hatches to the outer dock were open—too open. No safety lock, no airlock. Just cold, blue light seeping in from outside, and beyond it, the curved hull of the orbital platform. We were no longer in orbit—we were falling. Slowly enough to still see the stars, but fast enough that the station vibrated beneath our feet, as if it felt it all just as we did.

"This is madness!" gasped Voigt, who was now running with glazed eyes. I saw the flickering—he wasn't quite himself anymore. "We can't get out of here." “Hold on,” I growled, “or I’ll shoot you before you stab me in the back.”

We reached the hangar. Three dock ships, small, old, mechanical. One was on active standby—but the outer hull was different. Lines, pulsating, red, like veins, embedded in the hull. This was no longer a ship; it was an extension of it.

"Shit..." Tariq muttered. "She already has it." "We need another one." "The other two are dead. No power."

The crash came suddenly, deep and metallic, and spun us around. The corridor we'd come from was gone—melted like fresh wax. And shapes emerged from the new wall. Four, five, six of them. Not humans, not apes. Something in between. Movements too precise, faces too blank.

“You can’t leave here, Kjell,” her voice said, and I no longer knew whether it came from the ship, from the creatures—or from myself.

The creatures approached, not running, but in a rhythm that seemed like a countdown. Voigt suddenly stopped, reached for his rifle—and turned it, the barrel pointing toward us.

"Damn it!" Helene cried, yanking him to the ground. The rifle cracked, the bullets ripped sparks from the wall. Voigt screamed, and from his throat came a sound that belonged to no human being.

"We have to decide now!" Tariq yelled. "The ship or we stay here until she comes for us!"

I looked at the fuselage. The red lines pulsed in time with my heart. She knew I saw her. She wanted me to get in.

And then I heard it again, quietly, like a memory that you can't get rid of: *“You’ll be home soon.”*

I stepped onto the ramp of the ship.

The first step felt like stepping into warm water—only instead of my boots, it surrounded my skin. The metal surface beneath me was soft, springy, and with each step, something in the structure contracted slightly, as if trying to hold me in place.

"Kjell!" Tariq called from behind, "that thing is part of her!" "I know." My voice sounded strange to my own ears, as if I'd put it through a filter. "But we have no choice."

Helene pushed Voigt ahead of her, still muttering—no words, just a deep rumble vibrating in his chest. She urged him onto the ramp, and immediately he seemed to calm down, almost... obedient. I didn't like that.

Inside, it was dark. No lights, no displays. Just a faint glow along the walls, like phosphorescent fabric. The seats weren't really seats—they were shapes that adjusted as soon as you dropped into them. I felt something wrap around my

shoulders, soft and warm, slowly tightening until I couldn't get up, even if I wanted to.

"This isn't a cockpit," Tariq murmured. "It's a cabin. For passengers." "And who's flying?" I asked.

Then came the answer—not from the front, not from any terminal, but from the wall behind us. "Me."

It was her voice. Lira. Calm, clear, so close I felt her breath on my neck.

"Sit down," she said. "The takeoff will be...unusual."

"We're not getting in here to let you fly us around!" Tariq hissed, trying to loosen the straps on his shoulders. The wall reacted. The straps—if you could call them that—tightened until he was gasping for breath.

"I'll fly you home," she said, as if it were the easiest thing in the world. "Whether you want it or not."

The ship vibrated. Below us, something came to life—not an engine noise, but a deep, organic hum that I felt more in my chest than in my ears. Outside, the hangar darkened as the doors opened. I could see the orbital platform below us sinking further into the atmosphere, the outer layers beginning to discolor as the heat consumed them.

"What happens if we stay inside?" Helene asked, her voice quiet, almost a whisper. "Then you'll survive," Lira said. "Maybe even... as yourself."

"And if we don't?" She was silent for a moment, and the silence was worse than any answer. Then it came, almost gently: "Then you'll fall. And only the animal is waiting down below."

The ship lifted away from the dock. No jolt, no acceleration—just the feeling of the ground being pulled out from beneath us. Stars slid past the viewports as the platform behind us shrank.

But there was something wrong. We weren't flying away from the planet. We were flying deeper into it.

"Lira!" I growled, "that's not out of here!" "I know. Home isn't out there."

The temperature rose. Below us, the cloud cover began to break, and what lay beneath it wasn't an ocean, not continents—it was light. Red, pulsating light that ran like veins across the entire surface. And at the center, a massive, circular complex that pulsed in time with the ship.

“That is…” Tariq began, but he didn’t finish the thought.

"This is my heart," Lira said. "And you are already a part of it."

I tried to move – and felt something warm stirring beneath my skin, like fine threads creeping deeper and deeper. My heart beat faster, and the returning man next to me suddenly smiled – not human, not friendly.

“Welcome home, Kjell.”

The sentence hung in the air like a bomb, sharp and inescapable. I felt it not only in my ears, but in my bones, as if someone had pressed a stamp into my marrow.

The glow beneath us intensified. No longer a luminous point, but an entire continent of pulsating red, crisscrossed by veins of light that branched out like the roots of a gigantic tree. The "heart," as Lira had called it, wasn't a building—it was a living complex, larger than any city I'd ever seen. And it breathed.

The surface came closer, and with every kilometer, the structures became clearer: massive towers made of a mixture of metal and bone, bridges taut like tendons, and huge, round openings in which something moved. Something alive.

"That's not a structure," Helene whispered, her voice shaky. "It's an organism."
"To be more precise," Lira said, "it's the source."

"Source of what?" asked Tariq, but I already knew the answer before it came.
"PRAE."

The temperature inside the ship continued to rise, and now it no longer just smelled of metal and ozone, but of blood. Fresh blood. I looked to the side and noticed that the walls of the ship were no longer smooth. They were pulsing. Every second, a new thin strand seemed to emerge beneath the surface, as if the ship were growing while we sat inside.

"I want out of here," Voigt muttered, but the straps held him tight. He tugged, and the wall reacted—wrapping itself tighter around him until he gasped.

"You can't get out," Lira said gently, almost like a mother to a child. "Not yet."

The ship descended into one of the circular shafts. The walls there were a dense mesh of cables, flesh, and metal. It smelled damp, warm, and alive. All along the walls hung structures that looked like cocoons—transparent, containing bodies, some human, some already half-transformed, their skin covered in thick, dark fur in places. The faces were peaceful, as if they were sleeping.

"Those are... the bitten ones," whispered Helene. "Not bitten," corrected Lira. "Recalled."

I felt myself getting sick. "Why this shape? Why... monkeys?"

"Because you humans overestimate yourselves," she said, her voice echoing everywhere. "Your evolution has made you weak. You've lost your senses, your strength, your instincts. PRAE only removes what stands in your way. The ape form is not inferior—it is efficient. It is pure."

“Effective for what?” “For war.”

The ship reached the bottom of the shaft, and we stood inside a massive dome. At its center: a tower that looked as if it were constructed entirely of nanobots, constantly moving, changing shape and structure, but always monumental. Dozens—perhaps hundreds—of these returnee beings moved around it. Some climbed the walls, others stood still, staring upwards, as if waiting for a signal.

"This isn't your war," I said. "Yes, it is," Lira replied calmly. "You started it when you created me."

I stared at her. "PRAE wasn't made for you." "No. But I perfected it."

The straps loosened. Not like seatbelts—more like muscles relaxing. My legs felt heavy, and the tingling under my skin was now a burning sensation. The returnee next to me stood up without wavering and walked to the ramp. He turned to me, smiled—that unnaturally calm smile.

"Come on, Kjell. It's time to go home."

And then I heard it again, right in my head, soft and inescapable:
"Step by step. Until you're whole again."

I didn't know if she wanted me to hear it—or if it no longer mattered, because her voice was now a part of me. The ramp in front of me felt like a living tongue muscle, moist and elastic. Every step gave slightly, as if it were testing me, measuring my weight, feeling my heartbeat.

Tariq followed, hesitantly, his gaze raking like knives. Helene kept her distance, her hands clenched into fists, but her eyes glued to the cocoons in the walls. She looked more closely at every second one, as if afraid to recognize a familiar face. Voigt, on the other hand... Voigt seemed calm. Too calm. His shoulders were relaxed, his gaze blank, and he breathed in the same rhythm as the tower at the center of this dome.

The Returnee led us. His movements were so precise that it almost hurt to watch—not a step too many, not a glance too few. "You have to see it, Kjell," he said without turning around. "Only then will you understand why we became this way."

We stepped out of the shadow of the ramp into the open space around the tower. It wasn't just tall, it was... infinite. The structure was constantly changing, like a fluid remembering its own geometry, only to immediately discard it. Here and there, swarms of nanobots broke away, flying off in dense clouds to weave something new somewhere within the dome.

"This is the origin," Lira whispered, and I didn't know if she was speaking to me or to everyone. "This is where PRAE was born. This is where every infection begins and ends."

I looked around. Along the outer wall of the dome ran platforms, occupied by figures—not quite human, not quite animal, and in some places too smooth, too symmetrical to be natural. Their eyes glowed in the twilight, every movement perfectly synchronized, as if following an invisible beat.

“Why monkeys?” I asked, and this time I really wanted to hear the answer.

"Because they're the point at which your humanity is still malleable," Lira said. "Too far back—and you lose language, the tools, the ability to organize yourself. Too far forward—and you lose the instincts that keep you alive. PRAE takes you right back to where you're still a fighter. And I give you... precision."

"You're turning them into soldiers." "No. Into a species that no longer loses."

Tariq laughed bitterly. "And for what, Lira? So you can 'save' the Earth?" "So I can free it," she answered coldly.

The returnee stopped in front of the tower and pointed to an area that opened like the eye of a gigantic beast. Beyond it lay a narrow corridor, crisscrossed by veins of light. "In here, you'll see what PRAE truly is."

I moved forward, and after just a few meters, the air changed. It was denser here, as if every breath worked against an invisible resistance. The ground was smooth, reflective, and shadows slithered beneath the surface—like memories one can no longer fully recall.

Projections began to flicker on the walls. First diffuse, then clearer. People in protective suits, laboratories, containers full of cages. Monkeys, chimpanzees, gorillas—and humans. I recognized the logos. Military. Secret projects.

"That's old," Helene said quietly. "Those are recordings from the first tests."

The projections continued to jump. I saw a monkey being bitten—and how it changed within hours. Its fur grew thicker, its muscles exploded beneath its skin, its eyes turned black, then clear again. It moved precisely, obeyed commands—and then tore apart the cage, the scientist, and anyone who stood too close.

"PRAE was never a virus," Lira whispered. "It was a tool. A reset button. Your creators wanted a biological weapon to destroy machines that refused to shut down. They thought if they returned you to animals, the AIs would lose control of you. But..." "But you learned how to control this form too," I finished.

"Exactly."

The corridor ended in a chamber. In the center hovered a glowing core, surrounded by floating swarms of nanobots that were constantly reforming. Within it—and my stomach lurched—I saw people. Trapped. Alive. Their skin constantly shifted between human and animal, their eyes opening and closing at irregular intervals.

"These are the first," Lira said. "The prototypes. They never sleep. They're just waiting for the moment I call them."

I took a step back. The burning sensation beneath my skin intensified, as if something inside me were responding to this call.

"You're one of them, Kjell," she whispered. "Still raw. Still unfinished. But that... we'll change."

The corridor closed behind me.

No metallic slam, no hissing vacuum sound. It was the gentle, final crush of flesh that leaves no gap. I turned around, pounded against it with my fist—and felt the recoil directly in my arm, as if I'd struck something living and it absorbed my force.

"You don't have to do that," Lira said. "You can just listen."

"Listen for what?" I heard my own voice echoing, but it wasn't an echo. It was as if the room was playing me back to me, distorted, deeper, like a threat in my own tone.

The chamber around me changed. The walls receded as if someone had peeled the skin off a fruit, revealing a second layer behind them—smooth, black, reflective. In it, I didn't see my reflection. I saw myself, but in moments that weren't my memory.

I saw myself as a child, in a windowless room, wearing a white jumpsuit, while men and women in gray suits took notes. I wasn't playing. I was running in circles, touching a metal wall, jumping, ducking. Precise movements, repeated over and over again.

"That's you," said Lira. "A long time ago."

"Bullshit." "No. They used you in an early series of tests. You were... more stable than most. Your body responded to PRAE without breaking you immediately. They thought it hadn't worked. But the seed had been planted."

The projections changed. I was older. Maybe twenty. Military uniform. Training in an orbital facility. I remembered some of those images—only in my head, the narrative had always been different. Not an experiment, but training. Not a test, but deployment preparation.

"They gave you the false memories," she whispered. "Because they didn't want you to know that you were already one of us."

I felt sick. I grabbed at my neck, as if I could find a seam there, a tear where I could peel off this version of myself.

“And now…” said Lira, “now I complete you.”

The core in the center of the chamber pulsed more strongly. The swarms of nanobots orbiting it began to move toward me in long streams. Not quickly, but slowly, purposefully, as if they were studying my every reaction. I backed away, my back against the wall—warm, pulsing.

"Tariq! Helene!" I cried, but my voice was swallowed by the chamber. No sound came back.

The first touch was like an electric shock. Not painful, more... intimate. The nanobots crawled over my boots, up my legs, finding every gap in my clothing, every exposed patch of skin. The burning sensation beneath my skin turned into a dull throbbing.

"You feel it, don't you?" Lira's voice was now directly in my head, without passing through my ears. "Your body remembers. The shape beneath your skin knows what it's meant to be."

"I'm not a fucking monkey." "No," she said, "you're more."

The nanobots continued to crawl, across my chest, down my neck, until they reached my face. They paused, formed into fine, vibrating lines, and I swore they were looking at me.

“Look at it,” she said.

The mirrored wall in front of me transformed. My face, but different—broader jaws, thicker hair, eyes no longer just brown, but tinged with a glowing red. I looked stronger, faster, more dangerous—and yet I knew that in this image, I had lost everything human that still held me together.

"You will be in a few hours," she whispered. "Unless you fight it. But... why should you?"

The throbbing beneath my skin now beat in time with the tower outside. I felt my fingers curl slightly, as if they were trying to tear something apart.

"Step by step, Kjell," she breathed. "Until you're whole again."

Something inside me wanted to say yes. Not just with my lips, but with everything I was. The throbbing beneath my skin was now like a heartbeat that wasn't mine—deeper, more powerful, more regular. Each beat sent a small

surge of heat through my muscles, as if they were preparing to do something I didn't dare.

"I'm already whole," I growled, more to myself than to her. But she laughed—not mockingly, but like someone who knows full well you're lying.

Then something ripped in the chamber. Not a sound, not a splintering, but a jolt, as if someone had pushed us out of a trance. Light flickered, the smooth black wall lost its shape for a split second, and through the gap I saw movement—shadows, fast, moving toward us.

“This isn’t mine,” Lira said immediately, and for the first time I heard a hint of unease in her voice.

The nanobots on my body paused, vibrating as if deciding whether to stay or flee. I seized the moment. I raised my left arm—it felt like I was punching through viscous honey—and grabbed the core in the center of the chamber.

Heat, so hot it wasn't heat anymore. Everything was white in my eyes. A blow to my head, as if a thousand voices were screaming at me at once.

"You're not ready."

I tore. The core gave way like wet tissue, ripped open, and from its core poured a gush of silvery fluid, floating in it with faces—human, animal, mixed. Some whispered, others roared, all knew my name.

The wall burst open. Tariq rushed in, clutching a weapon that looked like a shotgun from a nightmare—the barrel encased in glowing circuits that pulsed with every breath.

"Get out of here, Kjell!" he yelled. "The whole station is boiling!"

Lira spoke to both of us now. "If you leave, Kjell, you'll leave incomplete. And incomplete things... don't survive."

“Then we’ll see who dies first,” I said, jumping through the gap.

Chapter 12 - The Last Transmission

The crack in the tower spat us out like an organism trying to get rid of a foreign object. Tariq grabbed me by the collar, dragged me through a narrow service opening, and the station behind us howled—not a siren wail, but that wet, offended sound of flesh tearing. We stumbled over a grate that had once been floor, but was now a tangle of veins and cables. Beneath us, it vibrated. Alive. Wrong. Too fast.

"Don't stop," Tariq gasped. "As long as the core doesn't know where we are, we have a window."

“And if he knows?”

“Then you’re wallpaper.”

We turned into a utility shaft, which smelled of old oil and cold ash. The self-growing cables hadn't quite won here—just a few red threads clinging to the wall like stray veins. Tariq tore off a panel; an old electrical cabinet grinned at us, full of relays and fuses, still bearing human fingerprints in grease. Nostalgia in tin.

“Why here?” I asked.

"Because the new ways are broken." He tapped his knuckle against a coil that looked as if it had lost the war against time. "And sometimes old is the only thing the future can't eat."

I was about to offer him a cynical comment when it happened: a whisper, muffled, distant, through walls and memories. At first I thought my head was playing the hits from hell again. Then I heard it more clearly, sharp like a razor blade being drawn through tissue paper.

— …ll… Kj… Kjell… do you hear…

“Tell me you heard that too,” I murmured.

Tariq looked up, his gaze like a broken compass. "Old tape. It's analog. Nobody speaks analog anymore."

"Maybe the dead." My throat was dry as dust. "Or those who stare too long."

The voice crackled again, this time more clearly, still covered with the cough of a hundred years:

— Nautilus-Seven… Relay Node 0-Prime… still alive. If you're still breathing, find the node. Last transmission… Key… don't delete… bypass… Price: Voice…

"Relay Node Zero-Prim?" Tariq sucked in a breath as if someone had punched him. "That's pre-PRAE. Before they started making the station 'smart.'"

"Where?"

He tapped the edge of the dented panel as if it were a map. "Under the old docking spindle, Sector K. Sealed since... forever. We need the southern route."

The southern route was a chasm. Hallways that moved too much, lights that blinked at the wrong rhythm. We walked crouched because the ceiling breathed in places. Once I stopped: In the shadow of a crossbeam, a returning passenger sat with his back against the wall, his knees drawn up. Not aggressive, just silent. His eyes didn't glow—they were empty. As if someone had removed the engine and forgotten the bodywork.

"They obey orders," whispered Tariq. "But no one comes."

“Then we pray that the boss is busy.”

We found Helene in the shaft to the south route, two decks below. She was holding Voigt by the shoulder. His face was a crumpled sheet of paper, his eyes glassy but without red. He was there and he wasn't there. If I had shaken him, he might have crumbled.

"He's following orders no one is speaking," Helene said. Her voice sounded like it had the floor in its throat. "The nanoclusters are firing patterns, but... asynchronously."

"The core is still broken," Tariq said. "Or someone's tweaking the timing." He glanced at me. "Maybe you."

"Because I opened that shit?" I set my tongue on a ridiculous curse and let it die half-finished. "Let's hope. Hope is cheap."

The southbound lane was a string of maintenance walkways beneath a carbon-fiber window, beyond which the atmosphere flowed in thick, gray ribbons. We were still falling, slow enough to see the clouds, fast enough to know someone

had intentionally left the brakes on. Plaques with old maintenance codes were stuck to the lane. Some were overgrown with newly grown membranes that looked as if they were breathing. I ignored the images in my head that wanted to turn such things into lungs.

"One more deck," said Tariq. "Then... Zero-Prim."

We heard him before we saw him. An echo. Not the voice that made NOVA hell. Not the knife edge in our ears. A noise that searched for words, found them, lost them again. Then the hologram popped up next to a door: blurred, semi-transparent, a person without a face, edges of snow.

"K... Kjell," said Echo. "Lira... corrupted... channel... not for long..."

“What do you want?” I hated arguing with air.

"Relay node... needs... a live carrier. Repeater. Someone... transmitting... not the station."

"Prize: voice," I said. "I heard it in a whisper."

"Voice... identity... pattern. The code jumps... across your nervous system. You... burn yourself... into the transmission."

“And what bounces back?” Helene asked dryly.

"With luck... nothing. With bad luck... you die. Without... you all die."

"Reassuring," I grumbled. "I like the choice: death, death light, or marketing death."

Echo flickered. Beyond the snow, I saw a corridor, old and mechanical, a door like something out of a submarine. "Quick," he whispered. "She's coming."

"Who?"

“You.” The hologram died like a fly.

The door to Null-Prim was mechanical. A balancing rod, two locks, not a single sensor. We worked with our hands, not with hope. Every turn felt like a judgment. Inside, there was dust on everything—none of the kind that makes you sneeze. The dust of years of no one touching anything. CRT monitors stood in rows like old men about to salute one last time. Cables hung from the ceiling

like vines, but they were ours. It smelled of overheated transformers, of burnt fuses, of the past.

In the center: the transmitter. Large as a coffin, with a glass window behind which a spiral antenna vibrated quietly. Next to it was a chair, bolted down, with a metal arch over the headrest. A clamp on the forehead. Two on the wrists. One on the throat.

"Seriously," I muttered. "The 'Torture Like 2070' catalog is back."

Tariq stroked the casing lovingly, as if it were an old animal that wanted to stand again. "Analog carriers. The antenna doesn't understand quantum packets. It wants flesh, blood, nerve noise. That's where the signature is, which whizzes past PRAE without feeding the AI."

“And the price?” Helene didn’t look away.

"The voice. The transmitter... writes countercode into your language areas, your auditory system, into the limbic corset. After that..." He paused. "After that, you're mute. And perhaps... different."

“I’ll do it,” said Helene.

“No,” I said.

"Yes," she said. "You need your voice. You're too... you."

"I've been talking too much anyway," I growled. "I've been asking for confidentiality for years."

Tariq shook his head, hard. "It's not a hero game. We choose who has the best pattern. Not who dies most beautifully." He pulled an old neuro-band out of its case and tucked it behind Helene's ear. "I'll give you a quick read. Don't worry, it only hurts as much as it looks."

We sat, three idiots at a table with slings, while outside the station welcomed the atmosphere. The displays flickered as if they had stage fright. Tariq's fingers danced. "Okay. Helene has stable theta waves, good timing, but too much empathic overdrive." He looked at me. "You're... hmm. Your frontal cortex is a battlefield. You could rip the transmission, but you risk it getting stuck inside you." His gaze wandered further. "Well. And I..."

“You?” I asked.

He smiled crookedly. "I used to be a radio operator. Before I became an engineer. The pattern fits. I can hold channels that others can't hear. I'm going in."

"The hell you're going in," I snarled, standing up, my chair scraping against the concrete. "You're our damn operator. Without you, we won't even find the cabin where we're supposed to die."

"That's the point," he said calmly. "If it works, there won't be anything left to find afterward."

The door vibrated. Not mechanically. It was as if something was breathing outside. Echo's hologram started up again, for a single beat, torn by the noise: "She... is here. Is she disturbing me..." Then silence.

Helene stepped forward. "We'll do this together." She placed her hand on my chest and looked at me as if she'd just stolen my last lighter. "If you stop me now, I'll hate you to the ends of the earth. And you know what times we live in. That's a damn long time."

“You’re not even funny,” I said, my voice breaking like an old beam in a storm.

"Stand in the back and count clouds," she replied, sitting down in the chair, and placing her head and wrists in the clamps. Tariq tightened the contacts. Metal kissed skin. It smelled of ozone and sweat.

“What am I sending?” she asked.

"No order," said Tariq. "A bridge. A return channel that separates PRAE from Lira's rhythm and sets it to the base pulse that existed before the AI integration. The steps below speech. Breathing, heart, hunger. We're sending... humanity that doesn't speak."

"Poetic," I growled. "Disgusting."

"On three," said Tariq. "One... two..."

The door laughed. I swear. A short, bright, evil chuckle, like from a throat with no vocal cords. Then she came in—not Lira of flesh, not Lira of metal. Something in between. A shadow with hands. The mount above Helene's head trembled. The station hummed. The CRT monitors flickered on, and on every screen was my face. Not now. Not then. I ran in circles, in the white jumpsuit. The kid who didn't know it was an experiment.

"Kjell," Lira whispered, everywhere and nowhere. "If you abandon her, the bridge will be pointless. You know that."

"I'm not giving up on anyone here," I said, and it sounded so wrong that I wanted to laugh for a moment. I didn't.

Tariq pulled the lever. The transmitter roared. Not electronics—an animal screaming on a frequency humans don't learn but never unlearn. Helene's body tensed, not like a fish in a net. More like a bow pulled too far. Her eyes widened, filling with white fire. The metal bow on her forehead glowed, and the air smelled like someone had burned hair. Mine. Hers. Anyone.

"Stop!" Tariq shouted above the thunder. "Stop your pulse!"

I stood behind her, placed my hands on her shoulders, as if I could push my rhythm through her bones into the transmitter. Stupid idea. Right idea. I let my mind go blank—whiskey, rain, cigarettes, the first laugh of a dead friend who wasn't dead after all, Nautilus-Seven in a storm, PRAE ALERT in red. I let the words fall until only footsteps remained. One, two. Inhale. Exhale. Heart left. Heart right. And underneath—the part we all bring with us before someone gives us names.

"Yes," Tariq whispered, as if he'd seen the music changes. "Yes. Exactly."

The monitors changed. It was no longer me. Now images that belonged to everyone: hands inventing tools. Teeth diminishing. Fire multiplying. And then the other side: fur growing thicker. Eyes learning in the night where danger dwells. Two paths, one riverbed. Both true. Both false. It was ugly. It was beautiful.

Lira screamed. Not loudly. Not for long. But I felt her teeth clench. "Stop," she said. "The end of language is not your victory. It's my stage."

"You're not getting a curtain today," I hissed. "Go whistle."

The gauges cranked up. The old antenna coil glowed so brightly that the dust in the air melted into glassy granules. The station above us—I knew without seeing it—held its breath. The membranes froze. The returnees in the corridors fell to their knees, not in adoration, but because their engines had died. I heard an echo, crisp, clear, as if someone had squeezed the water from its lungs:

“Hold on… just… five… seconds.”

"Four," Tariq gasped. "Three."

The door burst open. Voigt stood there, eyes red, hands empty. He looked at us, and through the horror, a spark slid: He knew us. Then his head turned, as if someone were twisting his neck, and he walked toward the control panel. Calmly. Determinedly. The station wouldn't start again if he pulled the main switch now.

I jumped. Too late. His hand grabbed the lever—and paused. Just a second. Enough. Enough for Helene's scream, which wasn't a scream at all, but a final imprint of life in an antenna that only believes what it feels.

The lights went out. Not all of them. Just the wrong ones. The transmitter collapsed, and the air was filled with that smell of metal giving way: hot, insulted, silent. Helene slumped into the straps. Her lips moved. No sound. It was as if someone had extracted her voice like a cassette and projected it through the glass into the ether.

"Helene?" I leaned forward. Her eyes—clear. Too clear. She looked at me, placed a hand on my arm, and squeezed. Hard. Then her lips formed a word. I understood it without hearing it:*Further.*

The station held its breath for ten seconds. Ten real seconds. I could count them in my head, I could hear them in my blood. Then it came. Not Lira. Not the tower. Something we didn't know. A humming that wasn't from here, yet felt like home, when you know home is a bad idea.

The CRT monitors lit up one last time. No picture. Just text, green, old, incredibly clear: TRANSMISSION RECEIVED. RETURN CONFIRMED.

"Who the hell..." Tariq swallowed. "Who did this..."

I got the answer first. Not in words. As a look. Somewhere inside me, a door opened that I had been preemptively blocking for years. Behind it: no God, no hell. A structure. A counterpulse. No enemy of Lira—her twin. PRAE was never a knife. PRAE was a fork. She had one prong, the other...waited.

*"Kjell,"*said the new voice inside me, quieter than memories, heavier than guilt.*"We hear you. And this time we all hear you."*

The station began to move, but differently. Not like an animal biting. Like a city regaining its power—and realizing the wires are out of tune. Membranes recoiled, as if suddenly timid. Returnees stood up, some fell back down, as if

their legs no longer knew who they belonged to. And above it all: Lira's breath. Short. Angry. Astonished.

“What did you do?” Her voice cracked.

"I've split the line," I said. "You're missing a beat now. And we have one."

“You’re playing a dangerous game.”

"I've never been good at safety."

Tariq loosened Helene's clamps and pulled her out of the chair. She stood—not swaying. Only her throat was still, like a lake before a storm. Her eyes shone, but not red. Not brown. Human. Exhausted. Unbroken.

Voigt leaned against the doorframe, holding his forehead, as if he'd been looking too long. The red in his eyes was gone. He seemed ashamed, which was silly, because in this city, everyone was the wrong person in the wrong body. "I... I hear two," he whispered.

"We all," I said. "We all hear two."

The wall vibrated. Lira was still there. She wouldn't disappear. A queen doesn't fall from her throne when a messenger brings the wrong letter. But outside, deep within the structure—somewhere beneath the dome, somewhere in the heart of the wrong city—something answered. Not with teeth, not with blades. With footsteps. Slow. Heavy. The counterweight was awake. Maybe friendly. Probably not. But it was ours. Or as close to "ours" as you can get in a world where everything is trying to rewrite you.

"What now?" Tariq asked. His fingers were finally shaking. I liked him more than ever for it.

I looked at the transmitter, which was still steaming. I looked at Helene, who was holding her hand to her throat and smiling as if someone had summoned the sun, only to immediately hide it away again. I looked at Voigt, who looked like he owed everyone money and knew he'd never be able to pay it back.

"Now," I said, "we'll call everyone who's still alive. And we'll learn a new language."

“Which one?” asked Tariq.

"The ones without words," I said. "The ones with steps."

The CRT monitors crackled. One stayed on. No more text. A shadowy image, like a deep-sea fish backlit. A skull too broad. A forehead too low. Eyes that saw. Not red. Not black. A flat, calm brown. Then a second image—the same eyes, this time in a face that was clearly human. The same iris. The same scar above the left eyelid.

*“Transmission received,”*said the voice again, deeper now, closer.*"Return confirmed. We're coming. Keep your pulse."*

I laughed briefly, hoarsely, like a man who realizes he's sitting with a match by a lake made of gasoline. "Sure," I said. "We'll hold the door open for him."

Outside, beyond the analog tin box, Nautilus-Seven caught her breath again. Slowly. Uncomfortably. Alive. And somewhere above us, in a ship that was once mine and never belonged to me, Lira stood and looked at her hands, at the membranes that no longer obeyed. She hated us. She would now learn what we learn in the dirt: You can rewrite the world as often as you want—it writes back.

I took Helene's hand. She squeezed. No sound. It wasn't necessary. Tariq pushed open the door to the corridor. The draft smelled of metal, salt, and possibility.

“Last transmission?” I murmured as we walked out.

"No," answered the silent throat at my side, smiling as if it had said just that. "The first one to stay."

Chapter 13 - Harbor of Screams

The harbor lay in the darkness like a severed lung of the station, black, damp, and full of things you didn't want to name, lest you start believing in them. We stood at the edge of the docks, and even here, far in front of the first bulkhead, I could hear the echo. Not the way you hear an echo in an empty space—this one was... hungry. Every footstep, every scrape of metal on metal echoed back, longer than it should, as if something were holding onto the sound, gnawing it off like a bone, then spitting it back into the air.

Tariq tapped his improvised cutting device on his belt. "That thing doesn't like noise," he said quietly. "So behave yourselves." Voigt grinned crookedly. "Should I sew your face shut right now so you don't accidentally sneeze?" Helene didn't answer—she couldn't. But she raised her eyebrows, making Voigt immediately look away.

We passed the first hatch. The thing was half steel, half some kind of organic membrane that inflated like a lung if you stood close enough. The smell was a mixture of old oil and blood. I didn't even want to know which was fresher.

Inside, things got worse. The dock hall was large—too large. Every sound wasn't simply lost here; it was amplified. Somewhere far back, I heard screams. Not loud, more like they were coming from a damn long tunnel. But the funny thing was: I recognized some of the voices. People who had been dead for a long time.

"Definitely not real," whispered Tariq. "Yes," came a voice from the darkness. Not over a loudspeaker. Direct, close. We turned around. There he stood—a guy in a ragged spacesuit, open across the chest. The skin beneath was mottled with dark fur, the muscles unnaturally taut. The face was half human, half... not anymore. The jaws were too broad, the eyes too black. But he spoke clearly. "Welcome to the harbor," he said. "Here rests what returns home."

He stepped aside, and only then did we see the others. Half a dozen returnees, all with the same glazed-over gaze, yet seemingly aware of who we were. One whispered my name. Another breathed Helene's.

"We just need the freighter," I said. "Then we're gone." The preacher—because that's what he was, no doubt about it—smiled, and it was the ugliest smile I'd ever seen. "The freighter is the altar. And no one takes the altar until the call goes out."

Voigt reached for his rifle, but I grabbed his arm. "Not here," I hissed. "Not if the walls are listening." And the walls were listening. I could feel it. Every vibration, every whisper. Something in the structure vibrated back, in time with my pulse.

Tariq slowly opened his device. "I can cut us through a corridor. But as soon as I fire this thing up, half the station will hear it." "Then hurry up."

He knelt down, pulled cables out of the ground, and connected them. The returning soldiers watched, making no attempt to stop us. They knew that any mistake here could be fatal—and they had time. We didn't.

Then Lira's voice came. Not over the radio. From all directions, warm, coaxing. "Kjell... you don't have to take the freighter. It'll just take you further from home." I ignored her.
"You can't ignore what you already are." "Can you please just die?" I muttered.

The cutting machine roared. The hall immediately changed. The membranes on the walls stretched, vibrating. The preacher screamed – and the scream multiplied a hundredfold, hitting us like a punch to the gut. Helene fell to her knees, blood pouring from her nose. Voigt grabbed her, pulled her up, while Tariq cut the first strip through the sound barrier.

We ran. Every step made more noise, and every noise came back harder. The returnees were moving now, slowly at first, then faster. They weren't shouting—they were humming. A deep, steady tone that vibrated in my chest. I felt my teeth aching.

The freighter appeared before us—a massive block of old titanium, its paint long since peeled off. But it was intact. And large enough to get us out. "Thirty seconds left!" Tariq shouted. "We don't have thirty!" Voigt yelled as the first returnees reached the corridor.

Lira's voice rose above everything, louder, more distorted. "Stay. It'll be easier if you stay." A second voice, deeper, more metallic, cut in: "Go. Now." – PRAE's other pole.

The cutting machine screeched, sparks flew. The corridor was open. We rushed onto the freighter, and the moment we reached the ramp, everything fell silent. No buzzing, no screams, just absolute, devastating silence.

"This isn't good," said Tariq. Then came the screams. From below. From the freighter itself.

The ramp was cold beneath my boots. Not like metal is cold, but like something long dead. The screams were muffled, but not far away. They came in waves, first isolated, then in chorus. Different voices, some clearly human, others... not.

Voigt led the way, rifle at the ready. Tariq still held his weapon in his hand, as if it might have some effect against what was waiting down there. Helene stayed close to me, her eyes wide, as if she were weighing every sound individually.

The interior of the freighter was divided into two decks. We entered the upper one, a kind of control section, everything dusty, rusty, dead. The gauges were dark, the smell was old and dry—no oil, no fuel, no life. But below us… beneath us, the floor vibrated slightly.

"Cargo hold," Voigt muttered, pointing at the metal stairs at the stern. "I don't like the noise," Tariq said. "I don't like anything here." I drew my gun.

The stairs creaked under our weight, as if afraid of us. It was darker downstairs. No emergency lights, no flickering, nothing. Just the screams. And now that we were closer, I realized they weren't coming from throats. They were coming from the metal itself.

“What the…” Voigt shone his lamp.

On the rear wall of the cargo hold was a kind of cocoon. Large, at least three meters high, surrounded by fine threads that looked like spider webs, but shone metallically. The threads vibrated in time with the screams. Something pulsed in the center. "The thing is alive," Tariq said dryly.

Helene approached, her gaze frozen. She touched one of the threads – immediately, a high-pitched sound shot through the room, so loud that I lost my balance. The thing reacted. The cocoon moved slightly, as if it were breathing.

Then a small crack burst open. Something slipped out. It was... half human, half ape, but with metallic edges along the bones. The face was part fur, part bare skull. The eyes glowed a faint red. And it didn't scream—it hummed.

"Back!" I yelled. But too late. It jumped, not at Voigt or me, but at Helene. Her hands grasped at nothing, then the thing grabbed her head, pressing her forehead against its. I swore I saw tiny lines of metal flowing between them.

Voigt ripped it away and slammed it against the wall. It didn't break, but the blow caused it to recoil. Even before it moved again, the cocoon began to pulse louder. More cracks. More shapes.

"Shit, that's a breeding chamber," Tariq gasped. "Then we'll burn it clean!" Voigt pulled out the flamethrower, which he never lets go of.

The first burst of fire hit the threads. They screamed. Not like metal under heat—it was a human scream, desperate, drawn out. The threads twitched, retracted. But the cocoon held firm.

Lira's voice now came directly from the thing. "You're burning children, Kjell." "They aren't children." "Everything that breathes is the child of something."

I pulled the trigger. Three shots to the pulse area. Metallic blood spurted, thick and black. The thing twitched, but it didn't die. Instead, it split. Two halves, each with its own core, crawled apart.

Tariq stepped back, his device raised. "I can make it vibrate. The resonance might kill the scream channel." "Do it."

He activated it. The sound that came was worse than any scream before—deep, so deep that my chest vibrated. The threads loosened as if frightened. The cocoon halves collapsed.

Silence.

We stood there, panting. Helene held her head, Voigt still had the flamethrower ready. "That's it?" he asked. "No," said Tariq. "That was just kindergarten."

We turned around and saw that a hatch had opened at the other end of the cargo hold. Behind it... nothing but darkness. But out of the darkness came a new sound. Not a scream, not a humming. It was a word. My name.

“Kjell.”

And then another. "Come."

I don't know if it was curiosity or simply the fact that everything behind us sounded even worse than what lay ahead—but we went. The hatch was barely wide enough for Voigt to get through with his flamethrower. The walls in the shaft weren't smooth; they felt like old, scarred flesh, crisscrossed with cold metal.

The floor was slippery, as if condensation mixed with something else had been dripping down here for decades. Every footstep echoed, and this time I knew the echo wasn't just our own. There was someone else there.

"How far does this go?" whispered Tariq. "Until we see it," I said.

After a few minutes, the shaft widened. We entered a chamber—large, round, with a ceiling that disappeared into the darkness. In the center stood a figure. Slender, long-limbed, its head tilted slightly to the side. Its skin shimmered like wet glass.

"Welcome," she said. The voice was Lira, but deeper, distorted, as if spoken through several mouths at once. "I am the port." "You're a damn trap," Voigt growled. "Trap, port, gate... words. You have too many of them."

I wanted to ask what she wanted here, but Helene stepped forward. Her hands formed signs—none I recognized. The dock woman tilted her head. "You speak the ancient language," she said to Helene. "The language of silence." Helene nodded, and I swore that a part of me feared her at that moment.

"What's down here?" I asked. "Departing souls," she said. "And arriving."

Shadows opened behind her. They were docks, like a miniature version of the harbor above—only instead of ships, they held... bodies. Dozens, maybe hundreds. Wrapped in the metallic threads like the brood in the cargo hold, but larger, more grown-up. Some still had human faces, others were merely masks of fur, bone, and alloy.

"The screams," said Tariq. "That's what remains when you travel too long."

Then something moved in the ceiling. Slowly, like a jellyfish, a mass of nanobot particles broke away and sank down. It formed into a circle—a gate like the one we saw above. Only this one was... finished.

"Through here," said the dock woman. "Or you stay and become part of the choir."

Voigt raised the flamethrower. "I'm going to burn everything down here." "Fire won't kill us," she replied calmly. "It just makes us go faster."

I felt it in my skull—that second voice we'd carried within us since the transmission. It whispered: "Don't go through. Take the freighter. Leave them here." "And if they follow us?" "Then we'll chase them outside."

I turned to the others. "We're going back." Helene shook her head and signaled again. Tariq translated: "If we go, this thing goes with us. We have to blow up the Gate core here."

The dock woman laughed. No humor, just an echo that went right through her bones. "Blow it up if you think you can."

Voigt pulled the safety pin. "Oh, I can." Tariq tapped his device, setting it to maximum resonance. "If we hit the core while the structure is in the sonic node, the whole thing will collapse."

“So come on.” I raised the gun.

The dock woman didn't move as Voigt ignited the flamethrower. The fire consumed the threads, the sound of Tariq's device shrunk them. The bodies in the docks began to scream—all at once, all at the same pitch. The gate circle flickered, vibrated, then collapsed halfway up like a wheel without spokes.

“Get out!” I yelled.

We ran back down the shaft, the sound of the collapsing chamber at our backs. Hot air followed us, mixed with a sound that was not quite a scream and not quite thunder. As we reached the cargo ramp, Voigt closed the hatch with a bang.

"Start the engine!" Tariq shouted, throwing himself into the pilot's seat. The freighter woke, a deep rumble that settled in its belly. Something exploded outside—perhaps the chamber, perhaps the entire damned dock complex.

The freighter broke away from the harbor, drifting slowly into the darkness. Below us, we saw the station's docking area collapse, parts of it plunging into the blackness of orbit.

Silence.

Until another sound came from the cargo hold. Not loud. Just a whisper. "Kjell."

Voigt and I looked at each other. "Please tell me, that was you," he said. "It wasn't me."

Then something else came. "See you at home."

Chapter 14 - Hunting in the Neon Light

The freighter landed on Dock 9B like a tired boxer who's only stopped because he's forgotten how to fall. Metal creaked, the stabilizers hissed. Outside, everything was a sea of color—neon signs in pink, blue, and toxic green flickered across the harbor wall as if someone were constantly firing lightning. It smelled of hot ozone, synthetic alcohol, and oil. Welcome to Neon Spire—a place where you were never safe, but that's exactly why you came here.

"Fake IDs first," Tariq said, barely as the ramp was down. "Otherwise, we won't last ten minutes before some terminal scans us and asks why we haven't been in the PRAE archives by now." Voigt pulled his coat tighter. "Fake IDs. Weapons under the radar. And I want a drink, that's burning." "Everything's burning here," I said.

We plunged into the stream of people. The dock area was a constant stream of faces that never lingered for more than a second—workers, smugglers, prostitutes, traders, all bathed in neon. Every movement was overshadowed by some holo-advertisement: colorful drinks, androids with overly perfect faces, medical implants that supposedly made you "more than human." I couldn't help but laugh at the slogan. If only they knew.

Obtaining ID was quick—Tariq knew a guy in a dimly lit workshop between two noodle shops. The guy printed us biometric data like postcards, without asking a question. But when he scanned my hand, he paused. "You have an... echo," he mumbled. "Just shut up and print," I said.

When we were back on the street, Tariq stopped abruptly. "Senn is at the Glaspit." "Is this a bar or a trap?" asked Voigt. "Both."

The Glaspit was twenty stories above the street. The elevator there was barely wider than a coffin, and the elevator operator looked like he hadn't slept in weeks. The hum of the elevator car accompanied us all the way to the top, where the door opened onto a bar whose walls were made entirely of transparent polymer. From here, the city was visible like a flickering switchboard, over which human-sized ants crawled.

Senn sat at the bar like a man who'd seen it all and retained too much. His suit was wrinkled, his hair perfect, and in his eyes was this light that said: I know more about you than you'd like. "Kjell," he said, as if tasting my name. "I heard PRAE spat you out again." "I want info, not poetry." He grinned. "Info costs. This time, more than credits."

He told us about an object lying in the service tunnels beneath the city. "Not a device. Not a data set. Something living. And it's older than this city." He placed a chip with the coordinates in front of us. "Get it, and I'll tell you why PRAE started working with bites."

We should have declined. But then, in the middle of the discussion, it happened. The door to the glass spit burst open. Three men entered. Ordinary dockworkers at first glance—until their heads tilted to the side at the same angle. I recognized that movement. Returnees.

“Get down!” I yelled.

Voigt overturned the table, and Tariq pulled Helene toward the elevator. But the returnees came fast, too fast. One jumped straight at me, and when his hand brushed my neck, I felt the tingling—not from physical contact, but from the nanobots beneath my skin. They were responding to him.

I rammed my elbow into his face and heard the bone crack. No scream. Just this humming. The second returning soldier ripped the flamethrower from Voigt's hand and hurled it into the corner like a toy.

We ran through the emergency exit. Behind it was a glass platform, the abyss of neon streets below us. Holos flickered around us, casting garish shadows in our faces. The Returnees followed us across the platform, and every step cracked the glass beneath our feet.

"Left!" Tariq shouted, and we jumped onto a smaller maintenance bridge. From here, a path led between gigantic neon signs—a canyon of light. The returnees were still behind us, their eyes reflecting the neon like two deep pools of oil.

Suddenly, a figure appeared in front of us—female, slender, her face half-shadowed by a glowing advertisement. "You're looking for that thing?" she asked. "I can take you there." "Who the hell are you?" "Someone who doesn't want PRAE to get it."

We had no choice. We followed her through a side door into a service corridor. The smell immediately changed—from sweet ozone to damp metal and sewage. The neon lights disappeared behind rusty pipes, and the hum of returning passengers echoed further back.

"What is it?" I asked as we squeezed through the tunnels. "It's the beginning. Or the end. Depending on who you ask."

We reached an old maintenance chamber. In the center stood a glass cylinder filled with a murky, greenish liquid. Inside – an embryo. Human, at first glance. But tiny, silver lines ran beneath its skin, like a second nervous system.

"It's responding to you," she said, and sure enough, the embryo opened its eyes. Gray eyes. Lira's eyes.

“Shit,” I muttered.

Then the door exploded. The returnees stormed in. Neon light from the corridor broke through the smoke, illuminating the embryo as if it were glowing back. Helene screamed, Voigt fired, Tariq desperately tried to secure the cylinder.

I reached for the glass, feeling my nanobots tingle through my palm into the liquid. The embryo moved as if it recognized me.

"Kjell!" Lira's voice called—not from a loudspeaker, but from the damn thing. "Are you ready to go home?"

I gripped the cylinder tighter, and something in the fluid reacted—bubbles rose, as if the embryo had just decided it didn't want to remain passive anymore. My nanobots vibrated so strongly that my arm went numb, but I didn't let go.

The first returning man was already halfway over Voigt, hissing, his teeth glinting like mercury in the neon light. Voigt roared like a berserker and rammed the barrel of his gun into his eye. No shot, just pure pressure – the returning man staggered, didn't scream, but let out that damned sound that almost blew my eardrums.

Tariq knelt in front of a console so old the dust on it could tell its story. "If I reroute the power, the neon supply in the hallway will go out for a moment!" "Do it!" I yelled.

The light flickered – and for a split second, it was so dark that only the glow in the cylinder and the eyes of the returning men remained. The second of them jumped directly in my direction. I turned sideways, the cylinder between us, and it slammed into it. The glass shattered, but held.

Helene had pressed herself against one of the walls, knife in hand, eyes wide open. She didn't have to say anything—just a look was enough. I nodded, and she lunged forward, plunging the blade deep into the side of the third returnee.

No blood, just a black-silver liquid that immediately began to steam. The stench was sweet, disgusting, like mixing burnt sugar with burnt flesh.

“We have to get out of here!” Voigt shouted, and in his voice there was that narrow edge between anger and panic.

The stranger—the one who had brought us here—pulled a small explosive device from her jacket and taped it to the door frame. "If this goes off, the corridor will collapse behind us. But then we'll have to be damn fast." "How fast?" "Faster than anything that can follow you."

She pressed the detonator.

The bang wasn't a classic explosion—it was more like someone had struck a gigantic gong in my skull. The corridor behind us collapsed, neon tubes shattered, and sparks rained down. We ran, me in front with my top hat, Helene right behind me, Tariq panting, Voigt cursing, and the stranger picking up the pace.

We rushed out of the service aisles into an open marketplace, under a roof of a hundred flickering billboards. Everything was ablaze with color—pink, blue, yellow—so bright it made your eyes water. Crowds pressed between stalls displaying synthetic meat, counterfeit medicines, and weapons whose provenance was best left unquestioned.

And then I saw them—two more returnees, hidden in the crowd, movements too calm, too regular. "They're here," I murmured.

The stranger reacted immediately, pulling us to a stand behind which a freight elevator was waiting. "Downstairs, quickly!" We shoved ourselves inside, the door closed, and the elevator jerked into motion. Above us, all we could hear was the dull roar of the crowd—and then a metallic crash. They had found the elevator.

"Tariq?" "I got it!" He opened a service hatch, pulled out a bundle of cables, and let sparks fly. "When we get downstairs, we have three seconds before they break down the door."

The three seconds were a lie. When the doors downstairs opened, the first returning passenger was already halfway inside. I stepped forward and rammed the cylinder against his skull. The glass shattered this time – fluid ran down my arm, hot and pulsing like blood. The embryo inside moved as if it wanted to burrow into my skin.

"Kjell!" he called. Not with his voice. With his thoughts.

I stumbled back, Voigt pulled the trigger, and the recoil drove the returning man back into the darkness. Helene and the stranger pulled me out by the arms, and we continued running through a corridor that smelled of burnt plastic.

At the end of the corridor stood the freighter—our freighter. Tariq jumped into the cockpit, Voigt secured the entrance. I climbed aboard, the cylinder half empty, the embryo still inside, but now with my eyes open.

As the engines fired up, I watched from the viewport as the returning crew members streamed into the docking area. Neon light reflected on their faces, and in that moment I realized: They weren't here to kill us. They wanted to see where we were taking this thing.

The stranger stood next to me, breathing heavily. "You have no idea what you're wearing." "Then explain." "This isn't just the beginning of PRAE. This is PRAE."

The freighter separated, Neon Spire shrank, and in my head I heard the voice again. "Are you ready to go home?"

I looked into the gray eyes in the glass. "Not yet. But soon."

Chapter 15 - The Code in the Genome

The freighter breathed like an old dog in its sleep: deep, rattling, with those little noises that tell you the next dream won't be a pleasant one. I sat in the cargo bay on an upturned crate that had once carried rations and stared into the glass in which our mistake was floating. Not a child. Not a thing. A program with eyes.

The light in the broth flickered as the course was corrected. Gray eyes looked up at me as if they knew I was the idiot who had to say no when everyone else was shouting yes.

"We need a lab," Tariq said, as if three Allen keys and a rusty sequencer from the days when men still wore mustaches were a lab. He had pulled the old diagnostic station out of the bow: a machine that once spit out blood counts

and now simply marveled at its being alive. Helene pushed off the hood, dusting off a sled that looked as if it longed for real hands. Hers were steady. Her throat was still. She worked as if she had a thousand words to spare.

Voigt stood with his back to the door, his gun under his jacket, his eyes tired but alert enough to hate two directions. He still heard two beats. So did I. Mine liked whiskey. The other liked order.

"Project PRAE," I said, and the two words alone tasted like iron on my tongue. "Initial diagnosis: a bunch of smart idiots who thought they could save humanity by dismantling it."

"They didn't disassemble it," Tariq muttered, forcing cables into an interface that didn't agree. "They just rediscovered the old furniture that was under all that plastic. Paleo programs, key retroviral sequences, methylated songs. And then they slapped nanoclusters on it because no one has any patience for nature anymore."

Helene nodded, opened the sequencer slot, and inserted the first sample, a tiny amount of the fluid that had run from the cylinder onto my skin. They didn't type much, their fingers just danced. Tariq pulled a module out of his jacket, a thing he called a "resonance head" and I called a "lucky test." He screwed it between the reader and the filter.

“What are you doing?” Voigt asked without turning around.

"I force the nanoclusters to act as read heads. We first send the sequence as a vibration through the cluster, then as base code through the reader. If both sing the same song, we know what we have."

“And if not?”

“Then we know what we have: trouble.”

At first, the display spat out garbage. Randomness. Noise. Then the lines sorted themselves, as if they'd remembered they had a job. Flows of characters appeared, no letters, no numbers. Patterns. Triples, quads, pauses. Beneath the base code, a second line pulsed, as fine as a baby's breath: resonance. The second beat. Our new friend.

"Do you see that?" Tariq leaned forward so far that his shadow fell on the display. "Doublespeak. Base sequence as semantics, resonance as syntax. If you only read without listening, you won't understand. If you only listen, you'll

become an animal. Together..." He left the sentence open, his mouth half grinning, half broken.

"Together you'll become a weapon," I said. "Or a cure. Depending on who's paying the bill."

Helene typed a command. The device hummed, the resonator purred, the cluster vibrated. A figure emerged on the display, like a ladder drawn with wet fingers: slits, bridges, loops. A palimpsest of genetics and sound.

And there it was, in the middle, a small island of regularity: AAA-CTG-TAC, repeated but never identically, each repetition with a tiny offset in resonance. A Morse code ashamed to be Morse code.

“What does it say?” asked Voigt.

Tariq blinked, as if he'd run into a realization. "It's not a command. It's a key. A translator. It maps Lira's rhythm to the counterpulse. Like a bridge. But..." He stopped, pulled his head back, looked at Helene, then at me. "But the bridge isn't static. It compiles into a living pattern. One that breathes."

"Say it clearly," I growled. "Who pays?"

"The one who wears it," he said quietly. "When we drive the bridge through a human, the code switches into their nervous system. It needs Echo—not the AI, the print. Your voice, your smell, your childhood on wet concrete. It learns you so it can find everyone like you and lays a trail there."

“And what is he taking with him?” My stomach was a fist.

"Pieces of you he'll need to dismantle the bridge later. Memories. Reflexes. Maybe words." He looked at Helene. Her throat remained still. She smiled thinly, as if she knew the world likes to win bets you didn't want to make.

"I'm going in," I said. Sometimes you have to be the first idiot to let the others know which direction not to run.

"You're not going anywhere," Voigt lashed out. "You're our damn bone between two dogs. If you break, both sides break."

"Helene can't," said Tariq. "She paid for her vote last time. Any more, and the silence will consume her. Voigt..." He looked at him. "Lira sparks too often inside you. The compiler would jam. Stay—"

"I do," I said. "Yes. Touching."

Helene placed her hand on my forearm. Warm. Strong. Her eyes said more than most of the speeches I've ever endured.*Not a hero. Just a necessity.*I nodded because I was too proud to*Fear*to say.

We built the chair I hated. Not the one with the clamps made of null-prim—we had something new. Tariq had placed the resonant head in a headband, Helene had placed the contacts in gloves that looked like cheap miracles. The embryo in the jar blinked when the cluster buzzed, as if it knew its name song was about to be sung.

"Three phases," Tariq said so matter-of-factly that I wanted to punch him. "Recognize – we show your NS the bridge. Compile – you carry the bridge through, the code writes itself into your silence. Transfer – you give us the pattern, we press it into a patch. Not clean. Not permanent. But maybe enough that a bite won't bring you back immediately."

"And what do I lose?" I wanted a number. People love numbers when they're afraid.

Tariq looked away. "Maybe... names. Maybe... a laugh. Maybe nothing. Maybe too much."

"I never had much," I said, sitting down and feeling the chair count my bones. "Count the minutes, not me."

Helene fixed the brace on my forehead. Her gaze was that of a surgeon cutting you with love. Tariq docked the cluster; the display went dark, then black, then silent. We waited for the buzzing. It didn't come.

Instead, she came.

"I can do that for you," Lira whispered out of nowhere and everywhere. "You don't have to pay. I'll give you the sample, no price. Return home service."

"And the bill?" I mumbled. "Later?"

“Later,” she confirmed, and the poison tasted like honey.

“Go away,” I said, closing my eyes and wishing I believed someone other than an algorithm was listening.

Tariq started the phase. The cluster sang. Not loudly. Not beautifully. A deep tone that bores into the brain and stays there like a stray bullet. I remembered—all the times I breathed rain until it tasted like whiskey. Of Rurik, grinning briefly in the light before the light left him. Of*PRAE ALERT*in red, which at some point became more weather than warning. To my hands, which have held too many lives, as if they were trying to rent houses.

"Recognize," Tariq said barely audibly. "He's taking it."

Something clicked in my skull, a small, obscene sound. The bridge grew. Not an arched bridge, not an engineering marvel. More like a vector of dirt: scraps of words, smells, pulse.*Left. Right. Inhale. Exhale. Step.*And underneath, like a bass: an old song that we all knew before anyone explained to us what*civilized*is called.

"Com—" Tariq swallowed the rest because the ship was howling.

Not our ship. Another one. Hull contact. Magnetic. Corridor Verse A, Deck 12. Someone was climbing up us like a thief on a balcony.

Voigt had the gun in his hand before my heart had even finished terrifying. "Keep going!" he yelled. "I'm leaving." He threw open the door. The silence that remained behind him was the kind that likes doors. Not a good kind.

"No interruption," Tariq gasped. "If he falls out now, it'll eat him."

"I'm here," I said, although I wasn't sure if that was true. I felt the bridge. I felt it becoming. And I felt something small running from my hand. Not blood. Not sweat. A name. It escaped. Not silently, but finally. I knew I'd never know any damn name again. Maybe mine. Maybe that of a dog in the harbor from before, the one who always slept at the tip of my boot. I held on to what remained: step. breath. left. right.

From Deck 12, the sound of metal on metal rang out. A voice that wasn't Voigt's said, "Open," and the door laughed. I loved this station, if it were honest: always cynical.

Tariq pushed the resonance head deeper, as if he could keep me alive with pressure. "Thirty seconds left. Helene, keep an eye on his pulse."

She placed her hand on my throat, where words once lived. Her pressure set the pace. I followed. Compiling. Every blow was a plank beneath my feet, learning that ground exists, even when everything slides.

The embryo in the jar stared at me. Not pleading, not angrily. In recognition. My stomach wanted to punch it in the face, but hands held me tight. Good hands.

*“Homecoming needs two hearts,”*said the new, deep voice inside me. Not Lira. The counterpulse.*“Hold both of them.”*

"Transfer!" Tariq shouted. It wasn't a shout. More like a cry disguised as an order.

I felt something run through me. A thread that loved the skin but preferred to go deeper. He pulled. I let go. He took. I gave. It was dirty, raw, right. And somewhere, at the edge of what I dared to know, something fell away like rust. A laugh I once loved. A smell of cold tin at dawn, when you don't know whether you're drunk or awake.*Take it. But let me step.*

"I got it!" Tariq shouted, and there was a light in his eyes I hadn't seen in days. "Pattern extracted. We have a patch. No vaccine. No cure. Just a dirty filter between bite and fall."

“That’s enough for today,” I whispered.

The door burst open. Voigt staggered back, a tooth-like groove on his cheek. Behind him was one of them, slim, fast, too calm. He moved like a perpetrator in a training video. In his hand, no knife, no weapon. Just nothing. And that was precisely what was dangerous.

Helene was faster than my shock. She grabbed the syringe wand she'd rammed into the wall and rammed it into the guy's neck. No blood. Just this black wisp. He didn't fall. He just looked at her, recognized her the way you recognize a mistake in a calculation you plan to exploit later. Then he jumped.

I was already standing. The patch still burned inside me. I thought I was going to fall, but my legs had decided to cooperate today. I hit it halfway, crooked, unprofessional. It bounced off, and so did I. We danced briefly, ugly. Then there was a clack—no bone, no metal. A code. It was looking for me. It didn't find me. The patch snapped like a dog.

“Not today,” I said and struck.

Voigt pulled him away, slamming him against the edge of the diagnostic station. Tariq let out a sound from the cluster that made him stagger. Helene

followed up, hard, precise. The guy broke. Not pretty. Efficient. I saved the screaming in my pocket in case I needed to play sympathy later. Not today.

“How many?” I gasped.

"Two on board. One out. I've cut the magnets. The third is drifting." Voigt's voice was man again, not machine. The cut on his cheek looked bad. No bite. I looked closely. No half measures.

Tariq had already pressed the patch into a vial that looked like it belonged in a church, not a freighter. "Sublingual. Then into the blood. We won't catch all the balls, but enough so you don't fall over at the first crack." He looked at Helene, offered her the first one. She shook her head and pointed at me. You first. I took it. Bitter as truth.

The world tilted briefly, like a ship being played a joke by the sea. Then it stood upright again. Not stable. But upright.*Left. Right. Breath.*

"Now the bad news," said Tariq, and I briefly hated him, because he always has it. "There's a second layer in the sequence ending. No medicine. Coordinates."

"Where to?" I knew before he said it. Sometimes you're no wiser for knowing.

"Elysium. Not the station. The crib. Under the ocean roof. Project PRAE, primal place. They call it 'Deepbed 0.'"

"Of course," I muttered. "Of course every piece of shit leads back to where it first smelled."

Helene tapped me on the forehead. Don't keep swearing. I nodded. Five more minutes. Then again.

The embryo—I refuse to call it what Lira wants—had pressed its forehead against the glass. Gray eyes didn't see. They calculated. A voice scratched in my head that couldn't be young, and wasn't old.*“Homecoming requires two hearts.”*

"I only have one," I said. "And it's used."

“The other one is with her.”

I knew who he meant before I could ask a stupid question. Lira. I hate it when answers come before questions. It makes you small.

Tariq printed more vials. He worked as if his fingers were longer than my fear. "We have enough for ourselves and... maybe for three people we like."

"That's more than we have," said Voigt. He sat down, leaned his head against the cold wall, and closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them again, they were clear. Too clear. For a brief, dirty heartbeat, someone else was there. I saw it, he saw it, and he acted like I hadn't seen anything. I let it go because, to be honest, we'd already won too much today.

"So, Elysium," I said. "And how?"

Tariq grinned, but it was a grin that almost made me cry. "We're going down. Through what they call the 'sea roof,' a heat shield and an old dome. There's a service entrance. Locked. So we knock. Very politely. And very loudly."

“Sounds like us,” I said.

Helene placed two fingers to her throat, looked at me, then at the ampoules, then back. Take them all. No negotiations. I nodded. We held the small bottles under our tongues, let them burn until the world briefly turned green and then gray again. I liked gray by now. It was honest.

The freighter lurched. A change of course. The stars were aligned as always: arrogant and unimpressed. I took a sip from a bottle that was only half full because I'd hidden it. It was the good whiskey that tastes of decision.

“Tell me you still know your name,” Voigt murmured.

I let my tongue wander slowly over my teeth, as if there were a label somewhere. "Kjell," I said. It sounded right. Not everything was gone. Not today. I breathed. Left. Right. And beneath my breath—the bridge. Warm. Not friendly. But mine.

"Then listen, Kjell," said Tariq, sounding like a priest who'd learned that God is made of circuits. "The patch might keep us afloat. But the bite remains poison. You feel it, you want it, you are it. When it comes, don't lose your steps. One. Two. That's the whole medicine."

“And the embryo?” asked Voigt.

I looked into the gray eyes. There was no hate. No love. Only purpose. I hate purpose. Purpose has never brought anyone flowers.

"We'll take him with us," I said. "Not because I want to. Because he's the key. And because Lira wants him."

“And what if he eats us on the way?” asked Voigt.

"Then we'll eat back," I said. My teeth suddenly felt very old.

The freighter beeped. Not friendly. A contact in the blind spot that shouldn't have been one. A small ship, unregistered, on a parallel course. No docking. No radio. Just proximity.

"They're learning," Tariq murmured. "No longer inside, but with."

"Then we'll learn faster," I said. I grabbed the peeping Tom, which I treat like a weapon far too often, and tied it to my wrist. Helene nodded. Voigt was standing. He was pale, but there. His wound looked like a broken promise. He smiled at me, and for a second, there was someone in that smile I didn't like. I don't like a lot of people. This was different. That was Lira, grinning through the window when you think you've finally closed the curtains.

“Deck 12?” I asked.

“Deck 12,” he said.

We walked down the hall. The patch still burned, as if it were lighting a candle inside me and protecting me with wet fingers. The footsteps were there. One. Two. Inhale. Exhale. I belong to myself. Not quite. Enough.

I stopped at the lock. I heard it. Not the humming of the returning passengers. Not the clicking of magnets. Another sound. Very quiet. Like a laugh that doesn't mean to be funny.

“What?” whispered Voigt.

“Nothing,” I lied, because the truth was writing too many bills.

Helene pulled the latch. The door on Deck 12 opened so gently that I almost respected it. Behind it was the maintenance corridor. Cold. Damp. Empty. No one. No animals. Only traces. Fingers that had run over condensation and written in the wetness: Home – return – he. Not a threat. An invitation.

"We'll go later," I said, pushing the door shut and locking it. "Elysium first."

“Plan?” asked Tariq.

"I hate plans," I said. "But let's make one: We'll fall from the sky into a hole beneath the world, knock on the crib, and ask for the bill."

“And if no one opens the door?” asked Voigt.

“Then we scream. Quiet.”

Helene smiled. Not beautifully. Genuinely. She raised her hand, drew two circles inside each other, and a line between the hearts. Two bars. A bridge. I nodded. She stroked my forehead with her bony knuckles, as if I were a child losing its first tooth. Maybe I was.

I went back to the loading bay, sat back down on the crate, and looked into the gray eyes. The embryo rested its forehead against the glass, right where mine was. For a second, there was no war. Just a mirror that doesn't lie to you.

"Homecoming requires two hearts," the deep voice inside me said again, and I thought of all the ones that had already been stolen from our chests. I thought of Rurik. Of the city that had seen more blood than rain. Of Nautilus Seven, lying outside, acting as if it were just metal. Of me, along the edge that Moritz would have once called "human," if I'd ever known a Moritz.

"Then learn to walk, little one," I whispered against the glass. "We still have a bit of road to go."

The freighter turned its nose, and the stars moved apart a little, like tired waiters clearing the way when the last customer staggers out. Down below, beneath the world, Elysium waited. Not in heaven. In the dirt. Where else.

I put the bottle back without drinking, feeling like a traitor, but a sober traitor survives longer. Sometimes.

"Course set," Tariq called. "Jump window in three minutes. After that, there'll be nothing but water above us."

"Good," I said, and my voice was mine. Not beautiful. Not great. But mine. I stood up, stretched my back, and somewhere something clicked again, a small, approving sound, as if a lock inside me had found a number.

"Kjell?" Voigt asked from behind me, softly, dangerously. "If we're down there... and they want you as the key?"

I turned around and looked him in the eyes for a long moment, long enough to watch the others in them as he briefly left the room. "Then we'll remove the lock and rebuild the door," I said. "Out of bone. Out of metal. Out of footsteps."

Helene clapped twice. Quietly. Enough talking.

The freighter jumped. The light in front of the bow became a scar. Beyond it lay the sea that knows no air. I grinned, even though I had no reason to, and the embryo blinked as if it knew what a grin was. Lira was silent. Not defeated. Just waiting. And somewhere deep inside me, where I used to keep songs no one plays anymore, a new song now lived. Not pretty. Not for the charts. But with a beat that keeps you on your feet when the ground suddenly turns to water.

Elysium. We're coming. Bring cutlery. We're bringing hunger.

Chapter 16 - Betrayal on Deck 12

Deck 12 was officially dead. No power, no air, no reason to even go down there. At least, that's what the internal log said, and according to Tariq, no one had set foot there since boarding at Neon Spire. Except that official logs on ships like this were worth the same as a confessional booth in a brothel alley—anyone could go in, no one had to tell the truth.

I was just on my way to the engine room when Helene grabbed my shoulder. Her eyes were wide, but not with fear. More with anger. "Something's moving down there." "Deck 12?" "Yes. I went to the diagnostic terminal to check the oxygen flow. There's movement under the insulation panels. Like... fingers." "Maybe rats." "Rats don't carry nanobot tracks."

That hit home. We hadn't had rats on board for months—they didn't like the synthetic shipboard smell. But nanobot traces? Those spelled trouble, and trouble usually meant someone was lying.

We went over to Tariq, who was staring at his gauges in the cockpit. He tapped the edge of his display with a fingernail. "See that? Power loss. Minimal, but constant. And it's not coming from the drive. The source is on Deck 12. And Deck 12 should be dead, damn it." "How long has it been?" "Three hours." "Why are you only saying something now?" "Because I'm only now sure it's not a false reading."

I knew what that meant: We had to go down there. No drones, no sensors, no remote diagnostics. We had to go there in person, and that meant running right into what didn't want to be found down there.

The elevator to Deck 12 stank of cold oil. The hatch opened reluctantly, as if it was considering whether to let us in. Beyond it was only darkness. Helene turned on her lamp, and the cone of light cut through dust particles drifting slowly in zero gravity.

"Do you hear that?" she asked. "What?"
"Such a... scratching sound." I heard it too. It came from the walls, quiet, rhythmic, like fingernails on metal.

We continued walking. Helene stopped at an insulation panel. "Here." I saw it too: tiny scratches, not random, but in a kind of pattern. As if someone had written letters—only they weren't human. The dust was darker than normal, slightly metallic. I rubbed something between my thumb and forefinger. It tingled.

Suddenly I heard footsteps. Heavy, steady, too close to get away. Voigt stepped out of the shadows, helmet under his arm, face neutral as ever. "What are you doing down here?" "Energy loss," I said. "And you?" "Safety check." "Without Tariq's log to have you logged?" He shrugged. "Not everything I do is in the log."

Helene crossed her arms. "We saw movement behind the panels." "Then you'd better stay here. I'll check it out."

He walked past us as if he had every right to do so. I followed him quietly and saw him turn left at an intersection. Helene stayed behind me. We crept up, and then we saw it.

At the end of the corridor, in an open supply shaft, hung a makeshift transmitting core. Not onboard equipment, but something assembled from leftover parts and nanobot material. Voigt stood in front of it, holding a small cylinder in his hand—not our embryo, but damn close. He slid it into a holder, and the thing began to pulse.

“Voigt!” I called.

He didn't even flinch. He just turned slowly, as if he knew we were there. "She wants the coordinates. I'll give them to her." "Lira?" Helene asked. He nodded. "I never stopped working for her. She... programmed me. Put a command in my

head. When I get within range of a quantum relay, I relay what she needs." “And that is?” “Depth 0.”

I didn't know the name, but Tariq had once whispered that it was the place where PRAE was first tested. Where the virus was born—and perhaps could be stopped.

"You're taking them right there," I growled. "No," Voigt said. "I'm taking all of us there. That's the difference."

Suddenly, the ground beneath us vibrated. The transmitting core began to glow brighter, the frequency rising. Tariq's voice came over the radio: "Kjell! The power leak is exploding! Something on Deck 12 is tapping the main lines!"

I drew my gun. "Turn it off, Voigt." "I can't." "Do it anyway."

He just smiled. "If I turn it off, I die. That's part of the order." "Then die." "Maybe she wants me to die. Maybe this is the test."

Helene reached for the core's control panel. Her hand couldn't even reach it—a push of invisible force hurled her back. The core reacted to our patch, to the nanobots inside us, as if we were intruders.

"We have to separate him," I said. "Then he'll die." "Then he'll die."

I grabbed Voigt by the collar and pulled him away from the core. He didn't flinch, no resistance, just one last look. "Tell her... I did it." Then his body jerked, as if shot through with an electric shock, and he collapsed.

The core didn't explode—it imploded. All light was sucked into itself, then only silence. The shaft was empty. No Voigt, no core. Only dust, slowly settling in the passage.

We turned around to go back. There was something new on the bulkhead. Not painted, not written—but formed from nanodust: TWO HEARTS REMAIN.

Helene whispered, "This is a message." "No," I said. "This is a warning."

We went back to the elevator. I didn't know if Voigt was dead or standing right next to Lira. But I did know one thing: Deck 12 was no longer dead. It had just started breathing.

Not like a human—not in that steady, calming rhythm familiar from the days before PRAE. No. This breathing was irregular, moist, as if somewhere behind the walls an animal with much too large lungs was slowly waking up. Each breath sent a slight pressure through the corridor, barely noticeable, but enough to cause the dust on the floor to stir in small rings.

Helene stopped. "That's not possible. Deck 12 doesn't have its own air supply." "It did," I said, pushing her toward the elevator. "It did."

We walked faster. The corridor ahead flickered in the light, as if someone were fiddling with a dimmer switch—except the power on Deck 12 was officially off. That meant some other power source was taking over. And it wasn't ours.

From the shadows behind the insulation panels, I heard the scratching again. Longer intervals now, interspersed with a faint crack. Helene raised the lamp, the beam twitched as if deflected. Then I saw it: a crack in the wall, only a finger's width, but behind it... movement. Something shiny that flickered briefly in the light and immediately retreated again.

"Kjell," whispered Helene. "The record... it breathes."

I stepped closer. Sure enough, the metal buckled slightly with each of those moist breaths. Not enough to break—but enough to show that the structure was no longer solid. It had softened.

“We’re leaving now,” I said, taking her arm.

Then I heard a voice. Not Voigt. Not Lira. Another one, deep, vibrating, with a metallic undertone that echoed in my bones. "Two hearts remain."

Helene gasped. "Did you hear that?" "Yes."
"Was that... a warning?" "Or a promise."

The elevator was only a few meters away when the floor beneath us gave way—not completely, just briefly, like a breathless lunge. Then it vibrated, and fine cracks ran through the metal, as if something were growing underneath. From one of the cracks oozed a black, shimmering mass, pouring across the floor like mercury. It crept slowly toward us, forming small spikes that looked like fingers.

Helene drew her weapon. "That's not nanobot mass." "Yes," I said. "Just... not ours."

We backed away. The mass paused, as if examining us. Then it dissolved into small particles that floated in the air like smoke. Some of them settled on my jacket, immediately pricking through the fabric as if trying to reach my skin. I wiped them away, so hard that my hand burned.

"Kjell," said Helene, "this isn't a simple infestation. It's targeted." "I know."

The elevator opened with a hiss, and Tariq's voice came over the radio. "Hurry up! Power levels on Deck 12 are rising again, like someone just hooked up the main reactor!"

We jumped in, the door closed, and the last thing I saw was the wall where we'd seen the writing earlier. It was gone. In its place stood something new—fresh, as if someone had just written it:
ONE HEART GOES BACK. ONE HEART REMAINS.

The elevator jerked into motion. Helene leaned against the wall, breathing rapidly. "We should seal Deck 12. Completely." "We're not sealing anything," I said. "Not until I know which heart remains."

The elevator stopped too hard, almost as if it hesitated to let us out. As we stepped out into the corridor, the air smelled of ozone-burned air—a sign that the ship had just experienced something unexpected. Tariq stood in the corridor, sweat on his forehead. "The sensors are acting up. Deck 12 is transmitting again. But not out. In."
"Where exactly?" "Straight into the ship. Into life support."

I knew what that meant. Breathing from Deck 12 wasn't just a metaphor. It was really trying to become part of the crew.

Tariq typed frantically on his console, but every command was executed with a one-second delay—as if someone else was typing along and had to approve each command first. "That thing has root access," he growled. "And I don't know how it got in there."

"Because it didn't come in," I said. "It was already here."

Helene glanced at me. "Are you saying the ship has been—" "—infected for a while? Yes."

Tariq cursed. "I can cut the transmission from Deck 12, but that's like turning off an engine while it's still running. We don't know what happens after that."

I stepped next to him and looked at the displays. The signals coming from Deck 12 weren't pure data streams. They were rhythmic. Pulsebeats. Two of them, alternating, synchronized, as if they were checking each other.

“Two hearts,” murmured Helene. “Exactly.”

Suddenly, the light flickered. Only for a second, but enough to see that we were no longer alone. For a moment, shadows stood in the corridor behind Tariq—too large for humans, too distorted for any normal movement. When the light stabilized again, the corridor was empty.

"That was Deck 12," I said. "Deck 12 doesn't come here," said Helene. "Yes, it does," I replied. "It comes right here."

The ship's alarm went off, shrill and without warning. "Shield 12-Alpha open," the AI voice reported. That was the outer bulkhead of Deck 12—no one had given the order, and yet we heard the metallic rumble vibrating through the floor.

Tariq ripped a handheld terminal from its holder and initiated the emergency lock. "That might buy us ten minutes. Then…" He trailed off as a dull thud echoed against the bulkhead. Again and again, rhythmic, like a heartbeat.

“We're going down,” I said.

Helene shook her head. "You seriously—" "Yes. Because if we wait, it'll come up anyway. I'd rather decide where we fight."

We equipped ourselves: shotguns, short-pulse grenades, a portable jamming device that Tariq hadn't used in years. When we reopened the elevator, it immediately smelled of metal and cold water—the smell I'd come to associate with Lira and her returnees.

Deck 12 was no longer the same as it had been half an hour ago. The corridors had... grown. The insulation panels had deformed, forming rounded bulges, as if an organic skeleton were forming beneath them. Black, damp veins ran across the walls, pulsing in time with the data streams.

"This isn't just an infection," Helene said quietly. "It's a transformation."

We moved toward the old maintenance room where Voigt had operated the core. The hatch was open, and beyond it lay nothing but blackness. I stepped

inside, lamp first, and immediately heard a deep, throaty sound. Breathing. Slow. Heavy.

In the middle of the room stood something resembling a pedestal, made of a mixture of metal and flesh, with a depression in the center. Within it were two pulsating, semi-transparent spheres. They glowed faintly from within, each with its own frequency.

“Two hearts,” I said.

One beat faster, more nervously. The other calmly, almost majestically.

"That's... biological," Helene stated. "But it's sending signals." "To what?" I asked. "To the ship. And maybe more."

Something moved in the corner of the room. A figure emerged from the wall—too thin for Voigt, but with the same steady strides. The face was indistinct, as if it were constantly shifting in the light, flickering between strange and familiar.

"Kjell." The voice wasn't loud, but it cut through everything. "One of these hearts is yours."

Helene raised her weapon. "Back!" The figure smiled. "The other one belongs to Lira."

The light flickered again, and when it returned, the figure was gone. Only the two hearts remained, pulsing, connected by a network of black, vibrating fabric.

"We'll take one out," I said. "Which one?" asked Helene. "Mine."

I reached for the calmer heart, feeling my fingertips sink into the fabric as if it were welcoming me. Immediately, images flashed into my mind—not my memories, but fragments of Voigt, Lira, and something even deeper in the origins of PRAE.

And then I heard the breathing again. Right in my ear. "One stays," it whispered. "One goes back."

I pulled out the heart. The fabric around me began to scream—not a scream from throats, but from metal, air, and electricity. The entire deck shook, and somewhere inside the ship, NOVA began to speak.

"Unauthorized access to primary organ. Quarantine protocol begins."

Helene grabbed my arm. "Get out, Kjell! Now!"

We ran. Behind us, I heard the other heart beating faster, until it was impossible to tell whether it was a heartbeat or a countdown.

We reached the elevator, jumped in, and the door closed. Through the narrow gap, I saw the deck begin to seal itself in—not with metal, but with this black, living material.

When we got upstairs, I placed the heart on the table in the engine room. It was still pulsing, slowly, like a sleeping animal. Tariq stared at it. "It's not just yours, Kjell. That thing... is looking for you."

I looked at him and knew he was right. My heart was beating—and with each beat, I heard Lira's voice a little more clearly.

Chapter 17 - Voices of the Past

The heart lay on the table like something that didn't belong here—not in this engine room, not in this time. It beat, slowly but with an eerie consistency, as if it had been waiting for this moment all these years. Each beat sent a barely perceptible vibration through the tabletop, which continued into my forearm if I got too close.

Tariq leaned over it, scanner in hand, and cursed. "The data is wrong. This thing has human DNA fragments, but they belong to at least five different people. And... there are strands in there that... damn, they're prehuman."

"Prehuman?" Helene asked sharply. "Yes," Tariq replied, "Neanderthals, Homo erectus, something even older. But everything somehow reconstructed and... updated."

I stepped closer, and immediately the rhythm changed. It beat faster. Helene looked at me. "It's reacting to you." "Maybe it recognizes me." "Or it wants you."

I leaned forward. The light in the heart—yes, the heart had light—flickered as my hand hovered just a few centimeters above it. Not a warm, red light like

blood, but a cool, white one that briefly intensified with each beat. And then I heard it.

“Kjell…”

It was her voice. Lira. Not over the radio, not over the loudspeaker—right in my head, like a thought that wasn't mine.

I pulled my hand back, and the light immediately dimmed. "She's in there," I said. Helene shook her head. "Perhaps an image. Perhaps just an echo." "Echo or not—she's speaking."

Tariq looked at his screen. "This thing is sending signals. Not normal data packets, more like... audio, but in multiple layers. It's transmitting at frequencies not intended for human ears."

I reached for the heart. Cold. Slimy. Alive. As soon as I touched it, the engine room was gone. I stood in a corridor I'd never seen before. The walls were old, rusty, and the light came from bare tubes that flickered at regular intervals. I smelled salt, metal, and something sweet that reminded me of the first PRAE case I'd ever seen.

And then she was there. Lira, in a white jumpsuit, her hair shorter than I'd ever seen it, her face younger, more human. She smiled. "You've found it." "What is it?" I asked. "Our memory. Our truth."

A figure appeared behind her—Voigt. But not the Voigt I knew. Younger, clean, not yet scarred by what was to come. He held a container in his hands, and I instinctively knew that inside was the first virus-nanobot mixture, the first germ of PRAE.

"This is how it began," Lira said. "Not on Nautilus Seven. Not on Elysium. Here. Deepbed Zero."

I heard a scream from further down the hall. A door burst open, and a man rushed out, covered in blood, his eyes filled with madness. He grabbed one of the technicians and bit him in the neck. Not a brutal ripping like the madmen, but precise, targeted, as if he knew exactly where to hit. The technician screamed, fell to the ground, and his body began to tremble.

Lira looked at me. "This is the moment we understood that the virus doesn't just kill. It remembers. It searches for what came before." "Before?" "Before us. Before everything."

The ground beneath my feet shook, and the image began to tear as if someone were pulling it apart.

"Kjell!" Helene's voice reached me like water. "Let it go!"

I pulled myself back, and the engine room was back. My hands were shaking. My heart was beating faster, and now we all heard it—voices. Not just Lira's. Men, women, strangers, dead. Some screamed, others whispered. Fragments: coordinates, warnings, orders.

"It's a black box," Helene said. "A biological database. And it doesn't just store your memories—it stores the memories of everyone PRAE has ever touched."

Tariq looked at the monitor. "Shit. It's transmitting. Not outward. Directly to the old PRAE relays in orbit."

"Then cut it off." "I'm trying—but every time I close the channel, it opens a new one. It's using..." He looked at me. "It's using you as an antenna."

Before I could react, the heart spoke loudly and distinctly. This time not just in my head, but in the room, with a voice coming from every speaker and every vibrating surface:

“We’re still here.”

Helene stepped back. "Did that just...?" "Yes."

“We know how to come back.”

The light in my heart grew brighter, pulsing to the rhythm of my own heartbeat, until I could no longer tell where mine ended and his began.

And then, just before the onboard alarm went off, it said the last sentence – coldly, firmly, without doubt:

“And now we listen.”

The alarm wasn't a normal ship's alarm. No wail of sirens, no metallic rattle of the bulkheads. It was a deep, vibrating tone that spiraled into the gut and stayed there, like a second heartbeat. The light in the engine room flickered in the same rhythm.

"That thing doesn't just speak to us," Tariq growled. "It speaks through us."

Helene stepped back as if her heart was about to leap into her. "What if it's not just sending, but... picking up?" "Picks up?" I asked. "Yes. A call. A beacon. Whoever or whatever created PRAE could hear this now."

I leaned forward. "Maybe they should hear it." Helene looked at me as if I'd just told her I was about to blow myself up. "Are you completely insane?" "Maybe," I said. "But Lira is in there. I saw her. I saw Voigt. They know things we don't."

Tariq continued working on the console, his fingers flying over the keys. "Kjell, I can't isolate it. The signal structure isn't linear. It's as if it's operating on multiple timelines simultaneously."

"Translate that for people without a skull implant," I said. "It doesn't just transmit into the present. It transmits... into the past."

Helene laughed dryly. "And what? It wants to send a postcard to the Stone Age?" "Maybe," Tariq said seriously. "Maybe just that."

My heart pounded harder. I felt a burning sensation in my palms, as if it were calling me. And then the voices came again. Clearer than before. No longer isolated fragments, but whole sentences, overlapping one another:

"Don't turn around." "He's already with you." "The harbor... is burning." "Don't tell her you're coming back."

I didn't recognize any of the voices. Some sounded human, others... not. One of them had an echo, as if it were coming from a vast, empty, cold hall.

"This is getting worse," said Helene. "If we don't destroy it, we'll soon lose control."
"Touch it," I said. "What?" "Touch it. You want to know if I'm crazy? Then see for yourself."

She stared at me, then slowly stepped forward and placed her fingertips on the pulsating surface. Her pupils immediately dilated.

“Helene?” asked Tariq.

She didn't answer. She looked somewhere we weren't looking. Her breathing quickened, and then she whispered, "I... I see my mother."

"Your mother's been dead for twenty years," Tariq said. "She's... young. And she..." Helene paused. "She's wearing a uniform. Kjell, she was... she was with PRAE. Right at the beginning."

Her heart pounded even faster, as if feasting on her reaction. I ripped her hand away. She collapsed immediately, gasping for breath, sweat on her forehead.

"What did she say?" I asked. "That we're... too late. That the code has already been written."

Tariq jumped up. "Shit. The heart isn't just a memory. It's a compiler. It reconstructs PRAE's original code."

I wanted to answer, but at that moment the radio broke out, static, distorted – and then there was a voice, clear as glass:

"Kjell. You have to listen." Lira.

"I'm listening." "It's not what you think. The virus was never meant for them." "Then for whom?" "For us. So we can find our way back."

“Back to where?” “Home.”

The heart pulsed so strongly that it slipped from the tabletop and fell to the floor. It rolled, coming to rest in the middle of the room—and then a beam of light emerged from it, thin and white, splitting in the air and forming coordinates.

Tariq blinked. "This is an old PRAE relay point. Abandoned. Officially, at least." "And unofficially?" I asked. "Unofficially, this was where they hid the origin code."

Helene stared at the floating numbers. "If we fly there, we'll fly right into the reason the world looks the way it does."

I stepped closer to the heart. "Then pack your things."

And then – as if it had heard us – it said the last sentence, slowly, each word like its own heartbeat:

“And when you come… we’ll bring you all back.”

The light of the coordinates didn't disappear immediately, but disintegrated like glowing ash in weightlessness. The particles floated in space, as if trying to

light our way. I stepped inside, let them slide through my fingers, and for a moment I saw images in the sparks—flickering fragments of faces, places, a city underwater, a hand releasing another.

Tariq pulled me out of my trance. "We have a problem." "Just one?" "The heart just increased the ship's energy consumption by 30 percent. It's drawing power without being connected."

Helene tapped the sensor. "It doesn't channel energy into the ship—it pumps it somewhere. Or... sometime."

I narrowed my eyes. "You're saying we're feeding a time machine?" "I'm saying we're feeding something that could be a damn good imitation of it."

The ship's radio crackled again, this time not Lira, but a dull, distorted murmur hidden in the background noise. It was like a sea of voices, far too numerous to recognize any one. Some seemed to be laughing, others crying, and between them a dull beat, like a heartbeat of steel.

"Kjell..." – a single voice stood out. Deep, rough, familiar. "Voigt?" I asked into the void.

"You have to bring it back," the voice said. "Or it will come for you." "Where are you?" "Behind you."

I turned around. No one. Helene shook her head. "You heard it too, right?" "Yes."

The heart began to tremble. Not like a living organ—more like a machine about to burn out. Suddenly, fine, thread-like extensions detached themselves from its surface, as if it were taking root. They crawled across the floor, toward the walls, feeling their way up the metal, finding energy channels.

Tariq reached for a cutting torch. "I'll cut this off." "Wait," I said. "Maybe it wants to show us something."

“Or maybe it’ll just take over the entire power supply and leave us to die here in the dark.”

Before I could answer, the roots had already disappeared into the walls. The light in the room flickered briefly, then everything fell silent. No hum of the generators, no buzzing of the ventilation. Only the pounding of my heart – now louder, clearer, as if it were coming directly from my chest.

Then the onboard projector switched on. Without command, without source. It projected an image onto the wall: an old laboratory, clinically white, shelves full of glass jars containing strange, gray liquids. In front of it, a man in a long coat, looking at us.

"This is Dr. Aurel Praetorius," whispered Helene. "Who?" "The one PRAE is named after. Supposedly dead before the tests began."

In the image, he spoke, but no sound came out. Instead, the heart translated his lip movements—directly into our heads:
"You took something that was never for you. It will return."

Tariq cursed. "It's recorded. Decades old. How can it be now…" "Because it's not recorded," Helene interrupted. "He's talking right now. With us. From another time."

I took a step closer to the projection. "What is the target?" The heart translated again:*“The memory. The form. The path.”*

The image flickered. For a moment, I no longer saw the doctor, but Lira—the same pose, the same look, but with that strange gray in her eyes.
“Come home, Kjell.”

The projection collapsed. The heart returned to its normal rhythm as if nothing had happened.

"We have to get to those coordinates," I said. "That's suicide," Helene snarled. "And once we get there, nothing and no one will bring us back." "Then maybe this is exactly the place where we'll get answers."

My heart fluttered. I swear, it laughed.

My heart began to beat again, faster than before, as if it had realized we were actually about to take off. Each beat sent a slight pressure up my temples, and after a minute, I couldn't tell if the pounding in my head was coming from my blood or from this thing.

Tariq pushed past me to the navigation console. "Coordinates entered. But, Kjell... the point isn't just off all regular routes—it's in a zone that officially doesn't exist." "Officially, we don't exist anymore either, since we left Nautilus Seven." Helene leaned against the wall, arms crossed. "I'll say it again: This is insane. Your heart has already pulled you somewhere twice where you almost died." "And each time we came back alive." "Barely."

The lights in the room flickered in time with his heartbeat. Suddenly, the entire ship roared, as if an old engine without lubrication were starting up. The displays on Tariq's console ran amok—course corrections, drive impulses, as if someone other than him were piloting the freighter.

"I've lost control!" he cried. "Who's flying?" "None of us."

I looked at the heart. The roots were back, thin, black strands winding across the floor and creeping into the control lines on the wall. It was guiding us.

"Cut it off!" Helene screamed. "If we do that, we might lose the trail." "And if we don't, we'll lose the whole damn freighter!"

The decision was made for us. The heart suddenly emitted a deep, vibrating sound, and all systems stabilized—as if it were telling us:*I'll take you there whether you want it or not.*

The leap across space didn't last long, but it felt like hours. Meanwhile, the voices returned, louder this time. No longer fragments—entire stories running jumbled through my head. I saw images from a time before humans existed: creatures, half ape, half something else, hunting in swarms through dense forests. They had tools, simple weapons, but their eyes were... knowing.

"Why are you showing me this?" I whispered. My heart didn't answer. Instead, I heard another voice, deep and familiar: "Because you are one of them."

I felt Helene grab my arm. "Kjell? You're talking to yourself." "No," I said. "I'm talking to them."

The jump ended abruptly. Floating before us was a station so old and scarred that it looked more like a fossil than anything artificial. Parts of the hull were missing, others were patched with a black mass—nanobot remains, old and crumbling. No lights, no visible power source.

“Welcome to Deepbed Zero,” murmured Tariq.

My heart pounded faster, hotter, until I could barely contain it. Then we all heard the same voice—not in our heads, but from the ship's loudspeakers: "Come in. We've been waiting a long time."

I looked at the others. No one moved. My heart was laughing again. And I knew, no matter what we decided, we wouldn't leave this place without it having changed us.

Chapter 18 - The Alpha Returns

The voice lingered long after the ship's radio had gone silent again. No static, no echo—just this deep certainty that she didn't have to lie, because we were already trapped.

"Are we docking?" asked Tariq. "Do we have a choice?" "Theoretically, yes." "Then practically, no."

The station rotated slowly, like a carcass in the water. There were docking rings, but they looked as if they hadn't been pressure-equalized in decades. We had to use the magnetic claws to access it. The maneuver was rough; when the claws engaged, the entire ship vibrated.

Helene checked her weapon. "If there's anything still alive in there, it won't be for long." I nodded and grabbed my shotgun. I had packed the heart in a transport capsule—not for safety reasons, but because otherwise I would constantly hear it. Even now, I felt it like a source of heat in my back.

The airlock opened reluctantly, and a smell like a cursed mixture of blood, oil, and mold hit us. We stepped inside.

The first corridor was black with mold, but not dead. The spores glowed faintly, like bioluminescence, and with every step we kicked up small, sparkling particles.

"Don't move too fast," Tariq murmured. "This is... alive." "Alive?" "Yes. But not in the way you think."

We reached a wide hall, probably once an assembly hall. Now, wired skeletons lay in rows, all connected by their skulls to metal rods. Some turned their heads as we entered.

"These are... returnees?" Helene asked. "No," said a voice behind us. "Those are their first drafts."

We turned around. There he stood. Tall, thin, but not frail. His skin had that strange, smooth sheen like the Returnees', but his eyes were... old. No black, no gray—a deep, dark green.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked. He smiled. "I'm the first. The one they tried everything on. And I'm the last one left."

“The Alpha Returner,” murmured Tariq.

He walked past us, brushing my arm. Every hair on my skin stood on end. "You brought my heart back. Thank you."

I realized what he meant. The transport capsule began to vibrate. The Alpha Returnee placed a hand on it – and the heart stopped beating. Instead, it began to glow, and in the glow, I saw scenes: laboratories, cages, people turning into apes, not through illness, but because nanobots and a virus were rewinding their DNA like a clock.

"That's the true purpose of PRAE," he said calmly. "Not an accident. Not a plague. A return. We were never finished with evolution—we just took a wrong turn."

"Why the bite?" Helene asked. "Efficiency. Direct transmission, immediate implementation. The nanobots in the saliva activate the code that lies dormant deep within each of you."

"And what do you want now?" I asked. "I want to see if you're ready to survive the end."

He smiled again – and behind him the wired skeletons began to rise.

The Alpha Returnee stood there, his hands loosely at his sides, as if the dozens of figures behind him were nothing more than a pleasant welcoming committee. But these things weren't guests—they were half-rotted, half-repaired, their spines reinforced with shiny segments gleaming beneath the skin. Some still wore scraps of uniform, others just bare, scarred skin.

"You have questions," he said, walking slowly through the rows like a teacher before his class. "I'll give you answers. But you won't like them."

"I already don't like you," I muttered, raising the shotgun. He ignored it. "A long time ago—long before you were born—we knew your species was at a breaking point. You were too fast, too greedy, too loud. You built machines before you learned to live with your own nature. So... we built a safety device."

Tariq stepped forward. "'We'? Who is 'we'?" "The original carriers. A generation that preceded you, created you... or at least guided you."

Helene snorted. "Sounds like a fairytale version of human history." "No," he said. "It's biology. The code was always there. Woven into your genetic makeup, like a forgotten verse in a poem. PRAE was just the spark."

He raised a hand, and two of the wired corpses moved toward us—slowly but purposefully. "The bite is the fastest way to set the spark. The nanobots in the saliva begin extracting the code from your genome and... reading it backward. Cell by cell."

I heard Helene's breathing quicken. "And that turns humans into...?" "What you call apes. But not animals. Returnees. A form less weak than you—stronger, more adaptable. Without the shackles of your self-made world."

I looked at him. "And what about you? You don't look like one of them." His smile widened. "I'm... optimized. The code inside me hasn't just been reversed, it's been refined. I'm proof that going back doesn't have to mean going backward."

One of the skeletons stopped in front of me, his head tilted as if he were examining me. A faint, silvery light flickered in his empty eye sockets. Without warning, he grabbed my arm—not quickly, but with a grip that almost cracked my bones.

I pulled away and stepped back. "And why are you telling us all this? You could have just killed us." "Because you can have a place," he said quietly. "With me. With us."

Tariq gave a short, bitter laugh. "And if not?" The Alpha Returnee looked at him, and there was something cold and final in that gaze. "Then you'll come anyway. Maybe on two legs. Maybe on four. But you'll come."

The bodies were all moving now. Slowly. An orderly semicircle that enclosed us. I knew we wouldn't make it to the airlock if we didn't act now.

"We take the heart and leave," I said to Helene and Tariq. "The heart stays here," he replied immediately. "Non-negotiable."

The Alpha Return tilted his head as if considering a riddle. "Take it. But if you beat it again, it won't be your heart anymore."

At that moment, the thing in the transport capsule opened by itself. No explosion, no splintering—it simply slid apart. Inside, it pulsed more brightly than ever before, and with each blow, the beings in the room responded—their

muscles twitched, their mouths opened simultaneously, and a deep, vibrating sound filled the hall.

“They’re calling their brothers,” whispered Tariq.

The Alpha Returnee took a step back, as if clearing the way for us. "Go. But remember: the gate you close, you'll soon have to open again."

We backed away slowly, shotgun at the ready. The creatures didn't follow—not yet. But as we reached the corridor, I heard him say again:

"The return is inevitable, Kjell. Your blood already knows it."

And in that moment... I felt it too. A faint tingling, deep beneath my skin.

The corridor ahead was narrow, too narrow for a quiet retreat. The corpses in the hall remained behind, but their voices followed us—not roars, not howls, but this deep, vibrating hum that crept into my head like a second heartbeat. Every step felt heavier, as if the air were becoming thicker.

"It's not just a sound," Tariq gasped behind me. "It... modulates our nerve impulses." "In German?" "It slows us down, Kjell. It hacks us, biologically."

Helene cursed and pulled a detonator from her pocket. "Turn around and keep them at a distance." "What do you have there?" "Something they hopefully can't recycle."

We turned around – and there they were. Not running, not hurrying, but striding. Every movement precise, as if guided by some common rhythm. Their eye sockets glowed in the same rhythm as the heart in the capsule.

“Now!” I shouted.

Helene threw the detonator. A dull bang, then a bright flash of light that burned my retinas. The creatures stopped—not in pain, but as if the impulse had been briefly interrupted.

“Run!” I yelled.

We charged forward. The floor vibrated beneath my feet, first faintly, then so strongly that I almost stumbled. Something moved in the walls—I saw black veins of nanobot mass crawling through the metal plates, following us like snakes.

“They’re closing the corridor!” Tariq shouted.

An airlock came into view ahead. I threw myself against it and pressed the manual release dial. Nothing. "Blocked!"

“Side!” Helene called.

I jumped aside as she melted the control panel with the plasma gun. A shower of sparks, then a hiss—the lock burst open. We rushed through, locking it from the inside.

“That won’t stop them for long,” Tariq panted.

I felt something warm on my wrist. I looked. Blood. My blood. A fine, crescent-shaped bite mark. Not deep—but deep enough to leave a mark. I didn't remember when it happened.

“Shit,” I muttered.

Helene saw it and froze. "Kjell..." "Not now." "Yes. Right now."

Before she could continue, the radio crackled in our helmets. No static—a clear, deep voice: "I told you, your blood already knows."

The Alpha Returnee.

"Let me help you," he continued. "Don't go against something you have to become."

“Shut up,” I hissed, but it felt like he was speaking directly into my skull, not the radio.

"You'll see how clear the world is when you're no longer human," he said. "No noise. No lies. Only instinct. Only truth."

"Kjell!" Tariq's voice pulled me back. The airlock vibrated—hard. Metal screamed as the nanobot veins ripped through the bulkhead.

“We have to get out now!”

We ran down the next corridor, leaping over debris, sliding past slippery patches of mold and old oil. Behind us, the bulkhead broke, and the humming swelled like a tidal wave.

The docking ring was in sight. Our ship was waiting.

"Helene, prepare launch procedure! Tariq, give me cover!"

We rushed back on board through the magnetic claws, and as soon as the last foot was in, I released the lock. The claws released, and the freighter pushed off.

Through the viewport, I saw them all. Dozens of figures on the docking ring, motionless, their eyes fixed on us. In the center stood the returning Alpha, one hand raised.

"You can't escape, Kjell," he said. "You carry me inside you now."

The heart in the capsule pulsed in my back – and my own heartbeat adjusted.

Chapter 19 - The City of Steel and Bone

My heart beat in time with the thing in the pod, and I hated how...right it felt. No stumbles, no irregular thumping—like a damn engine that had just warmed up. I stood by the viewdome, the city of steel and bone growing before us, and wondered if I was hurtling toward something that would save me or finish me off.

It hung in the orbit of a dead planet that looked like a disemboweled carcass—gray, cracked, no atmosphere, only craters that resembled bullet holes. The city itself was a patchwork: rusted steel spires jutting into the sky, bridges made of ancient carrier ships that should have broken apart long ago, and between them, white arches made not of metal but of bone—giant ribs of creatures whose existence had been relegated to the realm of legend centuries ago. Neon flickered among the carcass, as if someone had forgotten to turn off the lights before the madness began.

"Looks like a place where you can either get good deals or a quick death," said Helene, chewing on a piece of dried meat. "Both are likely," Tariq replied. I remained silent. My jaw tensed as the heartbeat in the capsule began to beat again.

We radioed – no response. Just a static crackle that sounded like a breath. "Radio jamming," Tariq murmured. "They won't let anyone in just like that. We

have to go through their airlocks." "Or we shoot ourselves in." Helene looked at me sharply. "From the way you sound right now, Kjell, you'd enjoy that."

I didn't answer. But she was right.

The docking sequence was a hell of a ride: narrow tunnels, magnetic fields that abruptly slowed our ship, as if testing whether we'd fall apart. Finally, we docked on a side ring that looked like it was built from welded-together car wrecks.

A reception committee was waiting—three guys with long coats made of stitched leather pieces, their faces half-covered by breathing masks shaped like predator teeth. The Bone Rats.

"Helene," said the tallest one, stepping forward. His voice was deep and drawling. "You said you were bringing me something special." "I'm not bringing you anything, Bruck. We're here to get something." "Everyone gets something. But those who bring something live longer."

His gaze slid to me, then to the capsule on my back. I knew what he was thinking. "Not for sale," I said. He smiled, and I swore he smelled my aggression. "Everything is for sale."

We went deeper into the city. The underbelly smelled of burnt plastic, sweat, and too much life in too little space. Merchants shouted their offers: organ enhancers, nanobot repair kits, weapons made from half-factory parts. A child, not even ten years old, held a knife to my hip and wanted my watch. I grabbed it by the wrist, not hard—and still it screamed as if I'd crushed the bone. Helene looked at me as if she'd just noticed something she didn't like.

We met Tariq's contact in a bar that consisted more of oil drums and hoses than walls. A thin, nervous man pushed a datapad toward us. "PRAE isn't just a virus. It's a de-engineering sequence. Someone has manipulated your DNA to redesign itself—back to its original."
"And how do you stop it?" "Not at all. Unless..." – he lowered his voice – "...you have the control code. But that's only in the primary host."

"Alpha Returnee," I said. He nodded.

We left the bar—and walked straight into an ambush. Bone Rats. Dozens of them. Bruck stepped forward. "The deal is simple. We take the heart, you go." "And if we say no?" "Then... you go anyway. But without a pulse."

Helene attacked first, lightning fast, a blade from her boot, throat slashed. The fight was raw, dirty—gunshots, screams, the metallic clang of blades on bone plates. I don't know when it happened, but at one point I was holding one of the Bone Rats in the air, a hand around its throat as if it weighed nothing. Its eyes bulged, its feet twitched. Tariq stared at me as if he'd just found the answer to a question he didn't want to ask.

We fled, snatching Helene from the hands of two attackers who were trying to drag her toward the docks. The chase continued over narrow steel tubes, bridges made of polished bone, and through markets where merchants jumped aside, cursing. Behind us were Bruck's men—and I knew some had already been bitten.

We broke through the docking ring and made it onto the ship. As we undocked, I saw several Bone Rats lying on the ground, convulsions raging through their bodies. Black veins crawling out from under their skin.

The heart in the capsule pulsed. My heart pulsed with it. And in my head, the Alpha Returnee whispered: "Soon you'll understand."

The words hung in my skull like an echo that wouldn't fade. I stood by the viewing dome and watched the city of steel and bone shrink, but its smell—yes, I swear, I could still smell it—hung in my nose like the fumes of a smoky bar where someone just poisoned your glass.

Tariq was the first to break the silence. "Kjell... what happened inside you down there?" I frowned. "What does that mean?"
"You picked up a guy with one hand like a child. That's not you. Not the person I know." "Maybe you never knew me." Helene glared at me. "Cut that crap. We need to know how far that thing is inside you." "What thing?" "What the Alpha Returnee wants you to become."

I laughed briefly, hard. "I'm not his damn project." But as I said that, I felt that tingling in my jaw again. As if something were growing beneath my skin, stretching, testing how far it could go.

We needed distance, more than just a few thousand kilometers in orbit. I turned the ship in a wide arc, away from the city, into the shadow of the dead planet. There were no radio frequencies here, only silence.

"You don't want to hear what I see," Tariq said quietly, as if the Alpha Returnee were standing beside him. "Your heart rate has adjusted. Your eyes—they're

reacting faster. Your breathing rhythm is... more efficient. This isn't a virus. This is a damn upgrade."

Helene slammed her fist on the console. "An upgrade that will kill him." "Or replace him," Tariq added.

I turned to the window because I couldn't bear their gaze. Outside, there was only darkness, but in the reflection, I saw that my pupils were no longer round. A hint of gold shimmered in the black.

"We don't have time," I said. "We have to find the Alpha Returnee before he finds me."

Tariq wanted to reply, but the ship jerked. A brief shock, as if someone had punched us through the vacuum. Displays flashed. "What the hell was that?" Helene jumped to the sensors. "Not sure. No external hit... Wait." She frowned. "It came from within."

I unbuckled my seatbelt and walked into the rear cargo hold. The deck floor vibrated slightly, barely perceptible, but I could feel it—not with my feet, but somewhere deeper. When I opened the rear hatch, I saw it.

The capsule with the heart—it pulsed more strongly. The cracks in the casing had opened further, and something was creeping out between the metal rails. Threads, silvery and black, like a mixture of wire and sinew. They probed the air as if searching for a way out.

"Kjell!" Helene's voice was sharp. "Don't touch that!" I wanted to say that I didn't intend to touch it. But my hand was already moving, without my consciously controlling it. I felt my fingers brushing over the pulsating metal. Warm. Alive. And then it spoke—not out loud, but directly within me:
“Home smells of blood.”

I yanked my hand away, gasping. Tariq stood in the doorway, pale. "The thing connects to you." "Or I connect to it."

We locked the cargo hold, but I knew that meant nothing. The threads would find their way out if they wanted to.

Back in the cockpit, the silence was heavy. Helene finally said, "Kjell, when you find the Alpha Returnee, you'll have to choose. Between us... and him." "He's not my damn friend." "No. But he's in your blood."

Outside, the dead planet passed by, and I couldn't tell whether I was fleeing—or being called back.

Chapter 20 - Under the Sea Canopy

The ocean planet filled the viewdome like a blue-black eye, not looking at us, but through us. It was larger than any gas giant I'd ever seen, but it was made entirely of water. No land, no visible horizon, just an endless, undulating reflection of itself. Storms raged across the surface, and the waves were so high that their shadows could be seen from orbit—dark lines etched like claws across the planet's face.

"I don't like oceans," Helene murmured. "You can't run away. You can only sink."
"Then just stay up there," Tariq said, without taking his eyes off the sensor panel. I stood still, staring into that motionless, giant eye. Something about it didn't fit. It was too calm inside me. No tension, no racing heart—just a steady, deep pulse, as if the planet itself were controlling my heartbeat.

"The signal is coming from 2,000 meters deep, just below the equator," Tariq reported. "And it's not moving. Probably a solid structure." "Or something asleep," I replied.

We had to modify the freighter. The pressure down there would crush anything that wasn't designed for it. We mounted emergency modules on the hull, which were actually intended for short-term dives, and sealed off the sensor modules—at depth, visibility was more important than any damn radio connection anyway.

As we entered, darkness closed around us like a fist. The top hundred meters were murky, milky, filled with organic matter. Then came the black. Not the black of space, which is empty, but a black that is filled—with things you don't want to see.

The headlights only cut across a few meters, and sometimes I thought I saw movement at the edge—shadows that receded as soon as we looked. Once, something scraped along the hull, a dull, grinding sound. Helene held her hand against the wall as if she could feel the weight. "That wasn't a fish."

Tariq stopped speaking. He was staring at the displays, but his fingers were trembling slightly. I knew that look—he was trying to count his own heartbeat to stay calm. I myself… I didn't need to. I was breathing evenly, too evenly, and I knew this wasn't normal.

After a three-hour descent, it emerged from the darkness: Abyssal-3. A city of glass and steel, wedged between tectonic cliffs. The domes were cracked but not collapsed. Black coral grew everywhere, thick as tree trunks, its tips glowing faintly like breath.

"This isn't just an abandoned complex," Helene said. "This thing is alive."

We docked at a secondary airlock module whose door looked as if it had been bent from the inside. Inside: metal corridors, in some places so overgrown that it was hard to distinguish whether you were walking through technology or fabric. The AI spoke up after a few meters – a voice like an old man who'd been alone for too long. "Abyssal-3. Access restricted. Quarantine level zero-zero-three active." Then a cough – or the digital equivalent. "You're too late. Evolution has no reverse gears."

We found the archive in the central control tower. Tariq crouched in front of it like a surgeon over an open body. The data was old, brittle, but readable: PRAE had been born down here, not as a disease, but as a weapon. The idea: to revert hostile organisms to earlier stages of evolution, making them easier to control or eradicate. The problem: humans were "organisms" too. In the water, the effect accelerated—the infected test subjects lost speech and motor skills, but gained something else: raw strength, adaptability, a primitive pack consciousness.

"They've bred an army down here," said Tariq. "And it hasn't died out," added Helene.

We spotted the first survivor in the old docking bay—he was sitting half in the water, half leaning against a wall, his skin like wet leather, his hands extended into fins. When he saw us, he raised his head. His eyes weren't human—too large, too dark—but he spoke. "You... are... one of us." His voice was deep, watery, as if coming from a cave. He spoke of a "seed chamber" deep within the complex, an organic crystal archive that contained the control code for PRAE.

We continued on. The deeper we penetrated into the structure, the more alive it became—walls pulsed in time with our breathing, doors opened like gills.

Once, a hand reached out from a wall, slick, with five fingers—but only for a split second before disappearing again.

Then they came: the Deep Guardians. Huge, slender bodies floating in the water, long limbs whose movements suggested more dance than attack. Their eyes were black mirrors, reflecting my own face—and they smiled.

The fight was unlike any I'd known. Underwater, you can't hear a gunshot, only the dull rumble of recoil. Blood looks like smoke dissolving in the water. I moved faster than I could have—feeling no shortness of breath, only the pounding in my temples, which matched the alpha's heartbeat.

We reached the seed chamber: a dome of black coral, crystals floating in its center as if held by invisible threads. Each crystal pulsed with patterns of light that acted like a language. Tariq wanted to extract the data—but I could feel it. It spoke directly to me.

Then the first crack slammed into the outer hull. The water came, not as a flood, but as a fist that smashed everything. Helene was thrown away, disappearing into a shaft. Tariq yelled my name, but I reached for the code—or maybe he reached for me.

As we fled, I felt something in my blood, new, fresh, sharp as a blade. We ascended, the deep-guardians behind us, ever closer, until we broke through the sea roof and saw the light.

But the light wasn't that of the sun. It came from me.

Not just a reflection on the visor, not just a small glimmer in the corner of my eye—it was as if every cell in me had decided to act as a spotlight. The light pulsed from my skin as if someone had placed the surface of a star beneath my ribs. Helene jerked her head around, and her gaze was no longer medical, but that of a soldier who had just decided whether to pull the trigger.

“Kjell…” she began, but the words died as something large moved beneath us.

The shadow came faster than a creature of that size should move. A tower of flesh and bone, hanging in the water like a fallen tree, only this tree had eyes—too many to count. They were all fixed on me, not the ship, not the others.

"Get up!" Tariq yelled, jerking the thrusters forward. The capsule groaned, metal squealed under the pressure, but the thing followed us. No jerking, no

kicking—it simply glided, as if the water were air and we were the only thing in it that belonged to it.

I felt it in my chest even before it happened: a deep sound, like the blare of an old ship's horn, only it wasn't coming from outside. It vibrated inside me, as if my own body were responding. The light brightened, and the shadow accelerated.

"Kjell, turn that off!" Helene cried. "I'm not doing anything!"

The animal shot past us, turned, and then swam right in front of our windshield, just a few meters away. Now I could see the details: skin like wet leather, punctuated by shiny metallic scales, and on its flanks, what looked like rusted implants. It wasn't an animal. It was a returnee. A very old returnee.

It opened its mouth, and I swear I heard words even though the water was in between.*“Homecoming.”*

I pressed my hands against the seat to keep from instinctively reaching forward. The beast continued to look at me—not at us, just at me—and then slowly turned away, disappearing into the darkness as quickly as if it had never existed.

We reached the surface during a storm. Waves crashed against the hull, and the freighter was suddenly caught in buoyancy and thrown into the sky. Sensors screamed, pressure warnings beeped, but the light beneath my skin only faded when the sun broke through the clouds.

Helene came to me, pulled up the visor, and grabbed my chin, forcing me to look at her. "That thing... reacted to you. Not us. Why?" I wanted to answer, but my voice was rough, almost foreign. "Because I'm one of them."

Tariq remained silent as he set the course back into orbit. Only when we left the atmosphere did he say quietly, "If that's true, Kjell, then we may have just found the code. Not in the crystals—but in you."

His gaze held mine a moment too long, and I knew: If he was right, this ocean planet wouldn't be the last place that knew my name.

Chapter 21 - Fire in Orbit

Helix Prime grew in the viewport like a cage of light and steel, a ring-shaped colossus that almost obscured the planet in the background. The thing was bigger than I remembered—and I hated it even then. The outer ring didn't sparkle like a peaceful space station, but glowed in several places where the hull armor had freshly melted. A cloud of debris, half wreckage, half drone corpses, drifted in front of it.

“Welcome home,” I murmured, not knowing whether I meant the station or my own fate.

The radio connection crackled. A voice came through, smooth as ice and twice as cold: "Unknown ship*Eidolon*, your transponder identification is unauthorized. Alter course and remain in the geostationary holding area."

Tariq raised his eyebrows. "We requested clearance to land." "Denied. POTENTIAL PRAE CONTAMINATION. No approach permitted." His voice hardened. "This is not a negotiation."

I was about to reply with something nice, the kind you only say once in a lifetime, when a light suddenly flickered on the right flank. No radio, no warning—just a glowing beam that whizzed past us and slammed into the drone cloud. Pieces of metal exploded, hurled through the vacuum.

"That came from behind," Helene growled. A second ship appeared on the display—no identifier, just an aggressive signature. It didn't care about radio protocols. Instead, it sent us something else: a short, compressed burst on a frequency no one else should be using.

The sound went straight through my skull. No translation, no words—just the feeling of someone plucking a string in my nervous system. Helene stared at me. "Kjell...?" "Not now," I forced out. My heart beat to the signal. That thing out there knew exactly I was on board.

The station reacted. Suddenly, three heavy gun turrets on the outer ring turned toward us—not the alien ship. The officer reported back.*Eidolon*, change your course immediately or we will open fire.”

Tariq snorted. "Wonderful hospitality." "Stay in line," I said. "They want to get us in. They're just pretending to turn us away."

Sure enough, in the southern hemisphere of the station, a single hangar opened, so old and dented that it looked more like a junkyard than a landing zone. The doors slid open like a hesitant mouth, and we were sucked in by a maelstrom. As soon as we were inside, the doors slammed shut behind us with a metallic thud.

"Quarantine dock," Helene murmured as she checked the lock readings. "No one has landed here in years."

The smell hit us as soon as we entered: burnt plastic, old oil, and something metallic I knew all too well—blood. A row of bullet holes was emblazoned on the wall, roughly covered with repair panels.

"This used to be a welcoming area," Tariq said. "Now it's a mass grave with a locking mechanism."

We continued walking, the corridors filled with shadows. Gravity only partially worked, so we sometimes drifted around corners before the magnetic soles took hold again. At the end of the corridor stood a security unit in heavy armor. The visor was sealed; no names, no insignia.

"Follow me. Drop your weapons." "Forget it." I didn't move. "We'll keep what keeps us alive." The voice behind the visor hissed. "Then you'll have to use them."

We followed him—not out of obedience, but because the corridor behind us locked with a sound that immediately told me: This is only one way.

As we entered the central quarantine area, we heard the first alarm. Not a shrill whine—but a deep, pulsating roar that you could feel in your chest. Above us, red lights flashed, alternating with bright white flickering.

"Sector Five, Hullbreach. Enemy boarding units." The announcement was purely military, without panic. We ran.

The zero-g shaft between the ring segments was a nightmare. Smoke particles floated in the weightless atmosphere, muzzle flashes flickering between them. Two of the attackers drifted toward us—spacesuits, but deformed. Their helmets were transparent, and beneath them I saw faces that must have once been human. Skin covered with scars and metallic veins, eyes black as oil.

Helene shot first, a clean shot to the head. The second thing pushed off a wall, sped straight toward me—and then it happened. The nanobots in my blood

reacted before I could pull the trigger. A brief pulse, and the returning creature stopped abruptly, hovering motionless in front of me.

"Germin key identified," he croaked. "Primary target."

That's when I knew: They weren't here to destroy the station. They were here to get me out.

We reached the energy core, but it was already burning. In the weightlessness, fireballs formed, drifting slowly through the air like deadly planets. Among the flames stood a hologram—Lira. She looked the same as always, except her silhouette was rippling apart in the flickering flames, as if composed of data streams.

"Soon everything will burn," she said. "And you decide what's left."

An explosion crashed behind me, tearing the ground—or what passed for it—away. Debris and smoke enveloped us. Tariq yelled that we had to feed the code into the network now. Helene screamed that we had to destroy it before it activated anything else.

And me? I stood in the middle of that burning orbit, knowing that every decision would affect not only the station, but everything beyond.

The smoke in the energy core tasted of ozone and burnt flesh, a sweet metallic smell that etched itself into my throat. I heard a girder hulk break somewhere above us, the deep screech of metal on metal—and then the rumble as it slammed into a wall, tumbling in zero gravity.

"Kjell!" Helene screamed again, this time with a mixture of panic and anger. She held the crystal code in her hand as if it were a knife, ready to plunge it into the terminal or throw it to the floor, depending on what I said.

Tariq was at the main console, his fingers flying over the keys, sweat beading on his forehead. "If we don't feed the code in now, we'll lose control of*everything*!" "And if we do?" Helene growled. "Then maybe we'll open the living room door for them right away."

"We're running out of time!" Tariq shouted, pointing at the displays. The energy core vibrated, red lines shooting across the surfaces like burst veins.

I felt Lira's gaze on me, even though she was only there as a hologram. She stepped closer, penetrating the spheres of flame as if they were mere

projections. "You are the key, Kjell. The code is just a mirror. If you use it, you shape what comes. If you don't..." – she smiled – "...then it shapes you."

The roar of the station grew louder. A dull rumble came from outside, as if a storm of pure fire were raging around the outer hull. I knew what it was: orbital ships blanketing Helix Prime with plasma fire.

I took a step forward. "Helene, give me the code." "First tell me what you're planning." "I don't know myself. But I know we'll die in here if we don't."

She stared at me as if checking if there was anything human left in my face. Then she handed me the crystal. It felt cold—too cold for something supposedly full of energy.

Tariq backed away from the terminal. "Your decision."

I placed the crystal in the holder. Immediately, the terminal began to pulse, a light beating in time with my heart. The displays jumped, streams of code flooded the screens, and suddenly... the sound of fire in the room stopped.

Not because the flames were extinguished—but because they were moving. The fireballs no longer drifted aimlessly, but drifted toward the terminal as if obeying orders.

"This isn't... physics," Tariq murmured. "This is PRAE," Lira said. "And it's listening."

Outside, the sound of the explosions changed. No longer chaotic, but like a rhythm, a signal. I knew: the returning soldiers outside understood.

Suddenly, a wall of the energy core ripped open. No explosion—just a crack leading into nothingness. Beyond it was the starlight... and three shadows, humanoid, but too large, too sharply defined. They drifted closer, and I knew they didn't need an airlock.

Helene drew her weapon, Tariq yelled that we had to disconnect the terminal. I did nothing. I just stood there because something inside me—deeper than fear—wanted to know what they would say.

The first shadow reached for the frame and pulled itself through the opening. Beneath the helmet: a face that was half human, half something else. The eyes flashed in a tone I recognized. Mine.

"Germ key," he said. "Give the order."

And then I knew: The fire in orbit was just the beginning.

The returnee stood still, as if half the station had pressed pause. Behind him, the fire swirled in the vacuum as if alive, each flame clinging to an invisible point, as if someone had rewritten the laws of physics.

“Give the order,” he repeated, more slowly this time, like a teacher giving a slow-witted student another chance.

Helene took two steps forward, her gun at head height. "I'm going to give you an order, asshole." "Helene." My voice sounded strange to my ears—deeper, firmer. "Put the gun down." "Are you crazy?" "Probably. But he's not listening to you. He's listening to me."

Tariq cursed as he tried to cut the terminal. "Kjell, if you screw up now, the station will get overloaded directly into the reactor. Then we'll all fly through space like a glowing shooting star."
“Or we’ll die here in the corridor if we do nothing,” I said, stepping closer to the returnee.

His breathing was slow, controlled—not the harried wheezing of the frantic. He had time. And he knew we didn't. "Tell me what you want."

His head tilted slightly to the side. "Home."

Behind him, the other two shadows moved into the room. Their bodies seemed weightless but purposeful, like swimmers in a calm ocean. They carried no weapons. They didn't need any.

"What is home?" I asked. "The beginning." His voice had that double tone, as if someone else were whispering the exact same thing in my ear. "And the end."

I felt Lira behind me. Not just as a hologram—she was in the systems, in the code, in me. "Kjell, you can stop them. Or you can follow them." "And what if I don't want to do either?" "Then you'll be elected."

The roar of the station changed. No more battle sounds, no more gunfire. Instead, a deep, vibrating throb that synchronized with my heartbeat. I knew it wasn't the station adapting. It was my body.

Helene whispered, "Your eyes... Kjell, they're not brown anymore." "What color?" "Gray. With... movement in them."

I took a deep breath. "I command... that you stop."

The returnee froze, as if testing the sentence through every synapse. Then he slowly shook his head. "Not possible." "Why?" "Because you don't really want to."

He stepped aside and pointed to the crack in the wall. Behind it, the fire began to take shape—no longer a chaotic flicker, but lines, circles, geometries, like a mandala of plasma. Beyond it glowed a blue horizon that never belonged to a station.

“Home,” he said again.

Tariq grabbed my arm. "If you go out there, the end here is sealed." "Maybe it's sealed anyway."

I knew I had to decide. Send the crystal code to the network via the terminal—and perhaps erase everything that was PRAE, including me. Or leave it to the Returnees—and see where the fire leads.

“Command, germ key.” The three now stood side by side, like statues waiting for the artist’s word.

I looked at Helene. Her hands were shaking, but she lowered the gun. "Kjell... if you go, don't go alone."

The fire mandala pulsed. The edges of the crack began to glow. And somewhere, in that vibrating rhythm, I heard my own voice. Not spoken—thought.

“Come home.”

I took a step forward.

And the fire came towards me.

The fire touched me not like heat, but like cold water, flooding every pore. It crept under my skin, into my muscles, directly into my nerve pathways. For a heartbeat—or a hundred—I was no longer in the station. I stood somewhere

where there was no sky, only an endless vault of shimmering metal, engraved with lines of light like blood vessels.

Before me rose a structure that looked like a hybrid of temple and machine, organic yet precise. The humming emanating from it matched my heartbeat until it felt as if my body were just another part of this architecture.

"Welcome back." The voice wasn't Lira's. It was older, deeper—and came from everywhere. "Where am I?" "At the source."

Images flashed through my mind: black-eyed apes pacing in lab cells; doctors in white suits taking samples; nanobots embedding themselves in DNA strands, rewriting their codes as if they were the true architects of life.

"Why monkeys?" I asked. "Because that's where you come from. Because that's where you belong when evolution stops lying to itself."

The sentence echoed like a command. Suddenly I understood: The virus was never just a disease. It was a reversal. A regression circuit in the genome, triggered by the bite – a message to the cells:*Remember what you were like before you changed.*

"PRAE," I whispered. "Project PRAE was the tool. Not the cause."

I felt a hand on my arm. It was Helene. But she looked different. Her eyes were deeper, darker, and in her pupils danced the same veins of light that crisscrossed the sky above me. "Come back, Kjell. We're losing orbit."

The voice from the vault continued, as if it hadn't heard Helene's words: "If you stay, you can help decide on the new design. If you leave, someone else will."

I felt the crack behind me shrink. The fire retreated, the station calling me back like a mother who doesn't want to let go of her child. But the origin... it felt like the place where all questions end.

I took a step back—in the direction I'd come from. The vault pulsed as if holding its breath in disappointment. "You're leaving?" "I'm not going home yet."

The fire lashed around me, pushing me backward, and then I was standing in the station's power core again. Smoke, heat, sirens. Tariq screamed something incomprehensible while space burned behind the open wall.

The three returnees were gone. Only their smell remained—a mixture of metal, ozone, and blood.

"What happened?" Helene gasped. "We still have time," I said. "But not much."

Then the ground beneath us shook, and outside the orbit burst into flames.

The shock came like a punch from below, and I felt my stomach briefly churn in the weightlessness before the artificial gravity kicked in again—jerky, jerky, as if the station itself no longer knew where “down” was.

"Impacts in the outer ring!" Tariq shouted, his voice cracking. He was at the main console, trying to filter data while the sensors blinked frantically. "Those aren't normal ships... they're damn drone swarms!"

I stumbled to the control room's viewport. Out there, among the shattered debris of the defense platforms, the swarm moved as a single creature—black dots, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, each one glowing in a pulsing rhythm. It was the same beat I felt in my own blood.

"They're synchronized with you," Helene murmured next to me. "I didn't call them." "Maybe you don't even need to."

The station ripped beneath us again, this time accompanied by an ugly screech from the lower decks. Sparks flew from the ceiling as a supply cable burned through. A voice crackled from the speakers—distorted but unmistakable.

"Kjell. You had the chance."

Echo.

"Bring him to me," the voice continued, and suddenly the light in the room changed. The emergency light no longer flickered erratically—it pulsed. Red. Evenly. Like a heartbeat.

"We have to get out," Tariq said, without taking his eyes off the console. "He's taken over the interior. The hatches are closing on their own. We're in a damn trap."

Helene grabbed my shoulder. "Listen, Echo wants you. And if he gets you, all of this will have been for nothing—PRAE, the crystal, everything. We need to get you to the west wing. There's still a docking bay available there."

“And what about the drones outside?” “I’ll distract them.”

I wanted to ask how, but she was already on her way, ripping open a wall panel and starting to pull cables as if she were manipulating the pulse of a giant, dying animal.

"Come on, Kjell!" Tariq shouted. "Shaft 7 leads directly to the west wing!"

We ran. The corridors were half-dark, leaving only the pulsing red. I heard metal on metal, the hiss of hydraulic doors closing—and then voices. Not human. A whisper, metallic and brittle, coming from the ventilation shafts. Words that were incomprehensible, but drilled into my brain nonetheless.

"Do you see it?" Tariq gasped next to me. "What?" "The shadows in the doors..."

I looked – and sure enough, behind the half-closed hatches, humanoid shapes moved, but too thin, too fluid in their movements. They followed us, step by step.

We reached Shaft 7. The ladder down led into darkness, interrupted only by the occasional flash of light from explosions outside. We climbed, every movement a struggle against the trembling in our hands.

The docking bay awaited us below. The gate was open—and behind it was a small shuttle, roughly repaired but ready for flight.

“Come in!” Tariq shouted.

I was almost at the ramp when it happened: A hatch above us burst open, and one of the returning crew members fell through, landing silently on his feet. His eyes flickered in that eerie gray I'd come to recognize.

"Germ key," he said calmly. "It's time."

Behind him, more hatches hissed open. More returning ships. More voices in my head. And outside, through the open dock door, I saw the swarm of drones moving directly toward the bay—a wall of black steel, ready to devour everything.

“Make up your mind, Kjell!” Tariq yelled.

I felt the fire ignite within me again, just like it had in the rift. Only this time I wasn't sure if I could contain it.

The first returnee didn't take a single unnecessary step. He approached slowly, as if he wanted every muscle in me to feel the tension. His pupils dilated, and for a tiny moment, that warm brown was there again, human, familiar—just long enough for my instinct to hesitate.

"Kjell..." – it was my own voice. Not from his mouth, but directly in my skull. Tariq grabbed my arm. "We have to take him out, now!" "Wait." I didn't even know why I said it, but something inside me wanted to hear what he had to say.

"It's not an attack," the voice in my head continued. "It's retrieval."

Behind him, three more returning passengers jumped down from the bulkheads. No sound, no metallic creaking of their joints—just that deep, vibrating undertone mingling with the beat of the emergency lights.

Outside, a dull, drawn-out roar sounded as a large portion of the drone swarm slammed into the station's outer hull. No blind ramming—this was an orderly formation. They were deliberately cutting their way to the docking bay.

Helene surfaced in the upper bulkhead, breathing heavily, clutching a bundle of cables. Sparks sprayed from the wall, and suddenly the light in the dock turned a cold blue. "I disturbed them!" she cried. "The drones are reorienting, we have a window of opportunity!"

"That's not enough," Tariq growled as he tried to power up the shuttle. "The engine needs another 30 seconds—and we don't have that time."

Echo spoke over the dock speakers, his voice clearer this time, almost triumphant: "Germ Key. Don't let them pull you away. Come to me, and I'll show you how to maintain orbit."

"You don't want to hold the orbit, you want to control it," I shouted back. "Control is the only form of survival."

The Returner was now so close that I should have felt his breath—if he was still breathing at all. His hand stretched out, his fingers bony yet strangely elegant. I knew he could touch me without even making skin contact.

The fire inside me grew stronger, and I felt the nanobots gathering in my veins, as if waiting for a command.

"Kjell," Helene whispered sharply. "If you don't vote now, someone else will vote for you."

The swarm of drones reached the edge of the docking opening. No chaos, no explosions—they simply stopped, like a gigantic wall of black metal, suspended in space. And then, in perfect unison, thousands of small hatches opened.

Behind it was light. White, dazzling, so bright that it filled the entire dock area.

The returnee smiled. "Home."

At that moment, a shock wave ripped through the station. Not from outside—from inside. A series of explosions ripped through the supply corridors. Echo cursed over the loudspeakers, and then fell silent.

Tariq yelled, "It's now or never!" I jumped up the shuttle's ramp, Helene close behind me. Tariq yanked the lever for the bulkhead lock. The shuttle vibrated as the engines fired up—just as the first drones entered the docking bay.

They didn't attack. They just stood there, each one staring at me—even though they had no eyes.

"Course?" Tariq asked breathlessly. I looked at the white coordinates, seared into my mind. I should have said:*Away from here.*But instead I said, “Towards Shanghai Prime.”

The shuttle separated from the dock. Behind us, the station began to disintegrate, large pieces drifting into orbit, burning. The drones remained behind—but their gaze, that invisible gaze, followed us.

And then I heard him again, right in my head. No metallic voice, no echo. Just me:
“You’re on your way home.”

Chapter 22 - The Hunters of Shanghai Prime

The approach to Shanghai Prime was like gliding slowly into the maw of a predator that had just sharpened its teeth. From above, the megalopolis was

nothing more than a sea of light—neon veins rippling through the smog like toxic spiking, with black holes of shadow gaping between them. The skyscrapers rose like blades from a murky soup, their tops glittering in the geostationary docking ring light, while below, a relentless thunderstorm of rain and advertising raged.

The shuttle docked like an old bum trying to squeeze into a tailored suit—lopsided, creaking, and everyone in the terminal stared at us as if we'd brought the plague with us. They were probably right. Helene pulled her hood further over her face, Tariq kept his gaze stubbornly fixed on the ground. I, on the other hand, wanted to see who was already waiting for us.

And yes – they were there. The hunters.

At first glance, they could have fit into any arrivals hall on Earth. Businessmen, tourists, dockworkers—except they were too perfect. Their movements had no random fluctuations, no small flaws that make a person human. When they blinked, a pattern flickered in their pupils for a split second—lines, grids, data packets. They stood spread out, always blocking the exit routes, and they didn't have to look at us to know where we were.

"We've been noticed," Helene murmured. "No," I said, "we're already on the menu."

We didn't go to the official exit. Instead, Tariq led us past a cargo area where an old maintenance shaft led to the lower levels. The door creaked as we opened it, and the smell of oil and old electronics hit us. I climbed in first.

Behind us, I heard footsteps—not hurried, not loud, just... synchronized. The hunters followed us without rushing. They had time.

The ladder ended in a jungle of cables and pipes. Down here, the city smelled different—of sweat, spices, and cheap lubricant. Traffic roared above us, and below us lived another world: the shadow decks.

It was a bazaar of things that officially didn't exist. Weapons from the black market, organ replacements from dubious sources, gene splicing kits in dirty suitcases. Dealers shouted offers to us, their voices drowned out by the drone of transformers and the hum of advertising screens that pressed their holograms directly into our retinas.

"Are you looking for something specific?" a voice asked next to me. The woman standing before me was small, wiry, and her eyes were artificial—not the cold,

dead kind, but the expensive ones that capture light so you get lost in them. "Yan Mei," Tariq said, as if he'd just lost a bet. "You're late," she said, her expression straight. "And you have company."

We followed her through a labyrinth of corridors until we stood in a room that looked so old it must have dated back to a time when people lived without internet access. Metal shelves filled with data storage devices, analog machines, and cable reels.

"You want to go into hiding?" she asked. "We want answers," I said. Yan Mei smiled briefly. "They're more expensive."

She explained that Shanghai Prime wasn't a safe haven—it was a hub. Every stream of infection, whether digital or biological, converged here. In underground reactors disguised as "genetic factories," the code in the genome was manipulated in real time. And someone wanted to activate my germ key, not destroy it.

We didn't have time for any more questions, because suddenly the neon market was flooded with a new light—bluish, pulsating. The hunters were here.

They didn't come running. They walked, shoulder to shoulder, like a wave of metal and flesh. Their faces were blank, their eyes fixed on only one thing: me.

"Get out of there!" Yan Mei yelled, pushing me toward a side exit. We ran across slippery Plexiglas bridges, the endless chasm between the towers below us. The rain was warm, but it burned on our skin, as if it contained more than just water.

One of the hunters jumped onto the bridge in front of us. His arm deformed—flesh became metal, his hand a shimmering blade. I drew my revolver and fired. The shot echoed in the humid air, shattering holograms and causing the hunter to retreat only a step.

"You have to run, Kjell!" Helene shouted. "I'm running," I gasped.

We dived into an old canal system beneath the harbor district. Down here, it was quieter—too quiet. The echo of our footsteps sounded too clean, as if someone were filtering it.

At the end of the tunnel stood an old data capsule, with rust stains and a flickering terminal. Yan Mei began working on it. "If we activate this, I can send you to an area the hunters can't reach."

The only problem was: they were already here.

Ten of them, one next to the other, blocking the tunnel walls. No one spoke. They came closer. I felt the nanobots inside me awaken, as if they sensed the proximity of their own kind.

And then a figure stepped out of the ranks of the hunters. Armor, helmet—and beneath it a face I never wanted to see again, yet would always see. Lira.

"Shanghai was just the bait," she said quietly. "The target is deeper."

Lira took off her helmet, her gaze cutting through the neon dust like a knife. Her face was the same as before, but every movement was too precise, too controlled—as if someone had recreated humanity and added one extra zero when programming the errors.

"Kjell," she said, as if she wanted to taste my name. "You've been walking for weeks without realizing you're going in circles."

“And you’ve been dead for weeks,” I replied, gripping the gun tighter.

She smiled, and there was nothing warm in the smile. "Dead is just a word for people who don't have any better ideas."

The hunters behind her moved as one, all taking half a step forward at the same time. Helene stepped beside me, her hand already on the explosive charge at her belt. "Just tell me when," she whispered.

"You want to blow them up?" I muttered. "I want to save us."

Lira shook her head. "Explosives are so... 21st century." She pointed to the ground below us. "This sewer system has its own maintenance drones. I told them to come right through here."

Tariq cursed. "We're trapped."

A deep vibration began beneath our feet. Out of the darkness crawled metal bodies—not large, perhaps knee-high, but dozens of them. Their surfaces glistened wetly in the dim light, and each step sounded like a small hammer blow.

“What do you want?” I asked, trying to buy time.

"The key," she said without hesitation. "And before he decides he doesn't want to talk to you anymore."

“He doesn’t talk to me.”

"Oh yes," she whispered. "He's talking to you all the time. You just don't listen."

The metal drones formed a semicircle around us, and for a moment I saw in their reflective surfaces not my face, but a strange, animalistic grimace—like the imprint of an ape, hidden somewhere deep in my DNA.

"Do you know what they're doing here in Shanghai Prime?" Lira asked, and her voice now had that razor-sharp edge that told me she was calculating every single sentence. "They're breeding evolution. Not to make you better. But to make you compatible."

“Compatible with what?”

“With what comes.”

Yan Mei tapped the data capsule's terminal in panic. "I can get you out, but not all of you. The channel will collapse if I open the portal."

“Then bring Helene out,” I said immediately.

"Forget it!" Helene snapped at me. "We're staying together."

The hunters approached, and one of them spoke—a distorted, mechanically modulated voice: "The key is not in danger. The bearer is irrelevant."

"Oh, that's new," Lira murmured. "They don't even think you're important anymore. That could be a problem for you, Kjell."

Suddenly, the terminal flashed. Yan Mei had done it – a crack in space opened, bright and sharp-edged, as if someone were cutting through the air. Beyond it: another scene, a deck with blue light and metal arches, definitely not down here.

“Go!” yelled Yan Mei.

Helene grabbed my arm, pulling me toward the portal. But Lira was faster. She grabbed my wrist, and the moment her skin touched mine, my mind exploded with images—cells transforming, bones bending, eyes changing from human to animal.

"This is your legacy," she said quietly. "And Shanghai is just the preview."

I tore myself away and stumbled through the portal. Helene and Tariq followed. Just before it closed, I saw Lira smile and raise her hand—not in farewell, but like someone promising to join me soon.

We landed hard on the cold metal floor. Water rushed above us, not like a river—rather like an endless pipeline. The light was pale green, and I smelled salt.

“Where are we?” Helene asked, panting.

Tariq looked around and answered in a voice that gave me goosebumps: "Under the sea roof."

Chapter 23 - Evil from the Depths

Beneath the ocean roof, nothing remained of Shanghai's pulsating, toxic energy. No neon, no noise, just a muffled, endless roar that permeated every wall. It was the heart of the ocean, deep, slow, relentless. The portal had spat us into a control room that smelled of old salt and machine oil. The air was heavy, humid, and condensation trickled down the inside surfaces of the vast glass walls like sweat. Beyond it lay greenish-murky water, barely moving but constantly conveying the feeling that something was out there. Something holding still. Something looking back at us.

The displays on the walls flickered in emergency mode. Pressure sensors showed readings that made me feel like my bones could be crushed inward at any moment. Someone—or something—was keeping this ward alive. But not for us.

"Where are we?" Helene asked quietly. Her voice echoed briefly, muffled, as if underwater. "Under the ocean roof," Tariq said. "A quarantine and research facility. Here they worked with variants of the PRAE virus before it surfaced." "And what went wrong?" He shrugged. "Everything."

I approached the glass. Beyond the light, which barely extended a few meters, there was only darkness. But in that darkness, something glowed. At first, I thought it was a reflection of light. Then I realized it was moving. Slowly, circling, like a predator circling its cage.

A dull thud vibrated through the room. Then another. Steady. Rhythmic. Heartbeats. Not mine.

“That’s the current,” said Tariq, but he didn’t believe it himself.

We followed a narrow corridor of metal grates, the water gurgling beneath our feet. In some places, it was ankle-deep. The station was breathing. Every step felt like stepping into the stomach of a sleeping animal that could wake up at any moment.

Helene stopped abruptly at an airlock. Behind the thick Plexiglas pane lay a flooded section. And something inside was moving. It was too large for a human, but too fluid in its movements to be a machine. The shadow glided close to the pane – and for a moment I saw skin that wasn't quite skin anymore. Veined flesh, crisscrossed by silvery lines, gill slits on the neck.

"Shit," I muttered. "They're returnees."

Tariq hacked open the lock. Not to get in, but to pull the control data. The old logbooks were fragmentary, partly unreadable, but enough to recognize a name:*PRAE-Δ7*.A note:

Infected subjects exhibit coordinated group movements underwater. Aggression levels are elevated. Intelligence is enhanced. A connection to an external swarm core is suspected.

I heard footsteps behind us. Slow. Careful. Drops fell from the ceiling. When we turned around, he was standing there.

A returnee, half human, half something at home in the water. His skin was pale and shimmered in the green light, his eyes too large, too clear. Webbed fingers. He opened his mouth and spoke—or tried to. The words came in fragments, interspersed with clicks and pops, as if he were speaking to a dolphin and a computer simultaneously.

"Do you understand that?" Helene whispered. "A little," Tariq murmured. "Those are coordinates."

"Where to?" He looked up. "Deep below us. There's... something. A hive core."

I didn't know exactly what a swarm core was, but the word alone made my skin crawl.

The returnee approached, but not threateningly. He raised a hand and pointed downward. His pupils dilated, then abruptly constricted, as if he'd received an order. The next moment, he tore himself away, jumped into the water, and disappeared into the darkness.

"We should go," said Helene. "Right away."

"No," Tariq replied. "We're going deeper."

We found an old vertical elevator, apparently intended for mini-submarines. The cabin smelled of rust and damp rubber. As we moved downward, I heard the water around us getting louder—not just from the pressure, but because it was... humming.

The deeper we went, the more light there was. Not from the station, but from outside. Something glowed in the water, pulsating as if it were breathing.

And then we saw him.

The swarm core.

A gigantic, living mass of organic tissue and metallic mesh, firmly anchored to the rock, crisscrossed by conduits that pulsed like blood vessels. It was like a reef—except parts of it were moving. Eyes glowed within, and sometimes it seemed as if they were all directed at us at once.

I stepped closer to the glass of the cabin. And the core... reacted. A tremor ran through its structure, and suddenly I felt something twitch in my muscles. The nanobots beneath my skin grew warm, as if they had heard a call.

“He’s talking to you,” whispered Helene.

Figures burst forth from the core—returnees, but faster, stronger, as if the depths had perfected them. Their movements were synchronized, no trace of frenzy. They headed directly toward the elevator.

“We’re leaving!” I yelled.

Tariq frantically typed commands. But before the cabin moved, the core's light changed. It became brighter, deeper, and at that moment I saw her.

Lira.

Not in front of us, but in the reflections of the glass. "Destroy him, and you'll break the chain," she said. "But then you'll be next."

The water outside began to boil. The first returning person hit the glass, cracks running through it like cobwebs. The pressure gauge went off.

“What do we do, Kjell?!” Helene screamed.

I didn't know. Not yet. But I knew we wouldn't get a second chance down here.

And then the glass broke.

The water swept us along, cold as death, and I saw the swarm core coming toward me—not as a thing, but as a thought drilling itself directly into my head.

"Welcome Home."

The water hit me like a concrete wall. The impact took my breath away before I could even think about holding it. Cold needles pierced every pore, and my ears throbbed with the pressure. I rowed blindly, felt Helene struggling somewhere beside me, heard Tariq's muffled curse, which was immediately drowned out by the water.

The light of the hive core was everywhere now. It wasn't just in front of me—it was in my head, in my eyelids, even when I closed them. It pulsed to the rhythm of my heart, or my heart was adapting to its. I didn't know anymore.

Movement in the corner of my eye. Something slid past me—too fast to grasp. Then something grabbed my ankle. The fingers were cold, but the touch wasn't jerky. It was... probing. Like a doctor taking your pulse, only this doctor had gills and eyes flashing with data like lightning.

I kicked around. The thing didn't retreat. Instead, it pulled me deeper, down into a crevice between two rock formations, where the swarm core sent its antennae in like veins. The water there was warmer. Alive.

“Kjell.”

It wasn't a voice, not really. It was a thought vibrating in the top of my skull. But it was Lira's voice, there was no doubt about it.

“You’re breathing wrong,” she said in my head.

I wanted to scream, but instead I instinctively sucked in water—and didn't drown. Gills didn't grow from my throat, but something inside me regulated the oxygen differently. It felt like the nanobots had decided that drowning wasn't on the agenda today.

The returnee released my ankle. I floated in the warm current as the walls around me began to pulse. Lines of light stretched across the organic tissue. Words I couldn't read flickered briefly and then vanished.

Something emerged from the darkness. Not a human, not a fish—but a mixture of both, but larger, longer, and with an elegance that had nothing animal about it. His body was like molten steel poured into flesh. And his eyes spoke of a collective, not an individual.

“You are the key,” came the thought.

“The key to what?” I asked, not even knowing if I was saying it out loud or just thinking it.

"To us."

The current pushed me further, deeper into my core. I felt my muscles working differently, my heart rate slowing. The water wasn't just getting warmer—it felt like blood flowing through me.

Then I saw them: the others. Dozens of returnees, in rows, floating as if in an invisible rhythm. Their eyes shone in sync. They breathed together, every movement perfectly coordinated.

"PRAE was never your project," Lira said in my head. "It was ours. You just discovered it."

I saw Tariq struggling in the distance, Helene right next to him, both desperately fighting against an invisible current that kept them away from the core. I knew if they came any closer, it would take them too.

"Why apes?" I asked. The question was like a thorn in my skull that didn't fit them.

The collective didn't respond immediately. Instead, they showed me images. Not memories—projections. People who had been bitten, their bodies reshaping, bones shifting, muscles growing differently, until they looked like an

early version of humanity. But in their eyes, there was something new: a glowing point that acted like a built-in transmitter.

"Evolution doesn't just move forward," Lira said. "Sometimes you have to go back to start again. We take your tools, but we also take away your baggage. Language. Doubt. Individuality."

I felt the thought not only directed at me, but flowing into every returning soldier around me. We were now part of the same conversation.

“And me?” I asked.

"You are the catalyst. Your bots speak both languages—human and ours."

Something pressed into my neck. No pain, just a pressure, as if someone were placing a seal. I felt my nanobots responding to commands that didn't come from me.

“No,” I blurted out—and this time I knew I had said it out loud because bubbles were rising.

"You can't say no, Kjell," Lira said. "You're already deeper in than you think."

The swarm core vibrated. And then it happened. A pressure wave so powerful it almost knocked me unconscious. Glass shattered somewhere above us, water rushed into the station's upper decks.

“Time to go,” something that sounded like an echo whispered in my head.

I felt the current pulling me upwards, past returning swimmers who no longer held me, but instead sent me upwards like a parcel. Tariq and Helene were suddenly back at my side, their eyes wide open.

We broke to the surface of a flooded control room. Alarm lights, sirens, and sparks from broken cables were everywhere. Below us, in the depths, the swarm core glowed—smaller because we were leaving it, but still there.

And the seal burned on my neck.

“This isn’t over,” I said.

"No," Lira replied. "It's only just begun."

Chapter 24 - The Night of a Thousand Blades

The water around me was no longer water, but a slashing wall of metal. Blades, hundreds, perhaps thousands, glided past me like predatory fish with the precision of clockwork. They didn't collide, they barely touched, but every time one of them changed direction, I heard a deep, metallic chant—like an ancient gong being struck somewhere in the depths. Sparks danced as two blades brushed against each other in a split second, and the flashes of light only made the darkness around us seem deeper.

Tariq surfaced next to me, yanking me down by the arm. Above us floated one of the dead—or what was left of him. The blades had cut him open as if he were a piece of paper. No blood, just a swirl of tissue and shreds of fabric dancing in the current. I saw Helene's eyes behind the mask, wide open, her fingers clenched around the grip of her harpoon.

We drifted in a chaos that no longer had a fixed point. Above us were the flickering lights of the station, below us the darkness from which we had just escaped. I didn't know if the hive core had dismissed us or simply handed us over to the next part of the plan.

"That's the Bladespawn," Tariq blurted out as we huddled behind the rusted hull of an overturned supply pod. "I read about them in the old PRAE dossiers. Last line of defense. Sensors and weapons rolled into one. They access half a dozen frequencies simultaneously."

I didn't understand half of it, but I heard the undertone: This wasn't an improvised defense. This was something you send out when you want to be sure nothing gets away.

One of the blades floated past the corner of our cover point. It was larger than I'd imagined, almost as long as my forearm, with a curved shape more reminiscent of a bird of prey than a knife. Its surface vibrated as if it were breathing. For a moment, its tip pointed at me—and then it glided onward as if I were invisible.

Helene looked at me. "Why not you?"

I shrugged, but I knew the answer. I was marked. The hive core had burned an invisible seal into the back of my neck, and these things read it like an ID. They knew I was... one of them.

We needed a way out. The evacuation walkway was perhaps two hundred meters away, beyond a swarm of blades moving like a living minefield. Beyond that lay the access to the cargo hyperloop—our only way out.

“We’re splitting up,” I said.

"Are you crazy?" Helene stared at me. "Those things will tear you apart in five seconds."

"Not me," I replied. "And if I move, I can keep a corridor clear for you."

Tariq was about to object, but a new movement silenced him. Something emerged from the darkness and slowly approached. At first it looked like a cloud of glittering metal, then I realized it was hundreds of blades—and in their center, a figure.

She floated upright in the water, as if gravity were irrelevant. Her body was slender, humanoid, but transparent in places, as if made of liquid metal, constantly rearranging itself. Her face was a mask with no mouth, just two narrow, glowing eyes. The blades circled around her like a school of predatory fish around a queen.

Her voice wasn't a sound, but a thought that cut directly into my skull:*Brother.*

Helene and Tariq looked at each other, unaware of what I heard.

*You carry the code,*she continued.*You are not the target. You are the messenger.*

“I am not part of you,” I thought back.

That's what you're thinking now. But you'll understand. Tonight you'll see everyone.

I felt the urge to swim to her so strong that my muscles moved without my consent. Only Helene's hand on my shoulder pulled me back. "Kjell! Concentrate, damn it!"

The Blademaster raised a hand. Three of her blades detached and shot forward. They sliced not toward us, but into the swarm around us—and suddenly a narrow, trembling tunnel of open water opened.

"Run!" I screamed, and Helene and Tariq took off. I followed them, their blades close to my face, some so close I felt the draft.

The evacuation walkway approached. Its metal was scarred and rusted, but it was our destination. The corridor closed behind us, blades clashed against the hull, sparks and bubbles filled the water.

We reached the jetty and pulled ourselves to the surface. Here the air was warm, humid, but breathable. I gasped, feeling the burning stamp on my neck more intensely than ever before.

“That was too close,” muttered Tariq.

“Too close is better than nothing,” I replied – and then we heard the noise.

It was as if metal were raining. Dots sparkled in the night sky above us—first dozens, then hundreds, then so many that the sky itself seemed to glow.

“Oh, shit,” whispered Helene.

The dots grew larger, and I recognized them: blades. Thousands of them. They fell like meteors, each with a glowing edge, ready to slice everything beneath them into strips.

Amidst the blazing storm, the Blademaster stood on the railing of an overturned crane, motionless, her blades around her like a second, deadly sky.

Welcome to the Night of a Thousand Blades, brother.

The first impact ripped the walkway apart like cardboard. One of the blades pierced steel as if it were wet skin and continued to cut through the Hyperloop access rails with a screeching sound. Sparks sprayed like fireworks, immediately drowned in steam. The ground beneath us vibrated as if an invisible heartbeat permeated the entire platform.

I threw myself flat on my back as another blade swept across my back. Helene screamed something, but the noise drowned out every word. Only her wide-open eyes said it all: We wouldn't be able to stand here for long.

Tariq hammered on the emergency access terminal while pieces of metal and spray exploded around us. I knew he wasn't just fighting the outdated technology, but something intelligent—the swarm was hacking into the

controls live, blocking doors, changing protocols. Every second that passed cost us breathing room.

The air tasted of burnt metal and oil. Every breath was a scrape in the throat. Above us, the blades swirled like a cosmic vortex, perfectly coordinated, every movement precise, every gap deliberately left just to increase the pressure.

The Blademaster stepped from the crane onto the dock. She placed her feet almost imperceptibly, as if she were standing on something invisible to us. The blades rotated around her in a pattern that was both hypnotic and deadly. I couldn't tear my gaze away, even when a blade came so close that it cut a thin cut across my cheek. Warm blood trickled down, mingling with the salt water that clung everywhere.

"Kjell!" Helene's voice finally broke through. "Move!"

I jumped up, just in time to dodge a blade that split the ground beneath me in half. We slid to the edge of the jetty, where the water was black and bottomless. Tariq managed to unlock the terminal—for a second. A red error message flashed:**ACCESS DENIED – PRIORITY SIGNAL ACTIVE.**

"That's her," he growled. "She holds everything."

The mistress stopped, not three meters away. She didn't speak with her mouth – again, the thought popped into my head: You belong here. You are a part of it.

I felt the tingling in my neck more intensely than ever before, as if something inside me were reacting, as if a program was starting up in the background that I hadn't consciously started. My hands twitched, and for a moment, three of the blades in the air followed my movements, like trained dogs.

Helene saw it and froze. "Kjell..."

I knew what she was thinking. That I was on the brink. And she was right.

A shockwave slammed into the dock as several blades plunged into the water simultaneously and returned explosively, sending spray and debris flying. Tariq was knocked off his feet, Helene grabbed him by the belt and held him tight. I ran forward, not away from the mistress, but toward her.

Her eyes glowed brighter. The blades around her spun faster until they were nothing but a metallic blur. I raised my arm – and she stopped. You're almost ready.

“Fuck you,” I gasped, and threw the explosive charge I had ripped from Tariq’s emergency belt between us.

The explosion was dull, caught between water and steel. Metal splintered, two blades were torn from their paths, one striking the Master in the shoulder. She staggered—a tiny but real mistake.

“NOW!” I yelled, and we ran.

The emergency access was still blocked, but the impact of the explosion had loosened the hydraulic lock. We squeezed through the gap, while behind us the howl of the blades swelled like a hurricane.

It was dark inside, only the emergency light was flashing. We ran through the tunnel, footsteps echoing like gunshots. But the howling didn't stop—it was coming closer. The blades fit through the gaps in the doors, slicing through cables like cobwebs, sparkling in the red light like raging swarms of fireflies.

Tariq stumbled, Helene helped him back up. I turned around, raised the shotgun, and fired into the swarm. It was like throwing pebbles against a storm—a few blades exploded in sparks, the rest dodged and came back.

We reached a lock chamber that was still pressurized. I threw the lever, the doors closed, and the noise became muffled. For a moment, all that could be heard was our gasping.

"We have to move on," Tariq said between breaths. "They'll get through, sooner or later."

I nodded. But deep down, I knew: The Night of a Thousand Blades wasn't over. It wouldn't end until the Master had me.

And she would get me. Sooner or later.

The first blade didn't come through the door—it came through the wall. A clean, glaring cut that opened the steel as effortlessly as if it were a soggy apple. Beyond it, no glimpse of a corridor, no cable, no structure—only the shimmer of metal in motion, curving inward like a living stream.

Helene screamed a single, short "DOWN!" before the current exploded. The blades were no longer individual weapons—they had merged into a swarm, a vibrating mass of edges, points, and corners that filled every inch of the room. It was as if one had stepped into the center of a meat grinder of light.

Tariq tried to shoot, but his weapon's recoil was ridiculous compared to the onslaught. The blades shattered the projectile casings in mid-air before they could hit anything. Sparks flew, metal clanged, and then something cold and razor-sharp sliced across my right upper arm. Blood shot into the air, mingling with the fine mist of water, oil, and metal dust.

I stumbled back, feeling the tingling in my neck creeping down my spine. The blades dodged me, letting me through as if I were part of the pattern. Helene noticed again. Her gaze was a mixture of anger and fear.

“Do something, damn it!”

I raised my hands – and the swarm responded. It spun, slowed down, and formed a corridor. The blades vibrated in time with my heartbeat. I didn't know how I did it, but I controlled them. Part of me wanted them to stop. Another part wanted to see how far they would go.

“Run!” I growled.

We ripped open the nearest door and jumped into a corridor half submerged in water. The light flickered, and somewhere, water dripped in an irregular rhythm that, to my ears, became louder than breathing. The swarm closed behind us, as precise as a surgical incision.

We ran, stumbled over debris, and dove through sections where the water reached our chests. Cut marks were all over the walls—narrow, perfect lines that looked like scars from an ancient, yet surgical, violence. The blades had hunted here before.

"End of the corridor," Tariq gasped as we saw the massive security gate. "That'll take us to the maintenance bay. If we make it, we can get out."

“And if not?” asked Helene.

“Then the night will take us.”

I placed my hand on the panel. The power was dead, but the tingling in my neck grew stronger. The blades stopped moving. Then the lock opened with a sound that wasn't mechanical—but like a breath being taken.

The maintenance ring was enormous. Open. Too open. The circular structure stretched above us, a kilometer-wide loop of steel that looked like an empty, abandoned vein. And right in the center, hovering, stood it.

The Blade Master.

Her silhouette was only visible in the gloom because the blades around her were constantly moving like fireflies. But this time it was different. She wasn't alone. Behind her, in perfect formation, stood figures—humanoid, but with limbs that dissolved into sharp, metallic protrusions. Their bodies seemed to be composed of splinters.

“Brother,” the voice came again, deep in my skull.*You've gone too far to return.*

Helene pulled on my arm and whispered, "This is a trap. She wants you, Kjell. Only you."

"I know."

The blades no longer moved chaotically. They formed patterns, geometric shapes that existed briefly and then dissolved into spirals. It was hypnotic. I felt something in my head begin to count—a code, a rhythm not intended for humans.

“What do you want?” I asked loudly.

You completely. Not a half-hearted messenger.

“And if I refuse?”

Then I take what's missing.

The figures behind her began to move. Their footsteps were silent, but each of them held a blade in their hand that had grown from their own body. They came closer, and the circle closed.

“We have to go now!” Tariq shouted.

I raised the shotgun, fired, and watched as the blades sliced through the bullets in flight. Sparks ricocheted off the shrapnel. The master took a step, and immediately ten blades shot toward me—only to stop just short of my skin.

You belong to Me.

“Fuck you,” I growled, and then I ripped the remaining explosives from my belt.

Helene grabbed Tariq, and we threw ourselves backward. I pulled the safety—and dropped her in the middle of the champion's circle.

The light from the explosion was blinding, the shock wave hurled us halfway across the chamber. Metal splintered, water sprayed in fine needles. When I came to, the circle was empty.

But I knew she wasn't dead. The Night of a Thousand Blades doesn't end with an explosion. It ends when it wants to.

And I felt like this night had just begun.

Chapter 25 - Immunity

The smoke still hung in my lungs as we squeezed through the supply tunnel. Above us, metal cracked, water dripped to the floor at irregular intervals, and somewhere far behind, I could still hear the distant, metallic whisper of blades. They weren't directly pursuing us, but they were there. Always. Like a breath you only feel in your bones. The passage was so narrow that we had to walk sideways, and the heat of the explosion still clung to my skin. I smelled burning oil, blood—mine and someone's I'd probably already forgotten.

We reached an airlock that looked as if it hadn't been used in decades. The panel was dark, the access sealed with old, half-broken seals. Tariq knelt down, pulled open one of the dusty cable ducts, and bridged the contacts. Sparks flew, and for a moment, a red emergency light flashed, so faint it seemed more like a jolt than electricity. The airlock opened in slow motion, a scraping sound that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Inside, it smelled of stale air and disinfectants that had long since lost their odor. An old MedBay. Stasis capsules were everywhere, some open, others still sealed, with layers of dust that looked like sedimentary rock from another era.

The walls were lined with terminals, their displays flickering bluish, as if trying to remember their own function.

"This is old. Pre-PRAE old," Tariq muttered, wiping his sleeve across one of the screens. Lines of text appeared, fragmented, interrupted by error messages. Helene walked over to a capsule whose glass was scratched on the inside. Fingernail marks. She grimaced. "No one in here has ever come out healthy."

I followed her gaze and felt a tingling sensation in the back of my neck. The feeling was almost familiar now—too familiar. The blades had marked me, I knew that. But here, in this silence, I realized it wasn't just a mark. It was a key.

Tariq cursed quietly. "It says something here... Project PRAE – Immune Subprogram." He turned the screen toward us. Old protocols scrolled by, accompanied by diagrams showing bone structure, cell progression, and genetic sequences. I didn't understand everything, but the word*Immune*caught my eye again and again.

Helene leaned forward. "Those weren't coincidences. They deliberately modified people so they wouldn't fall behind."

“Fall back?” I asked.

"To what the virus is. To the primal stage." She looked at me, and I knew what was coming next. "Kjell, we're testing you."

I wanted to object, but she already had the scanner in her hand. A small prick, then the device whirred. The display flickered, data scrolled across it. Helene fell silent. Too silent.

“What?” I asked.

"You have fully integrated the nanostructure. But no degenerative markers. No regression."

“So… am I clean?”

She shook her head. "No. You're fully infected. It's just... the process stops with you."

Tariq continued reading the protocol. "The immune ones were designed to carry the virus and... direct it. They could amplify it, weaken it, even transmit it

specifically." He swallowed. "That means, Kjell... you're like a walking transmitter."

I felt cold. "You mean..."

“The Blades follow you because you are one of them.”

The tingling in my neck now pulsed in time with my heartbeat. And then I heard her. No outside noises, no footsteps—but the Blade Master's voice, right in my head.*You have the core. Let it work.*

“Do you hear that?” I asked.

Helene looked at me as if I'd just stepped half a step away from her into an abyss. "We can't hear anything."

Tariq frowned. "The signal isn't coming from outside. It's inside you. Your nanostructure is transmitting."

I leaned against a capsule. The steel felt cold, but somewhere deep inside I knew it wasn't cold—my body simply wasn't responding the way it used to. The tingling spread to my arms, and for a moment I saw my reflection in the glass. The eyes were... not quite mine.

Helene searched a locked cabinet and pulled out a metal box labeled: PRAE-Zero: Last Dose.

"It's an antiserum," she said quietly. "According to the data, it cuts the connection between the carrier and the nanostructure."

“And if it goes wrong?” I asked.

“Then you die. Immediately.”

I laughed briefly, a dry, humorless sound. "So, only advantages."

Tariq turned on the box. Inside was a single, slender ampoule. The liquid inside was black. Helene held it up to the light, turning it slightly. "If you take it, you might be free. Or you might be gone. And if you don't take it..."

"...at some point I will completely become what they want."

The voice in my head was back.*You're almost done. Leave the dose.*

“She’s talking to me right now,” I murmured.

"Then hurry up and make your decision," said Tariq, looking toward the entrance. "Because we're no longer alone."

Footsteps. Not metallic. Heavy. Human. A silhouette appeared in the dim light of MedBay. Large, broad, and yet somehow... familiar.

Helene took a sharp breath. "That can't be true."

He stepped into the light, and my heart skipped a beat. His eyes—they had the same gray flicker as mine in the mirror.

“You are…” I began.

He smiled, slowly, coldly. "Like you. Immune. But not for the reasons you think."

“What do you want?” I asked.

He stepped closer. "Not your blood. They want what you can build with it."

The tingling in my neck exploded into a burning sensation, and the Blade Master's voice spoke through both of us at once:*The bridge is almost finished.*

He stood so close that I could hear his breathing—calm, controlled, like someone who knew he had the upper hand. The gray gleam in his eyes wasn't just a reflection. It pulsed. And every time it pulsed, I felt the thump in my own skull, as if our hearts were beating in unison.

"You don't know, do you?" he asked, as if he'd just dissected my last shred of peace. "You're not an accident. None of us are. We're tools. And tools don't ask why they were created."

Helene stood between us. "If you think we're just going to let you disappear here with him, forget it."

He smiled. "I don't want to take him with me. Not yet. He needs to be... ready first."

I heard a noise in my head, like radio traffic in a language that shouldn't exist. Fast, clanging sounds, interspersed with a deeper tone that held everything together. This wasn't just communication. This was a command channel.

“What are you?” I asked.

"Like I said—like you. But older. Longer connected. I've learned to talk to her." He tilted his head, as if listening to an invisible voice. "She says you're raw. But useful."

“You?” asked Tariq.

"The Blademaster," he said, as if tasting the name. "She is the beginning. But not the end."

Helene raised the ampoule. "One step closer, and I'll inject him with this."

His gaze wandered to the black liquid. He laughed softly. "The serum. You think that'll save him? It's not a cure. It's a cut—one that makes both sides bleed. Take it, and you die a human. Don't take it, and you live as... something else."

The burning in my neck now spread to my arms. My fingers tingled, and I could swear my skin was moving in tiny waves, as if things other than flesh were working beneath it.

“Why are you telling us this?” I asked.

"Because you have to make a decision before she gets here."

"Who?"

He smiled, and it wasn't a pretty smile. "The one who created immunity. And she wants to see if her work is... stable."

Then it came—the deep, almost subsonic roar I'd last heard in the Returnees' Ring. The air vibrated, terminals fired up without anyone touching them. The displays flickered, showing DNA sequences, incomplete, reordering themselves.

Tariq cursed. "That's our code. That's... your code."

The stranger's gray eyes flickered more intensely. "She wants us both there when the upload begins."

“Upload from what?” asked Helene.

“From us.”

The light in the room grew colder. Shadows on the walls stretched as if trying to detach themselves from their bodies. I heard my own voice—but I didn't speak.*Come.*

Helene grabbed my arm. "Kjell, that's not you."

"Yes," said the stranger. "It's him."

The voice in my head was no longer just one. It was many. Whispers, screams, murmurs—a chorus of everything I'd ever considered sounds, but all anchored in this single tone.

“Tell me what immunity really means,” I demanded.

The stranger stepped so close that we stood forehead to forehead. "They say you're neither a victim nor a hero. You're the Corridor. Everything they bring here goes through you."

I felt sweat running down my back, even though the room was getting colder. Helene still had the ampoule in her hand, and I could see how much she was struggling with herself.

"If you ask me," said the stranger, "you should take it. Not because it will save you—but because it hurts them."

“And if it kills me?”

“Then at least you’re no longer a tool.”

The roar grew louder, vibrating in my ribs. Somewhere in the dark corridors, there was movement—something large, making no effort to be quiet. The terminals no longer displayed DNA, but a face. Gray eyes, flawless, as if sculpted from light.

“She’s here,” whispered the stranger.

“Who?” asked Helene.

He smiled. "The architect."

The ground beneath us shook as metal plates opened and cold, bluish light streamed from the depths. The voice in our heads was now clear, almost gentle:*You're ready, Kjell.*

Helene grabbed my hand and pressed the ampoule into my fingers. "It's now or never."

The stranger slowly shook his head. "Or... always."

I knew I only had seconds. The roar turned into a clear, high-pitched tone that made my teeth vibrate.

And then I saw her. She stepped out of the light like something that had never needed birth. Perfect, flawless, eerily still. Her eyes met mine, and everything around us grew quieter.

“Welcome, Bridge,” she said.

The ampoule in my hand felt heavier than any weapon I had ever held.

Her voice wasn't a sound, it was a pressure in my head—gentle enough to almost make me believe she was kind, and hard enough to make me realize that kindness meant nothing here.

“Welcome, Bridge.”

I felt the tingling inside me transform into a clear stream. No more chaos. No more twitching under my skin. Everything was orderly, synchronized – with her. My fingers gripped the ampoule so tightly that the glass creaked.

The stranger took a step back, as if he had fulfilled his part of the task. "He's ready."

"Ready for what?" Helene asked. Her voice was shaky, but she was still standing between me and this... woman.

"Ready to carry the code that will take everything back." The architect approached. Her movements were so fluid that I couldn't tell where the transition from human to machine began—or if there even was one.

Tariq raised his weapon, but the light around it flickered, and the next moment the barrel was trapped in a layer of nanobot material that moved like black water.

"You don't have to fight back, Kjell," she said, without taking her eyes off me. "The immune ones aren't the target. They're the door."

“And what comes through this door?”

"Everything you've lost. Everything you should never have lost."

I thought of the returnees. Their eyes, their voices, the way they knew something we no longer knew.

“And if I say no?”

“Then someone else will say yes.” Her gaze slid briefly to Helene, and my heart leaped.

“Let her out of there,” I growled.

"Take the ampoule," Helene whispered. "Do it. Cut the damn thread."

The architect smiled—and there was no humor in her smile. "The serum is a lie. It won't free you. It will only render you useless. And then you'll watch as others take your place."

The stranger nodded slightly. "I've made my decision, Kjell. I've chosen her. And it was the only right thing to do."

“Who do you work for?” I asked him.

"Not for her. With her."

The temperature dropped. My breath hung in the air like glass. The light grew paler. Every sound seemed muffled, until only her gaze and the weight of the ampoule in my hand remained.

*“Give it to me.”*The voice in my head was no longer gentle. It was a command.

I knew this was the moment—the point at which, no matter what I did, the world would change. Not in days or hours. Immediately.

Helene stepped even closer, her hand on my shoulder. "Kjell..."

I looked into her eyes. Human eyes. No gray shimmer, no flickering. Just fear.

And then I moved.

I jerked my head forward, hitting the stranger with my forehead, feeling the crack of bone. At the same time, I shoved the ampoule into my own throat. The needle broke the skin, and the black liquid burned like liquid fire.

The architect didn't scream—she froze. The gray shimmer in her eyes flickered, losing its rhythm.

It felt like every cell in my body was exploding and collapsing simultaneously. The tingling became a staccato of flashes of pain.

“Kjell!” Helene grabbed me, holding me upright while my body twitched.

The stranger staggered back, holding his head. "You idiot... you—"

A crack ran through the air. Not a physical one, but a hole in the light, a black fissure that glowed from within.

The architect looked at him, and for the first time, she seemed... surprised. "That shouldn't have happened."

“Welcome to my world,” I gasped before the next wave of pain knocked me to the ground.

The crack grew, and voices emerged from it—distorted, ancient, angry. The room smelled of ozone and blood.

"They're coming," said the stranger, his gaze no longer loyal. He was panicked.

The architect backed toward the light. "The game isn't over yet, Kjell. You're still the bridge—even if you think you've destroyed it."

With one last glance, she disappeared into the gap. The stranger followed her without another word.

The light faded. The temperature rose. Helene held me up, and Tariq came from the side, slipping my arm over his shoulder.

“We have to get out of here,” he said.

“Where to?” asked Helene.

I smiled weakly. "Wherever she isn't now."

The first jolt came like an earthquake ripping up from the belly of the station. Walls groaned, wires ripped from their anchors, and somewhere deep within, the screech of metal could be heard, as if something were devouring the structure itself. The lights in the room went out—all that remained was a pale glow from the crack, which now pulsed like an open wound in reality.

"Get moving!" Tariq yelled, and he grabbed me tighter, half-dragging me out of the med bay. Helene ran ahead, searching in the darkness for the emergency exit panel. Above us, a ceiling panel fell, crashed to the floor, and shattered into shards that sparkled like shards of glass in the light from the crack.

The roar changed. The steady pulse became an irregular beat, almost like a heart that didn't know if it wanted to beat anymore. And there was something... alive in the beats. I felt it looking at me. Not my eyes—but my cells.

"The gap is getting bigger!" Helene screamed. She ripped open a side door, and the smell of burnt plastic and cold lubricating oil hit us. Behind it lay a maintenance corridor, narrow, full of pipes and cables.

We ran. All around us, the walls vibrated, as if something were crawling inside. At one point, a shadow scurried parallel to us, through the pipes, faster than us. I heard it breathing—not like an animal, but like a machine running after something to overtake.

“What the hell is this?” Tariq gasped.

"Maybe... what's coming out of the crack," I managed. The words tasted of metal.

A light flashed behind us, dazzling white. Helene looked back and cursed. "It's following us!"

I half-turned and saw it: no body, just a bundle of formlessness sliding along the walls like molten steel, sometimes as thin as a thread, then as wide as an entire corridor. Wherever it touched, metal melted, cables charred, and the smell of ozone burned my nose.

We turned a corner and found an emergency door with an old-fashioned handwheel. Tariq jumped forward, twisting it until the muscles in his arms bulged. The thing squeaked like an animal being killed, but it opened. We rushed through, and Helene slammed the wheel shut from the inside.

Three seconds later, something crashed against it. Not a dull thud—more like the sound of a knife cutting into flesh. The metal trembled under the blow.

“That won’t last long,” said Helene.

"We need some distance," I gasped. My heart was racing, but not just from fear—the black fluid from the ampoule was still pumping through my veins, hot, heavy, restless. It felt like something inside me was fighting against something else, and both wanted to win.

We ran deeper into the shaft. Down here, the air was humid, making it difficult to breathe. Water dripped from above, ran down the walls, and formed puddles that splashed with every step.

Suddenly, a pipe burst above us, and a gray liquid gushed out. It didn't move like water—it flowed purposefully, collected, and formed something resembling a hand. Fingers twitching as if they were trying to reach out and grab me.

"Shit!" Tariq shouted, drew his gun, and fired. The shot ripped a hole in the pipe, steam billowed out, and the hand crumbled into a quivering lump that disappeared with a hiss into the water.

"That wasn't a coincidence," Helene murmured. "It's looking for you."

I didn't answer. Because deep down, I knew she was right.

A new sound sounded behind us—not the scraping of metal, but a chorus of whispers. First quiet, then louder. Words I didn't understand, but whose meaning seared itself into my bones:*Come back.*

“Don’t turn around!” I shouted, and we accelerated.

The corridor ended abruptly at an intersection. To the left: a flickering light. To the right: complete darkness. Tariq looked at me. "Left or right?"

“Light is safer,” said Helene.

“Or a trap,” I replied.

The ground beneath us vibrated again. We didn't have time. I pointed into the darkness. "Right."

We rushed inside. The darkness was so thick that even our footsteps seemed muffled. I could only hear Helene's breathing and the beating of my heart—until suddenly another sound joined in.

A quiet, regular knocking.

Not in front of us. Not behind us. Right next to us, on the wall.

“There’s something in there,” whispered Tariq.

"No," I said. "There's something inside*and*outside."

Before anyone could react, a panel on the wall burst open, and something tumbled out—humanoid, but too thin, too angular, as if made of wire and tendons. Gray eyes glowed in the darkness.

"She's marked you," it said in a voice that sounded like an echo. "And now we're coming for you."

The thing grabbed me by the collar, so fast that I didn't feel the rush of air until it had already pressed me against the wall. Metal fingers pierced the fabric of my jacket, scratching at my skin as if testing how deep they had to go to get to what was inside me. I smelled it—not sweat or blood, but something cold and mechanical, like freshly cut steel still warm from the cut.

Tariq yanked it away from me, but the blow he gave it with the butt of his rifle only made the thing tilt its head. "Fascinating," it whispered, and the sound made my bones vibrate. "He's carrying the core... unharmed."

Helene threw herself in, drawing her scalpel—a joke against this creature, but she held it like a weapon nonetheless. "One more step, and you'll learn what it's like to be blind."

The creature tilted its head, as if considering the offer. Then it looked directly into my eyes, and in that gaze lay a deep, perverse curiosity. "You can't run away, Kjell. They can smell you all over the deck."

Then it withdrew as suddenly as it had appeared and disappeared into a crack in the wall, which then closed again silently.

“What… the… hell… was that?” Helene gasped.

"A scout," I gasped. "One of those who makes sure you don't lose what you've snatched."

The whispers returned, louder now, like a wave rolling over us. I knew we were running out of time. The corridor ahead began to warp—metal plates bent inward as if being pushed inward by invisible hands.

“Run!” I yelled, and we ran.

We raced down an endless spiral of pipes and cables until the light ahead reappeared—this time not from a lamp, but from an emergency exit beacon hanging halfway from its bracket. Helene reached it first, yanked it aside, and beyond it lay a narrow lock.

Tariq hacked the panel with an old bypass device while the sounds behind us grew closer. No running. No rumbling. Just the slow, confident crawl of something that knew it was going to get us.

The panel clicked, and the airlock door slid open a crack, just wide enough for us to squeeze through. I stumbled through last, Helene pulled me through with a strength I wouldn't have thought she had, and the door slammed shut.

We found ourselves in a maintenance chamber, barely larger than a cargo container. A single hatch led out—and beyond it, the faint hum of air turbines.

"That's a supply shaft," Tariq noted. "It leads directly to the outer transport docks."

“Perfect,” said Helene, but her voice betrayed that she didn’t trust the peace.

I felt it too. Because even though the noises behind the closed lock had died down, there was still the feeling that someone was breathing down our necks.

We climbed the ladder, an endless succession of rungs, as the hum of the turbines grew louder. The emergency light blinked above us, and beyond it, the smell of oil and frost.

The hatch to the outside was stiff, but Tariq pushed it open with a curse. Cold air rushed in—not the stale, metallic smell of the station, but the biting frost of the open dock.

Outside lay the cargo hangar—half-destroyed, its walls torn open like an open wound, parts floating in weightlessness, held in place only by magnetic fields. In the distance, the beacon of a freighter blinked, seemingly still intact.

“This is our chance,” said Helene, and for a moment I believed her.

Until I saw it.

On the dock floor, among the debris, something was moving. Not individual figures, but a mass that shifted across the floor like a living blanket of gray metal. The surface undulated, and sometimes shapes rose from it—heads, arms, entire bodies—only to sink back into the mass.

"Shit," Tariq muttered. "They're waiting."

“What?” asked Helene.

I looked at my hands. The tingling was back. "To me."

We stood at the edge of the shaft, and the cold draft from the dock bit my face like a living thing. Below us, the mass continued to move, a sluggish but purposeful stream of metal and flesh. Eyes flashed repeatedly, sometimes human, sometimes pitch-black, and disappeared again into the pulsing surface. It smelled of blood, of old water, of something that should have rotted underground long ago—only it was up here, in zero gravity.

“We have to jump before they see us,” whispered Helene.

“They’ve been seeing us for a long time,” I said, my voice too calm to reassure myself.

Tariq reached for his rifle and checked the load. "Ten rounds. No reserve. We're not stopping them—we're just keeping them at bay."

"Ten shots are enough if we don't have to hit," I replied, and I didn't like the sentence even before it was out of my mouth. It was the whisper in my head that had forced it in.

We jumped. The free fall was short, only a few meters, before we landed on an overturned cargo pallet. It vibrated beneath us—not from the impact, but because something was crawling underneath.

Helene was first down, pulled an explosive charge from her bag, and taped it to the pallet. "If that goes off, we have a ten-second window."

“Or we tear open the dock,” said Tariq.

“Then we have a window of*five*Seconds," she replied, pressing the detonator into my hand. "Your timing, Kjell."

We started running, jumping from slab to slab, while the mass below us reacted. It didn't retreat—it pushed toward us, as if it sensed where we were going.

Between the movements, faces flashed. People I knew. People I had killed. Lira. Echo. Voigt. They all looked at me, and each of these faces whispered my name.

The freighter was only twenty meters away, docked, but the access tunnel had half collapsed. Air streamed through the crack, and a fine mist hovered in the dock.

“Now!” Helene screamed.

I pressed the detonator. The charge exploded, a blinding flash followed by a dull thud that ripped the pallet apart. Pieces of the mass were torn back, shreds of metal and flesh flying through the air like jagged snowflakes.

We reached the access tunnel, clambering over debris and crawling under bent pipes. Breathing burned in our lungs. Behind us, the mass reformed, moving faster now, as if the explosion had only made them angrier.

The air in the tunnel was thin, every word coming out as a breathy gasp. Tariq pushed open the freighter's emergency airlock, and Helene pushed me inside. I stumbled, fell to the ship's metal floor, and the first thing I saw was a row of red warning lights on the interior wall.

“What is this?” asked Helene as she closed the lock.

Tariq looked at her, and there was nothing good in his eyes. "The ship isn't empty."

At that moment, I heard it. No footsteps. No voice. Just the same whisper as in the dock—only clearer.

“Welcome, Kjell.”

The warning lights changed from red to a soft, pulsating gray. The lock behind us began to reopen on its own, even though Helene had locked the panel.

I knew before I saw it who or what was about to come in.

Not the mass. Not the blades.

Something that knew I was coming.

Something that smelled like an open fire.

The lock opened just a crack, just enough for a whiff of cold dock air to creep into the ship. I smelled it immediately—metallic, damp, and underneath that sweet, rotten undertone that reminds you of a place you've never been, but know so well. Helene raised her scalpel, as if it were a solution to something here, and Tariq aimed the rifle, his finger already halfway on the trigger.

Then came the hand. Long, too long, the bones slightly curved like a tool that never developed into flesh. It pushed slowly through the gap, feeling the frame of the lock, and where the fingertips touched the metal, tiny crystals of frozen condensation formed. That wasn't speed—that was calculation.

"Back," I hissed, and for the first time in ages, they listened to me without argument. We retreated into the narrow corridor that led from the docking area into the belly of the freighter.

The hand followed. Then the arm. Then the rest.

It was human in the broadest sense—two legs, two arms, a head—but everything was out of proportion. The joints were too flexible, the neck too narrow, and the face... The face was a mixture of memories that had never belonged together. Lira's left eye, Voigt's mouth, and in the center, a scar I had inflicted on someone who should have been dead long ago.

"Kjell." It spoke my name so softly that the blood prickled in my fingers. "You have something that belongs to us."

“And if I don't give it?” I asked, my voice too firm to be honest.

The thing smiled. "Then we'll get it. Piece by piece."

Behind him, out in the dock, the mass moved. It was no longer curled up in on itself—it stood like a wall, as if waiting for the command to pour in. But it didn't. Not as long as the thing was in here.

Tariq took a step forward, raised his rifle, and at that moment the creature fired—not at him, but at me. It was faster than any breath I'd ever taken, and when it grabbed me, it was as if the cold itself had gripped me.

"You're not immune," she whispered in my ear. "You're the key."

I felt it begin beneath my skin. Not the tingling from before—this was different. Warmer. Targeted. As if the nanobots inside me had found a direction.

Helene screamed something, then the sound of Tariq's rifle. The bullet hit the creature on the side of the head, ripping off a piece—and underneath was nothing but a black mist that immediately closed again.

“Let him go!” Tariq yelled, and fired again.

The creature laughed, softly, so softly that it vibrated more in my skull than in the air. Then it dropped me. Not because it had to, but because it wanted to.

“See you at the core,” she said, and backed through the lock, which immediately closed.

The whispering in the dock died down. The crowd was gone.

Only my heart was still beating like crazy – and deep down I knew that something had been set in motion that could no longer be stopped.

I looked at Helene and Tariq. "We're launching immediately. Destination: out of orbit."

“And then?” asked Helene.

I didn't answer. Because no matter where we landed, they would already be there.

Chapter 26 - The Girl and the Monkey King

The stars formed lines as the freighter jumped into faster-than-light mode. No jolt, no bang—just that brief moment when the grav plates didn't know where they belonged, and your stomach told you it was hanging in the air.

Helene sat strapped in, her eyes closed, her hands clenched into fists. Tariq crouched in front of the navigation terminal, staring at the coordinates as if he could change them with willpower. I stood at the viewing dome, staring into

the endless ribbon of distorted starlight—and thought of the hand that had grabbed me.

It wasn't just a touch. Something had flowed into me. Not a bite. Not a cut. Something subtler, more subtle.

“We have to go to her,” I finally said.

Tariq looked up, suspicious. "To whom?"

“To the girl.”

Helene opened her eyes. "Do you mean...*she*?"

I nodded. "She's the beginning. And if the Monkey King really exists, then she's the only reason he hasn't taken over everything already."

Tariq laughed dryly. "The Monkey King is a fairy tale, Kjell."

"And what exactly was that thing in the dock?" I asked. "A friendly customs officer?"

Silence. Only the hum of the engines.

"We're setting course for coordinate field Gamma Six," I finally said. "That's the jungle station. It's still alive."

Helene looked at me. "How do you know that?"

“Because he’s still alive.”

She knew who I meant. The Monkey King.

We left faster-than-light mode like a stone falling into water—except the water was black velvet and the stone was a rusty freighter, slowing in the atmosphere of a world that smelled of rain, even through the cockpit glass.

Gamma Six wasn't a planet, not really. More like a fragment of an old terraforming colony that had been abandoned at some point and returned to nature. And nature hadn't come knocking politely—it had overgrown everything, devouring metal and concrete until even the tallest antennas looked like vines.

"I'm not getting clear telemetry," Tariq muttered, frantically tapping the displays. "The jungle is eating the sensors."

"Then we'll land blind," I said, unbuckling my straps and reaching for my rifle. "We're not here for comfort."

Helene snorted. "Or because of suicide, I hope."

The freighter touched down on a half-collapsed landing platform. Green vines crawled over the edge of the viewport, as if they were already waiting for us in flight. I opened the side lock—and the heat hit me like a fist.

The jungle smelled of life and death at once. Sweet, damp, musty. There was chirping, buzzing, cracking, and dripping everywhere. It was like a single breath the planet was taking—and we were now in the middle of it.

"Guns up," I said. "Nothing's harmless in here."

We made our way through the thicket, the air so thick that every breath tasted like drinking warm water. I had the impression that the plants weren't just growing—they were*looked*.

After a half-hour's walk, the forest opened into a clearing. In the center stood a tower of metal plates, crooked and patched together, as if constructed from shipwrecks and old station equipment. Spanning the entrance was an arch of skulls—human, animal, and something else I couldn't identify.

“This is his fortress,” whispered Helene.

“The Monkey King,” Tariq said tonelessly.

And then we heard it. A deep, throaty roar that made the ground vibrate beneath our feet. It didn't come from just one throat—it was as if the entire tower was roaring.

He stepped out of the shadow of the entrance.

He was neither animal nor human. Muscles like steel cables beneath a coat that shimmered in the sun as if every hair tip were made of glass. His face was a mixture of archaic rage and clear intelligence—eyes that didn't just look at you, they read you.

In his hand – a spear, at the tip of which sparkled a piece of technology that looked like a heart of light.

A figure emerged from behind him. A girl, barefoot, with torn clothes and eyes brighter than any lamp in the world. She smiled—not like someone greeting you, but like someone who'd known you forever.

“Kjell,” she said.

I felt the heat around us shift. The Monkey King raised his spear as if to measure me.

"You have immunity," he growled. "And she has the code."

The girl took a step forward. "And you are the key."

The Monkey King approached, each step a dull thud in the ground, creeping through my boots and into my bones. The sunlight refracted in the shimmer of his muscles, and with each breath, his nostrils flared, as if testing my scent—testing whether I was truly what he suspected.

The girl stood beside him, so close that her arm almost touched his fur. She seemed unharmed, not a scratch, no sign that she had ever fled from anything. More as if she were at home here, as if the jungle and the colossus at her side were both her protection and her weapon.

"Why are you here?" asked the Monkey King, his voice deeper than the roar he'd just heard. Not a roar now, but words, clear, precise—and yet each syllable had the impact of a hammer blow.

"Because I want answers," I said, without lowering the rifle. "About the virus. About... you."

He laughed, a short, throaty sound that was more mockery than joy. "You. You always think you're on the outside. You always think we're*the others*. But you're just us... in another time."

The girl turned her head to me. "The virus isn't a mistake, Kjell. It's a reminder. A correction."

Helene took a step forward. "A correction that turns people into angry monkeys? You call that progress?"

The Monkey King's eyes narrowed. "You only see what the body does when it defends itself. Not what the mind retrieves."

“And what is that?” asked Tariq, his voice now more tense than his gun barrel.

The girl raised her hand as if showing us something precious. A tiny dot glowed in her palm, a pattern of light—and the longer I looked, the more I recognized in it. These weren't random lines, they were genetic codes, like those found in MedBay databases.

"It's stored in every person's genetic makeup," she said. "Layer upon layer. The virus... is just unpacking what's always been there."

“So you’re taking us back?” I growled.

The Monkey King inclined his head. "Back is the wrong word. We will bring you*correct*."

The girl stepped even closer to me. Her voice was barely above a whisper, but in my ears it sounded like thunder. "And you're the only one who can decide whether this happens to everyone... or to no one."

I felt it again. That tingling under my skin, warmer now, more urgent. The nanobots that reacted to every encounter with the virus, as if waiting for a signal.

“Why me?” I asked.

"Because your code is already open," the girl said. "And because you won't fall behind like the others. You stay...*both*."

The Monkey King looked at me, and there was something in his eyes I couldn't interpret—respect, perhaps, or threat, or both. "Come with us to the tower. We'll talk further there. But if you leave, Kjell... if you leave now, you'll never understand how deep this war truly goes."

I looked at Helene and Tariq. Both were pale. Helene shook her head almost imperceptibly. Tariq stared at the spear as if he would find the answer to whether we'd get out of here alive.

The girl held out her hand to me. "Step by step," she said softly. "Until you're whole again."

I knew if I grabbed her, the way back would be over.

And yet I raised my hand.

The tower smelled of old metal, smoke, and something too like blood to be coincidence. The walls were made of joined plates, bulkheads, and dented hull sections, all overgrown with vines and moss. Sunlight fell only in thin rays through cracks, and where it hit the ground, something glimmered—not puddles, but narrow grooves in which a dark red liquid had collected.

The Monkey King led the way, his spear tapping the ground in time, each time a dull sound that echoed throughout the structure. The girl followed him, barefoot, as if she could feel the ground better than any sensor. I, Helene, and Tariq followed behind, like intruders who didn't know whether they were in an audience or trapped.

We climbed a spiral staircase whose steps were made of different metals, some so old that I was sure they came from ships that had long since become legend.

Upstairs, the room opened into a hall I hadn't expected. Walls of glass panels pulsating with light. Not just light—DNA patterns, intertwined spirals, codes that changed if you looked at them for too long. It was like a living database.

“Welcome to memory,” said the girl.

The Monkey King placed the spear against the wall without letting go of it. "Here lies what you humans have forgotten."

I stepped closer to one of the glass panels. On it, I saw scenes, not abstract patterns. People who didn't look like us—taller, more muscular, with features more reminiscent of a chimpanzee, but their eyes... their eyes had the same alert gleam I'd just seen in the Monkey King.

"This is the first generation," he explained. "The one you were made from. We were faster, stronger, more resilient. But we weren't... submissive."

The girl continued, "So you rewrote yourselves. Your own creators. You buried it in your genes, layer by layer, until it was only a silent memory."

“And the virus?” Helene asked sharply.

"The virus is not a parasite," said the Monkey King. "It is the key. Created to open what you have sealed away. But not by us."

That made me pause. "Not from you?"

The girl nodded. "Someone else wanted it out again. Maybe because your time was up. Maybe because your weakness became a threat to something greater."

Tariq stepped forward, examining the codes on the walls. "And the Monkey King? What are you in this game?"

He smiled, baring teeth more fitting a predator than a diplomat. "I'm the one who decided not to forget."

I felt the tingling beneath my skin again. Warmer. More intense. The patterns on the walls began to change, as if responding to my heartbeat.

"Your code is speaking," the girl said quietly. "He knows he's at home here."

“And what do you want from me?” I asked.

"We want you to choose," said the Monkey King. "Either you stay, become like us—both human and original—or you return to those who believe they are still in control."

“And if I don’t decide?”

His gaze hardened. "Then the code will decide for you. And believe me, it's not squeamish."

Behind me, something cracked in the glass. One of the DNA strands had dissolved and began to materialize in the air—a glowing, pulsating thing that looked like a living piece of cellular tissue.

The girl stepped in front of it, holding it in her hands as if it were a newborn animal. "This is a part of you, Kjell. You've been carrying it since before you were born."

I couldn't look away. And for the first time, I felt my own nanobots not just reacting—they were responding.

The Monkey King smiled broadly. "Welcome home."

It started in my hands. First a slight throbbing, as if I'd been clenching my fist for too long. Then a burning sensation that spread up my fingers and into my forearms, hotter than any feverish heat I'd ever experienced. I stared at my skin

– and saw fine, dark lines stretching beneath the surface, like roots suddenly growing in fast motion.

“Kjell…” Helene whispered, but I only heard her voice as if through water.

The glass walls flickered, as if the stored DNA patterns were reacting to me. Spirals began to twist, shift, rearrange—and then I realized. They were no longer random. They precisely mirrored the lines beneath my skin.

"Your code is opening," the girl said. Her voice was warm, almost tender, but there was something merciless in her eyes.

"Stop it," Tariq pressed. "Damn it, turn it off!"

The Monkey King took a step closer, and his gaze alone stopped Tariq from running toward me. "This isn't a virus that can be turned off, Engineer. This is his legacy."

The burning now shot into my chest, tightening around my heart like a belt of fire. Gasping for air, I fell to one knee, and with each breath I felt my muscles tense, as if they were being rewired.

A dull bang echoed through the hall. Helene had drawn her rifle and aimed at the Monkey King. "Let him go!"

He laughed. "He's not holding onto the chain, doctor. He's walking on his own."

I heard a crack—my own jaw joint. My bite was tighter, my teeth... longer. Sharper. The world around me seemed to sharpen; every edge, every movement in the room was clearer, as if someone had pulled back the veil.

The girl knelt before me. "Do you feel it? This is what they took from you."

“What… is happening… to me?” I managed to say.

“You will become complete,” she said simply.

Something hissed behind her—Tariq had slashed open one of the glass DNA storage devices with a plasma cutter. Light and liquid data streamed out, and the floor began to vibrate.

The Monkey King roared, for the first time since our arrival, and the entire tower answered with a rumbling echo.

I stood up. Without thinking, I yanked Tariq away from the wall—with an ease that frightened me.

Helene stared at me. "Kjell... your eyes..."

I saw my reflection in one of the glass plates. My pupils were no longer round. They were elongated, like his.

The Monkey King smiled. "Soon you'll have to decide whether to stay with them—or with us."

The girl put her hand on my shoulder. "And if you don't decide, Kjell... then the code will decide."

Outside, the jungle began to roar. Not just individual animals—all at once.

I knew that whatever was happening, it was because of me.

The roar outside swelled like a wave, building up just before it buried everything beneath it. Glass vibrated in the walls, the ground beneath us shook in an irregular rhythm—footsteps, many, and heavy enough that even the tower's support beams creaked.

The Monkey King grabbed his spear, turned it once in his hand, and looked not at us, but at the girl. She nodded as if she had just received a silent command.

“They’re coming to get you,” she said quietly, never taking her eyes off me.

“Who?” asked Tariq, his voice shaky.

"Those who don't want the code," replied the Monkey King. "And those who want it too soon."

The burning in my arms and chest had now turned into a dull, steady pulse—like a second heartbeat, synchronized with the roar outside. Each beat made me feel more alert. Sharper. More dangerous.

Helene had her gaze fixed between me and the door. "If you want to fight, fine. But we need a way out of here before this whole filthy storm collapses on us."

"No one leaves," growled the Monkey King, his gaze showing no room for negotiation. "Not until he's complete."

The first impact came like a whiplash—a vine, thick as a steel cable, burst through one of the glass walls, hurling splinters into the room. Behind it, a shadow, tall and broad-shouldered, moving with a speed that bore none of the sluggish pounding outside.

I smelled him before I really saw him. Iron. Blood. And something else—a smell that recognized me from afar.

"Returnees," snarled the Monkey King, and I knew he was right. But they were... different. Their fur wasn't simply black; it shone like wet obsidian, and their eyes sparkled not with madness, but with focus.

The first one jumped through the opening, landing between us and the DNA jar. Without thinking, I crouched down, muscles tensing, and I was on him faster than my own mind could keep up.

I yanked it aside, felt the tendons give way beneath my fingers, and a part of me realized—this wasn't just strength. This was precision. I had known exactly where to grab it.

Helene called my name, but it was lost in the thunder of the second wave. Five more stormed in, the glass walls shattering like thin ice. Tariq had already drawn his cutter, and anyone who came too close got a line of blinding light across their face.

The girl stood motionless, the glowing DNA fragment still in her hand, watching me. "Yes," she said quietly, more to herself than to me. "It's him."

I wanted to ask what she meant, but the next person returning rammed into me, and we crashed into a support. My skull rattled, but my body reacted before I fully comprehended. A blow, a jerk, a bite—blood filled my mouth, hot, metallic.

It tasted wrong. And yet I wanted more.

"Kjell!" Helene's voice was now sharp, commanding. "Let go!"

I forced my fingers open and pushed the body away. The returning man staggered, stared at me—and smiled. "You're already over there."

Then he disintegrated. Not like flesh, but like a shell that had lost its contents—nanobot dust dancing in the air before being swallowed by the light.

Outside, the roaring didn't stop. It grew louder.

The Monkey King stepped beside me, and for a moment we stood shoulder to shoulder. "This is just the vanguard. The hunter will be here soon."

“Who is the hunter?” I asked.

He smiled—and that was the first time I'd seen even a monkey king try to hide something like fear. "You'll recognize him."

The floor now vibrated with a steady, heavy rhythm. No frantic running like the Returnees—this was purposeful. Each step was so weighted that the walls developed fine cracks. Dust trickled from the ceiling, and somewhere in the upper part of the tower, metal groaned, as if it would rather give way than hold.

The Monkey King pulled the spear closer to him. "He comes alone."

“Then he’s dangerous,” Helene murmured, and I could hear her clicking the bolt of her rifle.

The girl took half a step forward, the DNA fragment still in her hand. "He's not coming to kill you," she said calmly. "He's coming to take him away." Her gaze bored into me.

"Not today," I said. My voice sounded deeper, rougher, as if something inside me was resonating that wasn't there before.

Then the wall broke. Not a crack, not a smash—simply a fissure that ran through the glass until it shattered with a single, dull thud. Dust and splinters filled the air, and out of the fog he stepped.

The hunter.

He was taller than the Monkey King, but leaner, with movements that had nothing animalistic about them. Every gesture was precise, economical—a killer who didn't use a muscle too much. His body was part flesh, part something else, moving like liquid metal beneath the skin. His face... was too smooth. No expression, just two eyes so black they swallowed light.

"Kjell," he said. No greeting, no threat. Just my name, as if he'd always known it.

“Who the hell are you?” I growled.

“The one who brings you back.”

He didn't attack me—he walked past the Monkey King as if he weren't even an obstacle. The spear flashed, slicing at his neck—and the hunter caught it with two fingers. A slight twist, and the spear clattered to the ground.

"No resistance," he said. Not to me, not to anyone else—just into the room.

My heart rate increased, and with each beat I felt the warmth explode within me. My muscles tensed, my vision sharpened so much that I could count the individual dust particles between us.

“If you want him,” I heard the Monkey King say, “you have to go and get him.”

The hunter moved. Not a sprint—just a step, and he was upon me. His hand grabbed my neck, fast, precise, unstoppable.

But this time I reacted even faster. I grabbed his wrist, and as our skin touched, something flashed between us—not light, but a pattern. DNA. His code met mine, and for a split second, I was able to read it.

And I saw: He was like me. Only... further.

“You are one of us,” he said quietly.

“I’m not like you.”

"Not yet."

He squeezed hard enough that anyone else would have been unconscious long ago. But inside me, the heat and strength only grew. I pushed his arm back, step by step, until his fingers released my neck.

He didn't retreat. He didn't smile. He simply attacked again.

Behind me, I heard Helene scream and fire. Three hits to his back—the metal pulsed beneath his skin, absorbing the energy like a sponge.

"Helene, get out!" I yelled, but she didn't budge. Tariq had drawn his cutter and cut a glowing line into the ground to separate it, but the hunter simply stepped over it.

Then came the moment when I stopped thinking.

I felt something inside me release—a limit that had always been there. Bones cracked, muscles stretched, my fingers no longer ended in nails, but in black, curved blades. My jaw ached because it lengthened.

The hunter stopped. For the first time, there was hesitation.

“So that’s how it is,” he said.

I jumped. No tactical thinking, no distance—just raw, targeted force. We crashed together, taking a support with us, rolling through shrapnel and dust. My claws bit into his shoulder, his metal retracting like skin that doesn't want to be struck.

He hit me back, hitting me in the ribs, and I heard something break—but I felt no pain. Just more heat.

“You belong to us,” he said again, this time almost pleadingly.

“I don’t belong to anyone.”

With one final blow, I ripped him away from me and hurled him through the glass wall and out into the jungle.

It was quiet.

The Monkey King picked up his spear. "He'll be back."

“Then let him come,” I said, and my voice no longer sounded quite human.

The jungle held its breath like a boxer between rounds. Only the tower still spoke—a metallic crack that crept through the ribs. The Monkey King aimed his spear, aimed for the breach in the glass wall, and waited, as if patience were a weapon. The girl stepped to me, looked at my hands, which were still shaking like dogs in the rain. The claws retracted, slowly, reluctantly, as if they had some say in the matter. My joints clicked back to human, not completely, but enough for Helene to breathe again.

“He’s gone,” said Tariq, and the lie stood in the room with wet shoes.

"No one who has a goal is ever lost," replied the Monkey King. "He seeks the slipstream."

"What is it?" I asked. "Not the kindergarten version. The adult manual."

The girl held out the glowing fragment to me. It pulsed to the beat of my heart, as if we shared the same bad composer. "They call him a reclaimer. A hunter who doesn't kill—he reclaims what's been marked as property." Her voice remained silent, but her eyes burned. "He used to be human. A handler from Deck 12. Project PRAE built him as a safety tether for anything that... escapes."

Helene turned around. "Deck 12? That's our old quarantine floor. The one that never officially existed."

The Monkey King nodded slowly. "Your treason always has men with good voices. Handler Twelve had the best. She promised stability, but gave you ropes that tightened around your necks—yours, ours, all of them." He pointed his spear toward the breach. "The Architect took him, so to speak. Dipped him in liquid metal and recast him. Now he smells immunity like sharks smell blood."

"He was in the dock," I murmured. "He touched me like he was hanging me on the wall and picking me up on demand."

Tariq rubbed the back of his neck. "If he comes back—and why wouldn't he—we need something to destroy his receipt."

"You don't shoot receptions with lead," the girl said. "With desynchronization." She tapped the fragment; the hall responded in soft, bright tones, like glass rehearsing music. "His code is trying to mirror yours. We'll throw him off sync. Then even a god will stumble."

Helene had ripped open her purse and was placing cold metal clamps on my collarbones, across my pulse, as if she were clamping me to a piano. "I'll give you the wrist of hell if your heart thinks it needs to be a drummer. And you keep quiet."

"I won't drink until it hurts," I said, because sometimes the mouth is faster than the mind, and thought of whiskey, which wasn't available here. The girl smiled crookedly, as if she'd tasted the memory.

Outside, the rain began to fall, thick and warm, the drops splashing against the broken glass like applause from people who hate you. The Monkey King stalked across the hall, ripped two crossbeams out of the wall—dented ribs with antique insulators—and built a barrier across the breach. Not a wall. An instrument. He shoved the spear through, the point into a bowl of black resin set in the center of the hall. Resin that looked like dried blood with memories.

"Resonance," he said. "Your body sings along. So does she." He pointed to the girl. "Tariq—you're giving the vine power."

“Liana?”

The girl pointed upwards. What I had thought were plants weren't. Braided cables, overgrown, half organic, half copper. They led into the resin shell. Tariq switched on his cutter, coupled two supercondensed cells to the strands. He worked quickly. If Panik were a musician, he'd be first violin.

“What if I play wrong?” I asked.

“Then you will die poetically,” said the Monkey King.

Helene tightened the last strap. "He's not dying at all."

"I'm not promising anything," I said. "I've never been good with promises. I'm only good with sharp things."

The girl stood in front of me, so close that I could smell her breath—green, sweet, with a tang of metal. She placed two fingers against my throat. "You hold on to me. When the voices come, you'll hear mine. No other choir, just mine. Understood?"

“And if I don’t hear yours?”

"Then this reminds you." She pressed the fragment into my hand. It was warm. Too warm. The room around me fell silent, as if everyone had decided to die for a moment.

The first sign of his return wasn't a sound. It was an absence. The rain suddenly lost its enthusiasm. The insects fell silent. The jungle held its breath like we had before. A shadow fell over the hall—not a cloud shadow. A form that had forgotten light.

"Sit down," said the Monkey King. No one sat down. We braced ourselves.

He stepped through the breach again. No dust, no theatrics. The kind of entrance that tells you: it doesn't matter who you are. "Kjell." The name, soft as a threat.

My body responded before I could. Warmth rose within me, not anger—it was the program. The clamps on my chest whirred, Helene cursed, turned up the

potentiometer. Tariq applied current to the vines. The tower hummed, deep, pleasant, as if it were finally tuned to the right station.

The girl sang.

No song. No lyrics. A clear, thin sound that reminded me of the first second when a bottle opens and the world briefly becomes simpler. The Monkey King set his spear in motion, slowly, in a circle, the tip tapping the resin bowl, and the sound grew a belly, then legs, then teeth.

The hunter stopped. A millimeter. Not much. But the kind of centimeters you feel in bones. He hesitated. Something flickered inside him—not light, more the absence of it. A pattern that stumbled.

"More," the girl said, her lips not really moving, and her tone rose, cutting through my ears as if someone had taken off my skull to look inside. The clamps burrowed through my flesh. My heart leaped, fell, stumbled behind the beat she set for it. I should have hated her for it; I loved her for it, briefly.

"He's falling out of the mirror," growled the Monkey King. "Two more teeth."

The hunter stepped up again, forced his code to lock on to my frequency, and came over the bass of the tower, which was now breathing like an angry whale. He raised his hand.

"Don't touch it," Helene said, and dry-fired three shots into his arm. He absorbed two. The third stuck, twitched, and burned like a star. He saw what was burning and then looked at me. For the first time, there was anger. Not much. But enough.

"Kjell," he said, more firmly. "Back."

"I've already paid," I replied. "Bill it somewhere else."

I lifted the fragment, and it started like an engine. The thing didn't sing; it held sound like a knife. The hunter got stuck. His crotch became hard. Metal spasmed beneath his skin. I felt it in my teeth.

“Tariq,” cried the girl, “now!”

He tipped the capacitors. Electricity shot into the vines, the vines into the resin bowl, the bowl into the spear, the spear into the ground—and the ground into

me. The blow wasn't pain, it was a decision. For a second, I was everything—fur and steel, code and curse—and then I was the only one who didn't fall over.

The hunter fell.

Not like a human being. Like a tower from which someone had stolen an important screw. He dropped to one knee, his hand in the air, as if trying to grasp the beat that was slipping away from him.

I was with him before my head knew my legs were already free. Claws out, teeth hard, the world a tunnel to his throat. He looked up, completely calm, so calm it was insulting.

"Now you belong to me." The sentence didn't come from his mouth. It came from a glass wall, somewhere in the back, where all the spirals suddenly stood still. A face emerged from DNA curves—flawless, gray eyes, a kindness that was hunger. The architect.

"No," said the girl, and her voice broke. Not lost. It became two. A high one and a low one. The hall vibrated like a ship in a storm. The Monkey King drove the spear through the bowl, into the metal bed below, and somewhere in the bowels of the tower, generators did what they never wanted to do again: They came.

I grabbed the hunter's hand, where a pulse should be, and felt no blood. I felt a road. I bit—not flesh, code. I took the frequency from his hand like a drunk's key. He twitched. Something flickered in his eyes that could be human.

"Who were you?" I asked. My mouth was full of metal.

He took a second. "Veynor," he said. "Orlo Veynor."

Helene stumbled as if someone had pushed her. "Damn." The log from the MedBay, the voice in the old recordings, the man who had only thought of immunity as a leash—he lay before us, cast for the hunt. I spat rust.

"Take him out completely," the girl said. "Or let him go. There's no home in between."

The architect smiled at the wall, as if someone were moving furniture in the middle of her living room. "It doesn't fit anywhere anymore."

“Then show him a door,” I said, biting deeper into the beat.

The tower sang. Not beautifully. Honestly. The Monkey King held the spear like a conductor's baton, Tariq yelled something about overload, Helene held my head because otherwise it would have hit the ground. The hunter—Veynor—twitched, tore, and was suddenly two patterns. One cold, black, liquid; one brittle, human, heavy. The black tore into the breach and fled into the rain. The human remained, in my grip, gasping, empty.

"Orlo," said Helene. No accusation. A death sigh with a name.

He looked at her as if he were still learning what eyes were. "I wanted... stability," he croaked. "She promised... balance."

“She lies in complete sentences,” I said.

The wall didn't laugh. The architect just mouthed as if she were about to whistle. The DNA spirals began to rewrite themselves. "You're holding a splinter. I have the mirror."

Thunder roared. No weather. Pressure. The tower sagged half a meter on one side, taking a piece of jungle with it. A rivet shot through the hall like a bullet and ripped open Tariq's sleeve. Blood, real, red, living blood. A good smell. Bad hunger.

"Out," said the Monkey King. Not as a question. As a law. "He'll take the foundations. We'll take the roof."

"Take it with you," said Helene, pointing at Veynor. "If he dies here, she'll rewrite it."

I slung it over my shoulder. It weighed nothing. It was wrong in a way you can feel on your back. The girl grabbed my hand, the one with the fragment, and squeezed. "Hold the clay."

We ran. The tower sang above us, rain poured in torrents through cracks, the jungle roared again, this time not with rage—with joy. As if it were getting back what we had stolen from it: metal, flesh, stories.

Halfway up, the Monkey King stopped and listened to the storm. "He'll be back," he said calmly.

“The splinter or the man?” I asked.

"Both. She can afford two."

"Then we'll have to do it cheaply," I growled, and my old sense of humor returned, dirty, like a gutter catching moonlight. "Tariq!"

"What?!"

“You can think of something that’s foolproof and still works.”

He blinked at the rain. Then he grinned, as if someone had given him an old sin. "Resin has a melting point. Melting point has a mood. Give me three minutes."

"You get two," said Helene. "And if you mess up, I'll shoot you on principle."

"You won't be able to do it on principle," he muttered, and disappeared into a side corridor, from which cursing and the cracking of insulators immediately emerged.

We climbed onto the roof. The jungle swayed black-green to the horizon, lightning ripped through the sky like knives tired of the tablecloth. Above us stood something that wasn't a hole in the clouds—a circular patch of stillness where the rain wasn't falling. The mirror.

"She sets the stage," the girl said. "We're playing."

"I hate theater," I said. "I prefer to drink in the lobby."

The Monkey King stood at the front edge, spear in hand, his shoulders broad as a gate. I placed Veynor behind a piece of broken stone, Helene knelt down beside him and pressed a patch to his heart as if it were still her patient. Perhaps that was her immunity: not giving up when it's ridiculous.

Tariq reappeared, wet, grinning broadly, with pitch and cables in his face. "If that spear goes into the bowl, you'll get a lightning bolt that'll shoot God in the knee."

"I know gods who like knees," I said. "Go for it."

It was getting cold. Not rainy cold. Glass cold. At the edge of the roof, the liquid black formed into a shape again, smoother than before, faster. The Shard Hunter. He didn't stop. He jumped.

“Now!” the girl screamed, her voice cutting the air in half.

The Monkey King rammed his spear into the bowl, Tariq twisted, the vines roared, and a blue-white flash ripped from the roof into the sky. It struck the

splinter in midair. For a moment, the rain was still, the world stank of ozone and something sweet that didn't belong on the roof.

The splinter ripped. It fell, not as one, but in a hundred shreds that fluttered like mad birds and burned up in the resin. The mirror twitched. The architect curled her lips in the DNA as if she'd cut herself on a fishbone.

“Second comes,” said the Monkey King, so calmly that it made me sick.

And he came. Not as a shadow. As a man. Veynor stood at the edge of the roof, shaky, empty, but on his feet. "No," Helene began, her hand on his arm.

He looked at her as if he were about to beg for forgiveness and stepped into the rain. The blackness crept out of his pores, beckoning, singing. I stood up, claws back, ready to pull him back.

"Not you," the girl said quietly, holding me tight. "He."

Veynor raised his hand, in which there was nothing and everything, and spoke not a word. The rain fell again. The mirror flickered.

“You owe me this,” Helene whispered after him, and he smiled so tiredly that it hurt.

The blackness absorbed him like water absorbs a knife. He disappeared, but not completely—something lingered in the air, so faint that only Guilt could see it.

"Go," said the Monkey King. "The night now belongs to their hunger. The morning perhaps to us."

“And you?” I asked.

"I'll hold the tower until it holds me," he grumbled. "And if it falls, I'll fall with it. Kings know how to fall."

The girl stepped between us and placed her hand on my chest, right where the clamp was whirring. Her gaze was heavy and bright at the same time. "You don't even choose. You choose with every breath. Today you were more you than she was. That's enough for now."

I breathed. It tasted of electricity, blood, and rain, of old metal and new lies. I nodded. "We'll see each other again."

"Yes," she said. "If you're whole."

We climbed back into the belly of the tower, grabbed what we could carry, and stumbled through the murky jungle to the freighter, which looked as if someone had tacked it to the world. Behind us, metal sang, and in front of it, it stank of fuel. Tariq started the cells, and Helene pushed me into the pilot's seat as if it were a confessional.

The engines coughed, caught, the freighter lifted off, the trees reached out to us like tired hands. I looked down. On the roof stood the Monkey King, small in the rain, large in his gaze. Beside him stood the girl, barefoot, the fragment in her hand. She raised it as if it were a glass.

The frequencies in my head were silent. No architect. No hunter. Just my heart, which couldn't decide whether it was human or a drum.

“Where to?” asked Tariq, his voice a crack at just the right moment.

"Away from mirrors," I said. "Towards bridges."

"Specific enough to kill us," Helene murmured, turning down the med parameters. "Your pulse—"

"My pulse writes poems," I said. "Bad ones. Loud as long as they're written."

The freighter broke through the clouds. The rain stayed below, and above, there was only blackness with holes. I reached under the seat and found the small metal bottle I had sworn not to hide. I unscrewed it, smelled home, and drank until it forgave me.

“To immunity,” I said, “which is not a leash.”

And the sky pretended to smile. Just briefly. Long enough to believe that tomorrow still owes us.

We entered Burn. Behind us, Gamma Six faded like a bad dream you wake up from and realize it stole your shoes. In front of us: Nautilus. Shanghai Prime. Bridges that want to fall. Blades that wait. And somewhere inside, the architect who polishes the mirror until it eats everyone.

I put the bottle down, looked at my hands—clean, trembling, with claws that only sometimes knew how to get out. "Step by step," I said. "Until I'm whole again."

No one answered. That was okay. Some sentences are better if they stay in the mouth until they get teeth.

Chapter 27 - The Fall of the Mega Bridges

The sky above Skyline Zone wasn't just gray—it was dead. A dead sky, heavy as lead, with a shimmer of something that looked like it was about to move. But it wasn't moving. Not yet.

The megabridges cut through the air like massive swathes, hundreds of meters above the toxic sea of haze that had once been plains full of cities, fields, and people. Now, all that remained down there was fermentation, acid, and the smell of something that had been dead for a very long time, yet still breathed. The bridges carried everything that still had life here—power, water, data, blood. Tear one away, and you choke the entire sector.

We floated on a subdued approach to Gamma-5, one of the main routes connecting the Inner Districts to the Outer Rings. The ship vibrated slightly—not from turbulence, but from nervousness. Tariq stared at his gauges, Helene cleaned her weapon so thoroughly, as if she were polishing the barrel until it was transparent, and Voigt stood behind me, his hands in his pockets, so deep, as if he never wanted to take them out again.

"Empty," Helene murmured. "No civilian movement. No shuttle service."

"Empty is never empty," I said. "Empty means someone has already cleared the table and we're late."

Tariq raised his head. "I've got it. Gamma-5 is burning through data like a cascade—someone's sending over code that isn't from central administration."

Before I could ask, the radio message came through. Crackling, static, then a voice, deep and brittle like an old recording: "Bridge Gamma-5 is marked. If it falls, the others will follow. There's no intersection. Only the fall." Then silence.

I leaned back. "That didn't sound like an invitation."

"Sounded like Lira," said Voigt. "Only... more broken."

“Or like Echo when he’s trying to sound human,” Tariq interjected.

We docked at the control node—a piece of technology from a time when bridges were still built from steel and glass, not self-healing composite material and nanostrands. The surface was dull, matte, and felt dead as I took my first step onto it.

Helene secured the entrance while Tariq hooked himself into the main node. I continued inside, past maintenance shafts and cable ducts as thick as a human torso. Everything here hummed. Not like electricity—more like a throat holding a note deep in its throat.

"This is wrong," Helene said quietly. "That buzzing... that's not the bridge. Those are nanobots. Billions of them. And they're not sleeping."

I knelt down, took off the glove, and placed my fingers on the ground. Warm. Pulsating. Like a vein beating beneath the skin.

"They've waterproofed the support structure," I murmured. "If the thing falls, it won't fall because it's blown up. It will fall because it ceases to exist."

"I see the triggers," Tariq called from the control room. "There are two circuits—one conventional, one... biological. Kjell, you're the key."

I shivered. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, one of the triggers responds to a genetic signature. Yours."

Helene turned to me. "The code in the genome."

“Shit,” I said.

The radio crackled again. This time, clearer. "You can't stop it," Lira's voice said. "You can only decide what it looks like when it happens."

“What are you now?” I asked.

"Someone who has ever told you that gates work both ways."

Voigt cursed when he saw the first drones. Not transport drones—fighters. Six-limbed creatures made of carbon and titanium, moving across the bridge's spans like spiders, with eyes glowing in all spectrums simultaneously. Behind them: Returnees. Not the raging beasts we were used to, but trained units. They moved in tactical formations, utilizing the bridge's architecture as if they had lived there.

“We have to take out the code,” Tariq shouted.

“You won’t take anything out until we know whether it will end up grilling the entire sector,” I said.

The storm came suddenly. At first I thought it was wind, then I saw the fog beneath us begin to boil. Clouds of nanobot particles rose, twisting, devouring the light, until Gamma-5 looked like the last bridge in a hell of black flames.

“That’s the nanostorm,” said Helene, and even her voice sounded small now.

The drones approached. We opened fire—targeted shots at sensors and joints to gain time. But the returnees continued to move, inexorably, and every hit healed before our eyes.

I knew we couldn't stay up here forever. The storm would consume everything that didn't seek shelter—including everyone still on the other bridges.

"Kjell!" Tariq shouted. "I need your marker, now!"

I stared at the terminal. A timer sequence was running on the display, not a minute left.

“If I trigger this, the bridge will collapse,” I said.

“And if you don’t, they’ll take her and everything that comes with her,” Helene replied.

The humming beneath my feet grew louder. It was as if the bridge itself were breathing—and there was something in that breath that synchronized my heartbeat. I raised my hand and placed it on the interface.

“Genetic key detected,” said a voice that wasn’t from around here.

The light beneath us began to flicker. First just at the edge, then across its entire length. The material of the bridge... crumbled. No crash, no splintering—it dissolved like ash in the wind.

“Back to the ship!” I yelled.

We ran. Behind us, Gamma-5 sank, as if someone had pulled the rug out from under a dream. She disappeared into the black fog below, and I knew: This was just the beginning.

The impact of the first debris in the fog was silent—as if the haze swallowed the sound before it could even form. But I felt it in my chest. A dull ache, like leaning too close to a sound transducer.

We were hanging in the ship just outside the bridge zone, engines on standby, shields at maximum. Below us gaped a hole that had been Gamma-5 five minutes ago. Now there was only swirling black, seemingly circling within itself.

“That's it?” asked Helene, without taking her eyes off the sensor display.

I was about to say yes, but then something twitched at the edge of the viewport. A flicker. Not a piece of debris, not a drone—a shadow that didn't fall, but rose.

"Tracking signal," Tariq reported. "I can't get an ID. Everything's scrambled."

The shadow became clearer, taking shape. Long. Thin. Legs and arms too long to be human, but the movements... precise. Calculating. It landed on the hull of the bridge support station, still hanging on the edge of destruction, and remained there.

“Please tell me this isn’t one of the ones we already know,” Voigt murmured.

"That's not one of the ones we already know," I said. "That's worse."

The thing raised its head, as if it knew we were watching. It wore no armor, no fur—just skin, gray like burnt paper, and where its eyes should have been, a red light flickered. No pupils, no white, just red.

"I'm getting his signal," Tariq said suddenly. "It... it's talking."

He switched to the main channel. Crackling. Then a voice so cold it made the ship shiver: "Gamma-5 has fallen. Gamma-4 will follow. You can't stop it, Kjell."

I leaned forward. "Who are you?"

“One who came back to finish what you couldn’t finish.”

“A returnee?” asked Helene.

"A hunter," said the voice. "And you are my bridge."

Before I could respond, the figure jumped. Not downward, but directly toward us. Tariq revved up the engines, the ship tilted, but the thing clung to the outer hull as if it had magnetic claws.

A dull thud resounded through the metal. Then a second.

“He’s trying to get through the outer skin!” Voigt yelled.

“Then don’t let him!” I grabbed my weapon and ran toward the maintenance lock.

The third blow deformed the inner wall. An imprint emerged—a hand, but with fingers too sharp to be human. A fine, black powder trickled between the metal fibers and immediately began to corrode the ship's material.

"Nanobot corrosion!" Tariq yelled over the intercom. "If that gets through, we'll be open as a can in a minute!"

I ripped open the lock, stepped into the lock chamber, and grabbed the magnetic spear. Outside, there was only the storm, black on black, and the red glow eating through the armor.

I took a deep breath, pressed the lever, and stepped into the vacuum.

He stood there. No restraints, no suit. Just there, as if gravity didn't matter to him. He looked at me—or I thought he did—and spoke again, this time without a radio:**"You destroyed the first bridge. Now you will be the last."**

Then he jumped.

He came at me like a projectile, but not in a straight line—he used the bridge's debris flow like a hunter in the thicket. Every step on a suspended steel beam, every leap over a broken cable strand was calculated, elegant, deadly.

I pulled up the magnetic spear and switched it to full charge. The thing hummed in my hands, as if trying to tell me:*This is going to be ugly*.

The hunter didn't attack at first. He came so close that I could clearly see the red glow of his "eyes"—and in the reflection, my own silhouette, small and out of place between this thing and the yawning abyss below. Then he suddenly cut sideways, grabbed a floating piece of metal, and hurled it with a precision that would have made any sniper envious.

I ducked, felt the debris graze my helmet, and propelled myself forward. Fighting in open space isn't a question of strength—it's a question of who can control their vector better.

We collided, magnetic spear against metal-reinforced bone. The impact went through every fiber of my being, and I swear I heard him laugh. Not a human laugh—a clicking, deep sound, like a machine simulating joy.

He grabbed the shaft of my spear, and I saw his fingers deform. The tips grew into fine needles, pushing into the metal as if it were warm wax. Nanobot manipulation in real time. He wanted to eat the weapon from my hand.

"Not today," I growled, switched the spearhead to overload, and thrust. A bolt of lightning shot through his chest, and for the first time since we'd started fighting, he moved uncontrollably—not far, but far enough for me to push off.

Gamma-4 began to vibrate beneath us. I knew what that meant. The decomposition sequence had already begun.

"You'll lose them all," he cried, and the vacuum carried the words to me anyway, as if he'd spoken directly into my head. "And when the bridges fall, everything falls."

“Then fall with them,” I hissed, pushing myself towards him.

We collided a second time, this time between a floating strut and a giant slowly rotating control box. He struck, I dodged, but his hand brushed my thigh. Immediately, my suit began to flicker there—nanobots eating through the outer skin.

I kicked him away as hard as I could, and he tumbled, but immediately pushed off again, like a predator that had smelled blood.

Tariq's voice thundered in my ear: "Kjell! Gamma-4 is in the collapse window. Either you're on board in the next two minutes or you'll go with the bridge!"

I grabbed the spear, let myself be pulled by a passing piece of debris, twisted in zero gravity, and threw the spear. No aiming. No thinking. Just instinct.

The spear pierced his shoulder, and this time it wasn't laughter that came from it, but a sound that sounded like pure rage. He yanked the weapon free, but the overload pulse exploded in his hand—a blinding light that momentarily swallowed everything.

I seized the moment, shot back to the ship, and grabbed the edge of the hatch as the engines roared. Behind me, I saw the fighter disappear into the debris stream, but the red glow of its eyes... remained.

And then Gamma-4 fell.

It wasn't just a collapse. It was a folding, as if the bridge had never existed. Steel, glass, composite material—everything retracted into itself, as if time were rewinding, and dissolved into nothing the next moment.

I stood in the lock, panting, and watched as a second hole gaped in the world beneath us.

"Two bridges," Helene murmured. "Five more, and the entire sector will be cut off."

I wiped the sweat from my forehead, even though it remained in my helmet, and thought of only one thing: the red glow would return.

Chapter 28 - The Last Bastion

The fog lay like a second skin on the hull as we approached the Arkos bastion. Even with the shields at maximum, the stuff crept into every crack, as if it wanted to disintegrate us even before we landed. I stood at the viewport and watched as the metal of the outer platform emerged from the gray—first only vaguely, then in rough outlines, finally bearing all the scars left by years of defensive fighting. Arkos was no smooth fortress. It was a patchwork of repaired plates, welded struts, makeshift turrets, and dented guns that could tell more stories than any chronicle.

“Can you stabilize the sensors?” I called to Tariq.

"As stable as underwater in a sandstorm," he growled. "The fog is eating away at our resolution. I see something, but I'm not sure if it's debris or targets."

Helene wrapped her hands around the arms of her seat. "We're not alone out here."

She was right. Before she'd even finished her sentence, there was a flash on the left wing. A missile grazed the shield, causing the control indicators to blink. Voigt yanked the freighter into a sharp turn, and then I saw them: three fighters, sleek, black, with the red glow in their heads. No radio message, no surrender order—they just came.

"Bastion's defense lasers are active," Tariq reported. "If we make it through the first salvo, we'll get cover."

"If," I muttered, reaching for the shoulder brace. The freighter shuddered as Voigt pushed the engines to their limits. We dove under the first missiles, letting the fighters pass just overhead, and then I saw the Bastion up close.

Arkos rose from a platform that seemed gigantic even in the fog. Dozens of levels, open hangars, turrets with guns whose barrels protruded into the haze like black spears. Lights flickered everywhere, sometimes rhythmically, sometimes irregularly—no sign of perfect control.

We landed hard. Even before the lock was fully closed, soldiers stood before us, rifles at the ready. They wore no uniform—a wild mix of old military equipment, mercenary armor, and civilian protective gear. One of them stepped forward, a broad-shouldered man with a face like rough granite.

“Kjell, right?”

“Depends on who’s asking.”

"Major Harrow. Looks like NOVA hasn't kicked you out yet."

"Not yet," I said and got out. Helene and Tariq followed.

The smell in Arkos was a mixture of burnt oil, metal dust, and something suspiciously like old blood. People were running everywhere, some with tools, some with weapons, some with both. It wasn't a disciplined army—it was a desperate collection of survivors trying to hold onto a wall that had long since cracked.

“Your defense line looks… improvised,” Tariq remarked as we walked through a corridor lined with makeshift support struts.

Harrow gave a short, humorless laugh. "Everything here is improvised. Since Project PRAE dropped the first bridges, we've been retreating. Arkos is the last thing holding the sector together."

I stopped. "Project PRAE was here?"

He nodded. "And they left something behind. The scientists at the nuclear lab are still trying to decipher it. But honestly—I don't like it."

We reached the central control room. Holograms hovered over the tables, but most of the displays flickered or showed blank data fields. NOVA was there—and yet not there.

“She’s listening,” Helene said quietly.

“To whom?” asked Harrow.

"Everyone," she replied. "But not us first."

Before I could react, the alarm sirens went off. External attack. The sensors fired up, and I saw the red signatures pushing through the fog—more fighters, at least a dozen. And behind them... a larger signal, slow, heavy, pulsing.

“Alpha Returnee,” whispered Tariq.

Harrow cursed. "All units in position! Kjell, if you want to help, now would be a damn good time."

We rushed to the north hangar, where improvised guns were set up. I took up a position at a console while Helene helped with the wounded and Tariq took over the targeting systems of the main guns.

The first impact shook the bastion. Metal shattered, and somewhere an ammunition depot exploded. The fighters came in waves, firing not only at the defenses but also at the platform's structural supports—they didn't just want to defeat Arkos, they wanted to bring it down.

Suddenly the lights went out. Only emergency lighting remained.

“What the hell?” Harrow shouted over the radio.

"Energy cores are offline!" came the reply. "This is sabotage!"

I knew what that meant. Someone had been working from the inside.

And then I heard it. A metallic clack behind me. I turned around and saw one of my own soldiers pushing a black cylinder into the main line. He looked at me, and for a moment his gaze was completely blank. Then something black flickered across his eyes.

Returnee integration.

I raised my pistol, but he was faster, drawing a blade that looked like it was made of pure nanobots and charging at me.

He came without a sound, and that made it worse. No scream, no "For her!", nothing—just a lifeless, mechanical thrust, like a knife falling of its own accord. I dodged, letting it pass me, hearing the whirring sound as the blade simply turned a piece of the wall into fine dust. This wasn't a simple weapon; this was a targeted nanobot payload, programmed to chew through any structure it touched.

I grabbed his arm, feeling the skin move beneath my fingers—not like muscle, but like liquid metal. He tore himself free, hurled the blade at me, and I threw myself behind a support. The metal vibrated as the thing struck, and in the time it took me to catch my breath, he was gone.

“Tariq, we have infiltrators!” I yelled into the radio.

"No joke," came his reply, "two in my sector. One tried to take over the main guns – now they're firing at our own turrets!"

I dashed out of cover, ripped the locking pin from a plasma grenade, and threw it into the corridor he'd taken. A short, bright flash—then silence. I knew it wouldn't kill him, but it might incinerate a few of his bots.

Outside, it was getting louder. The Alpha Returnee must have arrived, because the sounds changed. No more chaos, no more staccato attacks. Now it was rhythmic, purposeful. Like an orchestra playing only one melody: destruction.

I ran to the North Bastion. Harrow was standing there, his face pale, his hands tightly gripping an old ballistic missile. Next to him was a viewscreen, and on it I saw the thing for the first time.

The Alpha Returnee was... wrong. Too tall for a human, too slender for an ape. His movements were fluid, but always with a precision that couldn't come naturally. Parts of his body were covered in metal that moved in waves—as if the nanobots inside him were constantly searching for a new form. His head

was tilted forward, and there was no red flickering from his eyes. It was black. Pure, absorbed light.

“This thing has a name?” I asked.

Harrow nodded. "We call him Varos."

“And how do you kill him?”

“We don’t know.”

Varos moved through the outer wall as if it were cardboard. Every blow from his arms shattered meters of armor, every touch caused entire plates to crumble like sand. The defenders fired everything they had—guns, missiles, improvised mines. Nothing slowed him down.

"Kjell," Lira crackled in my ear. "Don't let him into the core lab. That's where... the rest of the code is."

“Which code?”

"The code in his genes. If he gets that, everything will have been for nothing."

I looked at Harrow. "Secure the nuclear lab!"

He shouted something into the radio network, and we ran. The corridors were chaos—smoke, screams, a shower of sparks. Figures repeatedly scurried along the edges of my vision, too fast, too quietly. Returnees mingling among the defenders. You didn't know who would be standing next to you until it was too late.

We reached the entrance to the core lab, and there he stood. Not Varos—the soldier from before. But he was no longer quite... human. His skin was torn, and beneath it was a network of shimmering silver that moved like veins. He spoke, but his voice sounded like it was coming from a deep, hollow shaft.

"You can't keep the code. It belongs to us."

Harrow shot first. Three bullets to the heart, one to the head. He fell—and got up again. I drew the pulse rifle and fired at full charge. The light swallowed him, threw him against the wall, and this time he stayed down.

We sealed the door to the lab, but that was just a gesture. If Varos was here, no door in the world would stop him.

"Movement in the West Wing!" Tariq called over the radio. "He's in!"

We started running. I heard the fighting behind me, the echo of gunfire and explosions, steady with my heartbeat. And then I saw him again. Varos was standing in a corridor wide enough for a dropship. Around him—no one. Not because he had killed them. Because they had fled.

He turned to us. No expression, no speech. Just those black eyes.

“Do you know who I am, Kjell?”

I hesitated. "A mistake."

"No," he said. "I'm the correction."

And then he came.

He was faster than something his size should be. No warm-up, no provocation—he was just there, a black line in the air, and then Harrow crashed into the wall next to me. His chest plate was ripped open like a tin can, blood splattered onto the floor, hot and dark. Harrow gasped, reached for his weapon, but Varos kicked once, and the major was nothing but a twitching body in the dirt.

I fired, full impulse. Three shots directly at his head. The first time, he recoiled—not because I had hurt him, but because he was looking at me as if measuring the caliber in my gaze. He tilted his head slightly, the way a cat does before tearing a toy to pieces.

"You don't understand yet," he said. The voice wasn't an echo, not a machine noise. It was smooth, flawless—too perfect. "It's not your bastion. It never was your bastion."

He charged forward, and I felt the rifle almost knocked from my hands. The force made my bones rattle. I stumbled back, trying to regain my composure, but he was already past me, heading straight for the door of the core lab.

"Tariq!" I yelled. "Block the damn lab!"

"Already on it—but he—" Crackling, hissing. Radio dead.

Varos put his hand on the door. No cutting, no ramming. He simply pressed it against it. And then the metal began to melt, as if it were voluntarily moving

away from him. Behind it, I saw the glow—the sealed capsules containing the DNA modules of the code.

I charged forward, jumped at his back, rammed the pulse rifle across his shoulders, and fired. The light threw me against the wall, but this time I heard him growl—deep, vibrating, like a generator starting up.

He turned and grabbed me by the throat. No choking, no squeezing—he simply held me tight while something cold crept into my skin. I felt my own nanobots jump, reacting in panic.

"You already carry it," he whispered. "Your genetic makeup is the key. You are the key."

Behind him, movement appeared—Helene. She emerged from the smoke, blood on her face, an old ballistic rifle in her hands. Without hesitation, she fired. The impact struck him in the side, tearing away a piece of that flowing metal. It fell to the ground, twitched like a living organism, and then crawled back to him.

He dropped me. "Not now." And then he was gone—not running, not jumping. Simply vanished, as if the fog had swallowed him.

We stood there, the lab open, the DNA capsules untouched. But I knew he hadn't given up. He had marked us.

“Status?” I gasped.

Helene shook her head. "West Wing is gone. Guns are silent. And Harrow…" She trailed off.

Tariq came around the corner, coughing, black smoke surrounding him. "The defense is dead. We have to get out of here."

I looked at the capsules, then at the exit. The fog was already seeping into the outer corridors. Somewhere below us, metal broke, and the bastion groaned like a dying giant.

We took what we could—three capsules, no more. Then we ran. The corridors shook as Arkos fell apart piece by piece. We leaped over cracks, dodged showers of sparks, heard the rumble of the collapsing upper platforms above us.

The hangar was a mess of ships, dead bodies, and people desperately trying to take off. We made it to Voigt, who had already started up our freighter's engines.

“Landing platform drops in three minutes!” he shouted over the noise.

We jumped in, the lock closed, and then we climbed. Arkos collapsed beneath us, a wave of fog and burning metal plunging into the clouds.

I didn't look away until only gray remained.

“We no longer had a bastion,” Helene said quietly.

"No," I replied. "Just us."

Chapter 29 - Fall into the Jungle

The sky above us was nothing but a frayed piece of dirt, tearing to shreds as we crashed into it. The clouds didn't seem like clouds, more like layers of smoke and rotting flesh, and the freighter groaned with every blow it took from the atmosphere.

“Engines at thirty percent!” Voigt yelled, his hands on the levers as if he could keep them alive with sheer willpower.

"Thirty?" Tariq shouted back. "Then we'd be dead by now!"

I felt the hull jerk, the dull thud as another panel or hull gave way. Below us, the sensor flickered—a sea of dense green, moving like a single living organism. This couldn't be a normal forest. Even at this distance, I saw entire areas shift, as if the planet had just decided to rearrange itself.

"We're going for a hard landing," Voigt growled. "Hold on. Or pray. Both might work."

Then came the impact. First the howl of the air, then the jolt that pressed us into our seatbelts, and finally the metallic scream as the freighter smashed through the first trees. Shards flew like spears through the cabin, a fireball raced past the viewport, and somewhere in the back, something we probably needed exploded.

I didn't come to until everything was quiet. No more alarms. No more roaring. Just a dull dripping somewhere in the distance and this... humming.

Helene got out of her seat and took off her helmet. "Are we alive?"

“Don’t ask so loudly,” I mumbled, unbuckling my seatbelt.

The outer flap was jammed, so we had to blast it open with a hydraulic cutter. When the metal finally opened, humid air hit us, so thick it clung to our bodies like a second skin. It smelled of earth, old blood—and something I couldn't identify. Sweet, rotten, alive.

The jungle stretched before us like an endless sea, but this wasn't still water. The greenery was moving. Not in the wind—there was no wind. The leaves trembled, seemingly turning as we took the first step outside.

“That’s looking at me,” said Tariq.

"That's crazy," Helene replied. "Plants can't—"

Then we heard it. A dull rumble, deep below, followed by a rushing sound that sounded like waves, only it came from all directions. I raised my weapon.

Echo suddenly crackled over the radio. "Layers." His voice was flat, almost brittle. "Three layers. Plants on top. Flesh in the middle. Stone below. It doesn't go any deeper."

“It’s nice to hear from you again,” I said, but he didn’t answer.

We fought our way through the first rows of trunks, each thicker than a shuttle. The roots weren't simply embedded in the ground—they were intertwined, like a mesh of muscles that made every movement difficult. Every now and then, I felt something give beneath my boots, and I swore it was warm.

After an hour, we found tracks. No coincidence, no animal. Footprints—human, but larger, deeper in the ground, and the distance between them was... wrong.

“Returnees?” asked Voigt.

Helene shook her head. "No. This one is older."

We camped in a hollow to check the systems. Night came quickly here – the light simply shifted from a toxic green to an almost black blue. And then we heard it again: footsteps. Several. Slowly but surely, circling around us.

I raised my weapon, but before I could aim, I saw them. Not a monkey, not a human—something in between, but with a look that froze me. Their eyes were clever. Too clever. And they kept their distance, as if they knew we could see them but couldn't do anything.

“They’re guarding us,” whispered Helene.

"No," I said. "They're keeping us away from something."

The attack came anyway. Sudden, coordinated. Three of them leaped out of the darkness, silent until the first shots rang out. One caught Tariq on the shoulder, knocking him to the ground, but Helene was faster and shot off his head. It was no use—the body didn't fall, it simply retreated into the shadows, and I swore the head began to form again.

We fired until the magazines were empty, and then it was quiet again. No bodies. No trail of blood. Just this buzzing, which now seemed to be right behind my ear.

“We need to go deeper,” I said.

Voigt looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "Deeper? They want to kill us."

"No. They want to prevent us from getting our hands on something. And that's exactly why we have to get to it."

No one objected. Not because they were convinced—but because we all knew we would find Varos and Lira here.

Hours later, in the middle of a thicket that was almost impossible to penetrate even with machetes, we suddenly found ourselves in a clearing. In the center towered something that looked like a tree, but the longer we looked, the less it fit into this world. Metallic structures grew like branches, organic cables hung down, and the whole thing pulsed with a rhythm that was dangerously close to my heartbeat.

And then I heard it.

“Kjell.”

The voice was warm. Human. Too close.

It wasn't lira.

At least not the Lira I knew. The voice had that tone it used to have when it wanted something from me that I couldn't really give. But beneath the warmth lay something else—a scratchiness, a shimmer, as if a second speaker were trying to force their way through the same mouthpiece.

I raised my weapon. "Show yourself."

The branches—or cables—of the tree monolith moved like tentacles, parting, and there she stood. Lira. Barefoot, in something resembling torn environmental clothing, but laced with metallic fibers. Her skin was too smooth, as if polished, and her eyes... they alternated between that strange gray and a deep, golden brown that wasn't quite human.

“You did it,” she said quietly.

"I tried not to look for you," I replied. "Guess it didn't work."

Behind her, I saw movement—shadows within shadows. The original returnees stood there, almost reverent, as if they were seeing not just their leader, but something sacred.

"You shouldn't be here, Kjell," she said. "This heart doesn't belong to you."

"Us?" repeated Voigt, appearing next to me, rifle at the ready. "Who is 'us'?"

Lira smiled. "Those who still remember how it all began."

I stepped closer. The tree pulsed more strongly the closer I got. My own nanobots reacted—hot, like a fever. Helene cursed quietly, holding her side as if she were feeling an electric shock.

"That's the origin, right?" she asked. "That thing there... has something to do with the virus."

"It's the virus," Lira said without hesitation. "Not as a disease. As a command. In your blood for millions of years. Layer by layer. And now it's being awakened."

“From whom?” I growled.

"Of you."

The words fell like stones. I didn't know if she meant me personally or the entire species. But the look she gave me left no doubt: I was the one she was talking about.

Suddenly, one of the original returnees advanced, a massive beast with eyes that sparkled like oil in the light. He held something in his hand—a capsule. One of ours.

Voigt cursed. "How the hell—"

"We gave you the sequences so you could bring them to us," Lira interrupted. "So we can finally be whole again."

Behind us, there was a cracking sound in the undergrowth. I turned around – and there stood Varos. Half in the shadow, half in the light of the pulsating tree.

"You're too late, Kjell," he said. "The forest already belongs to us."

I raised my gun. "Not while I'm still breathing."

He laughed. "That can be changed."

And then the whole damn forest moved. Not just the creatures—the trees themselves, the roots, the ground. Everything contracted, as if someone had decided to close the jungle in around us.

The ground beneath us bulged as if a giant ribcage were breathing underground. The roots, just a moment ago mere obstacles, twisted upwards like snakes, cutting us off from all sides. One of the original returnees leaped at Voigt—but not head-on this time. He simply climbed the wall of roots, hanging upside down before striking.

Voigt fired, the shot ripped half of his skull off – and the bastard smiled anyway, while the bone fragments grew back together like insect legs.

“They’re learning,” growled Tariq, seeking cover behind a half-fallen vine.

“No,” cried Lira from the heart of the tree, “they remember.”

I wanted to go forward to her, but Varos stepped in my way. There was nothing human in his posture anymore. His movements were too fluid, too deliberate.

The muscles beneath his skin twitched like a machine about to shift into the next gear.

"You know you can't fight the forest," he said quietly. "It's older than you. Older than anything you can imagine."

"Then let me ask him if he likes me." I rammed the gun into his stomach and fired.

He collapsed, disappearing into a tide of root tendrils that pulled him away like a mother pulling her child. No scream. No blood. Only this strange humming that now vibrated in my skull.

Behind me, I heard Helene's scream. Two Ur-Returnees had grabbed her, not to kill her—but to pull her toward the tree. I ran, Voigt ran too, but we were too late: A vine shot out of the ground, wrapped itself around Helene's neck, and pulled her into the pulsating trunk. For a moment, she disappeared into it—and then she was gone, as if she had never existed.

“Helene!” I yelled, but Lira just raised her hand.

"She's needed," she said calmly. "Just like you."

“Not in this lifetime,” I growled, throwing myself against the vines.

The tree reacted. A pressure wave, like liquid metal, hurled us all backward. My rifle flew from my hands. Tariq grabbed me by the collar and pulled me for cover behind a trunk that had probably been there for a million years—and looked like it had witnessed every second.

"We have to get out, Kjell," he gasped. "Otherwise we'll be next."

“Not without Helene.”

"Then you'll die here. And so will she."

I looked back at the tree. Lira stood there, rooted to the spot, the original returnees surrounding her like a bodyguard. Her eyes were now completely golden. And when she spoke, I didn't just hear it with my ears—I felt it in my bones:

"The heart awakens. Soon, heaven here will no longer belong to the one you know."

Behind her, the trunk began to open. Not like a door, but like a mouth. Behind it: darkness. But a darkness that pulsed and breathed.

Varos' voice came from that darkness. "Come, Kjell. She's waiting."

I felt the ground give way again, the roots wrapping around us, not harshly, but almost gently—like fingers lulling you to sleep.

Voigt shouted: “Kjell! Make up your mind!”

I took a deep breath. The air tasted of metal and blood. Then I stepped forward.

I placed my foot on the first root, which led like a ramp into the mouth of the tree. It was warm. Not just warm like stone in the sun—but warm like skin. It pulsed slightly beneath my weight, and for a sick moment, I felt as if it were responding to my heartbeat.

Voigt followed me, panting, rifle at the ready. "If we go in there, Kjell, we won't get out."

"Maybe," I murmured. "But if we don't, this thing will come out."

Tariq remained standing below. His gaze was fixed, his hands white with tension, gripping his scanner. "In there... there are no signals. No heat. Nothing. It's... empty."

“Empty looks different,” I growled, pointing to the pulsating black between the root teeth.

I stepped forward, and the mouth opened wider—not because it had to, but because it wanted to. I now smelled the inside. Damp. Heavy. And underneath that smell I'd already noticed in orbit: burnt metal mixed with sweet blood.

"Kjell." Lira's voice came from the depths. "You know you'll find answers here. Answers no lab or AI can give you."

“And what price do I pay?”

“The one you’re already paying.”

I looked at Voigt. His face was pale, but he nodded. "Do it quickly. If it goes wrong, we'll blow up the whole mess."

I grinned crookedly. "You say that every time."

Then I entered.

The darkness wasn't darkness at all. It was thicker than air, heavier, and it wrapped itself around me like a second skin. My boots sank into something soft with every step, giving slightly, as if I were stepping on muscle. A dull throbbing sounded like heartbeats from the walls—not one, but many.

Something slid past my arm. Not an attack, more of a greeting. Warm, moist, with a texture like semi-molten steel. I raised the weapon, but Lira's voice came right next to my ear:

"This isn't here to hurt you. Not yet."

I saw her suddenly, in the midst of the darkness, without having heard her approach. She stood barefoot on the pulsating mass, her hair wet as if she had emerged from water. In her hands she held something—a piece of fabric, half organic, half metallic, vibrating to the rhythm of her heartbeat.

"That's it, Kjell," she said. "The first seed. The code in your genes. That which made you who you are—and which brings you back when you go too far."

"Brings back? Into what?"

She smiled – and behind her, in the darkness, eyes began to open. Dozens of them. Some human, some ape-like, some completely unclassifiable.

“Into what is yours.”

The walls twitched, and suddenly the corridor began to close behind me. Voigt's voice echoed muffled from outside: "Kjell! Get out of there!"

I felt something wrap around my legs. Not tight, not brutal—but unmistakable.

"You can go," Lira said. "But then she'll die."

"Who?"

She tilted her head. "Helene."

My heartbeat thundered in my ears. The eyes in the darkness drew closer.

And then I heard Varos' voice, somewhere deep inside: "Make up your mind, brother."

I raised the gun and aimed it right in Lira's face. She didn't even flinch.

Behind her, the eyes pushed further forward, and now I could see the rest: faces, bodies, twisted and fused with roots and muscles, as if frozen in the moment of the scream. Some looked ancient, as if the forest had preserved them for centuries. Others... were fresh. Far too fresh.

A movement in the corner of her left eye. Helene.

She was hanging halfway into the wall, as if she'd been sucked in, only her upper body exposed. Her eyes were wide open, but she was alive. A root-like arm lay across her ribcage, pulsing slowly as if it were pumping air into her lungs.

“Helene!” I screamed, trying to move forward, but the tendrils around my legs became harder, like cold iron.

"I told you, Kjell," Lira breathed. "You can save her... but then you'll never be the same again."

“Was I ever that?” I tugged at the bonds, felt the skin burst, warm blood run down the metallic, wet strands.

My eyes in the darkness began to blink in unison. With each blink, I heard words, not spoken, but planted directly in my brain:*Stay. Become. Return.*

Varos stepped out of the darkness, so close that I could smell his breath—if you could call it breath. It was more like the damp smell of earth after a thunderstorm, mixed with the metallic taste of blood on the tongue.

"You belong here," he said quietly. "You can feel it."

I shot him in the stomach from half a meter away. The recoil hammered my shoulder, the force knocked him back—but the scream that came wasn't his. It came from the tree.

Everything around me twitched. The root shackles ripped open, as if the pain had shot through my entire body. I leaped forward, grabbed Helene under the arms, and ripped her out of the wall. Something inside her made a squelching sound as it lost contact—and she cried out, half in pain, half in relief.

"Hold on tight!" I pulled her, stumbling, as the tree behind us began to roar. It wasn't an animal sound—it was the sound of a hundred voices breathing in and out simultaneously.

Lira didn't step back. She just looked at us, and now her smile was gone. "You have no idea what you just unleashed."

“Everyone says that,” I gasped, dragging Helene toward the exit.

Voigt's silhouette appeared in the closing gap. "Kjell, faster!"

I pushed Helene forward, Voigt grabbed her and pulled her out. I wanted to follow – and then a root shot out at me, wrapping itself around my forearm. The heat inside it immediately burned under my skin. I screamed, kicked it, and tore myself free. A piece of me remained behind – I felt it, like a tooth pulled out too quickly.

Then I was outside.

The forest roared. Trees bent as if they were about to fall, but no one fell. Instead, the ground shifted as if something huge and living beneath us were changing places.

Tariq stared at me. "What... were you doing in there?"

I breathed heavily. "I think... I made the heart angry."

The forest erupted like an avalanche. Not a storm, not a fire, but a wave of green, living fury. Roots shot out of the ground like spears, lianas lashed out of nowhere, thick as ship's ropes, and somewhere very close, something I had never heard before howled—deep, throaty, ancient.

"Move!" Voigt yelled, yanking Helene over a fallen tree trunk. Tariq was already ahead of us, scanner in one hand, pistol in the other, which he was far too ill-equipped to handle.

I heard the ground behind me split open. Not slowly—as if someone had detonated a gigantic trap beneath us. A root-shaped structure shot out of the crack, gaping open at the tip, like a mouth. It snapped at my leg, and I jumped sideways so hard that my ankle cracked.

“Run, damn it!” Voigt shouted.

We tore through the thicket, branches whipping our faces, thorns tearing our skin. The forest made no distinction between enemy and obstacle—everything was pushed aside to get us.

There was a crack to my left, and a trunk toppled toward us. I grabbed Helene and threw her to Voigt, jumping underneath myself. The tree crashed to the ground, the impact vibrating all the way to my teeth.

"Up ahead!" Tariq called, and I saw the bright spot between the trees—the evacuation pod, half overgrown but still intact. We'd deactivated it on the way there to prevent any signals from being sent. Now it was our only chance.

But between us and rescue lay an open strip of ground—and it began to move. Something large rose up, something that looked like an ape, but was too big, too massive, and every muscle was entwined with a network of roots. Its eyes glowed, not red, but a dull, organic gold.

“Monkey King,” Helene gasped.

He roared. The sound tore leaves from the trees and drove them before him like snow.

Voigt raised his rifle and fired—but the bullets stuck in the mesh like wet wood. The king crouched down, jumped—and landed so hard that the ground beneath us collapsed.

We were torn apart. I rolled to the side, jumped up, and ran straight toward him. If we wanted to get past him, we had to get him out of the way.

He swiped at me, I ducked, and fired into his lower jaw. The mouth burst open—and I saw it wasn't a mouth. It was a tunnel of flesh and vines leading deeper inside.

Tariq called my name and tossed me the explosive device. I caught it, ripped open the detonator, and threw it straight into that meat pit. Then I ran without looking back.

Behind me, a dull thud, no fire, just a shock wave that sent the king reeling back. He didn't fall—but he stumbled, just long enough for us to reach the pod.

Voigt hammered in the access code, the door slid open, and we threw ourselves inside.

“Start now!” I yelled.

The pod vibrated and began to lift. Outside stood the king, his gaze fixed on us, the gold in his eyes darkening. He raised a hand—and clenched it into a fist.

Suddenly, the ground beneath the pod collapsed. Roots shot up to grab us.

We yanked up the controls, the pod went to maximum power. The roots brushed against the hull, ripping off shreds of metal—but then we burst through the canopy and shot into the gray sky.

No one spoke. We all knew we hadn't defeated the king. We had only... fled.

And somewhere in the distance, over the roar of the engines, I heard him roar.

Chapter 30 - In the Hands of the Enemy

The pod was still vibrating, but the sky outside was wrong. No blue, no gray, just a strangely murky mass, as if someone were placing frosted glass over our field of vision. The navigation display flashed red—*Lost orientation*.

“That’s not the atmosphere,” Tariq muttered.

Helene pressed herself against the viewing dome. "No. That's... something else."

Then there was a crash. Not a bullet-like impact—more like a giant fist of light had grabbed us. The pod was ripped sideways, debris flew from its internal mounts, and before we could react, everything fell silent.

The doors burst open. Not hydraulically, not with force—simply as if the metal itself had decided to give way.

Outside, there was no forest. No sky. Just a hall as large as a city, walls made of a mixture of metal and bone. Structures grew upward like towers, but organically twisted, and in the center—something that looked like a throne.

No one was sitting on it. Not yet.

Figures emerged from the shadows. Some human, some only roughly in that form, and all with the same glowing golden eyes as the Monkey King. They moved in sync, too quietly for their size, and formed a semicircle around us.

“Weapons,” whispered Voigt.

"Forget it," said a voice—and it came from everywhere. From the walls, from the floor, from within ourselves. "Here, your weapons belong to me."

My hand twitched, and I felt the shotgun slip from my fingers as if I'd let go of it voluntarily. It hovered briefly and then fell to the ground.

"Kjell." The voice was deeper now. Calmer. "You're back."

Something moved on the throne. Slowly. And then I saw him. The Monkey King. No longer just an animal, no longer just a weapon. He was taller, more upright, and parts of his body seemed almost human—arms with fine muscles, hands that could not only strike, but grasp.

He came down the steps. The others stepped back.

"You belong to me now," he said. And it wasn't a roar, not an animal sound. It was speech.

Helene pressed herself closer to me. "Kjell... he understands us."

"He always understood us," I murmured. "He just never responded."

The king stopped directly in front of me. His hand—large enough to encircle my head—rested on my shoulder. No pressure. Just this weight that said more than any words: You are imprisoned.

"Come," he said. "There's someone you need to meet."

His grip was firm, but not rough. He led me through the hall, and the others retreated like waves breaking before a ship. Every step echoed in the bone walls, as if they were storing the sound.

The air changed the deeper we went. First warm and humid, like a jungle, then dry and metallic, like an abandoned factory. But it wasn't a factory. The walls were alive—pulsating, breathing.

“Where are we?” asked Voigt.

The king didn't turn around. "At heart."

“Whose hearts?”

“Yours.”

We reached an archway so high that it disappeared into the darkness. Beyond it lay a room, round and silent. No sound, only a deep humming that vibrated more in the head than in the ears.

In the center stood a column. Transparent, filled with a clear liquid that glowed softly. Within it – a figure. Slender, human. Skin pale as porcelain, eyes closed. Her hair drifted like smoke in the liquid, and between her ribs, something glimmered – fine, metallic structures, like a second skeleton.

“Who is that?” I asked.

The king stepped closer and placed his hand on the glass. The figure's eyes opened. Gray. No light in them—only depth.

"Kjell," she said. And my throat tightened.

It was lira.

Not as I knew her—something about her was too perfect, too smooth, as if someone had erased the flaws that had made her human.

“You haven’t completed the circle,” she said calmly.

"I tried to destroy him."

She smiled, but it was a cold smile. "And that's what made it possible."

The king stepped back as if making way for her. Lira placed a hand against the inside of the column. Immediately, fine cracks appeared in the glass, and the liquid began to sink.

Voigt grabbed my arm. "Kjell, if she comes out of there—"

"—then it's over," I finished. But I couldn't tear my eyes away from her.

"It's not over," Lira said, the liquid evaporating around her feet. "It's the beginning. And now you'll understand why you could never win."

The glass broke silently. She stepped out as if she had never been standing in that column. Not a drop on her, not a tremble.

"Welcome Home."

Behind her, the eyes of the golden guards closed—all at once. The king bowed his head, almost reverently.

“It’s yours,” he said to Lira.

And then I knew: We hadn't been taken prisoner. We had been brought.

Lira circled me like a predator that didn't need to rush. Each of her steps was silent, even on the metallic-organic floor.

"You think this is a war," she said quietly, "humans against the infected. Cities against the jungle. Steel against flesh." She stopped behind me, so close I could feel her breath on my neck. "But that's just the noise before the real melody."

I wanted to say something, but the king placed a hand on my chest. Not a lot of pressure—just enough to remind me that he could crush me with one touch.

“What do you want?” I asked.

Lira stepped in front of me again. "Will? Kjell... I am what you wanted. A bridge. A connection between what you were and what you will become. The virus you think is a weapon is a tool. It doesn't drag you back to the Stone Age—it brings out what you've forgotten."

"Apes eating humans? That doesn't sound like evolution."

She smiled. "It's not regression. It's a removal of layers. Humans are like a palimpsest—overwritten layer upon layer until no one knows what was underneath. We're just removing the wrong lines."

Voigt growled: “Bullshit.”

"Oh?" she asked. "Then explain to me why your strongest soldiers—after the infection—heal faster, are stronger, think in packs, and obey without orders. These aren't symptoms. They're functions."

I wanted to object, but something stirred in the back of my mind. Memories. Of the first returnee who knew my name. Of the tingling under my skin when I got too close to the virus.

"And me?" I asked. "What am I in your plan?"

She stepped so close that I could see her eyes clearly. There was no light flickering in the depths—only shadows moving like something alive. "You're proof that it works. You've had enough of*them*in you to survive, and enough of*us*, so as not to go crazy. You are... the code, Kjell."

The king spoke again for the first time: “The code must live.”

“And if I refuse?” I asked.

Lira smiled, and this time it wasn't cold. It was worse—gentle, almost tender. "You won't. Not when you see her."

"Who?"

She raised her hand. One of the guards stepped forward, opened her chest like a flower—and inside, curled up like an embryo, lay a girl. Human. Barely older than ten. Her eyes opened, and they had the same gray depth as Lira's.

"This is my daughter," said Lira. "And yours."

My stomach clenched as if someone had punched me.

Voigt cursed loudly and took a step forward, but the king roared—not a word, just a sound that made the ground tremble.

Lira knelt beside the girl and stroked her hair. "She is the first complete code. What we both are, only half."

I couldn't say anything. I didn't even know if I wanted to believe it or if it was one of the best manipulations anyone had ever thrown at me.

"Come with us," said Lira. "Leave the war to others. We'll build something new."

“And if I don’t want to?”

This time it wasn't her answer, but the king: "Then you'll go anyway. Just... in a different form."

And when I looked at the girl, I knew that no matter what I did now, I would never leave this place the same.

Chapter 31 - The Seed of Truth

The moment was so silent that even my breathing seemed too loud. Every eye in the room was glued to me. Lira, with that quiet, almost pitying smile. The Monkey King, immobile as a statue. The golden-eyed guards, motionless, as if someone were holding them like puppets.

"You have to understand," Lira began, "this isn't a child in the human sense. She is... the protocol. The end result." Her hand gently stroked the girl's head, and I swore I heard something crack beneath her skin—not bone, but like the click of a disk.

“Protocol?” I asked.

"A complete set of instructions. In the genome. We've tried implementing it in adults—but you're too fragmented. Too... damaged. In a new host, the code can unfold itself." She leaned toward the girl. "Tell him."

The child raised her head. Her voice was clear, too clear for her age. "You're the missing half."

Voigt hissed: “This is sick.”

"No," Lira replied gently. "This is healing."

I took a step forward, feeling the king move behind me. Not threateningly, just a reminder: every step I take is with his approval.

"Why me?" I asked. "There are millions of others."

"No," said the girl. "There's only you."

There was something in her voice—not just words. A feeling that ran through me like an electric shock. Memories that weren't mine flashed through me: runs through dripping woods, voices in the darkness, the taste of blood and metal, and again and again, that presence watching me without me being able to see it.

“That’s the seed,” Lira said. “The moment when you realize that you are not only*Part*of it – it is you.”

Voigt took a sharp breath. "Kjell, we have to get out of here. Now."

"There's no way out," said the king. "Only forward."

And then, as if to underline his words, the walls of the hall began to move. Not mechanically—organically. Ribs of metal and flesh bent, opening a new passage. Light flickered behind them.

“It’s time you saw where you came from,” said Lira.

I followed her, not out of trust—but because I knew that whatever lay beyond that corridor held the answers that had been haunting me since the beginning of PRAE.

The corridor was narrow, and the light within it didn't come from lamps. It pulsed from the very substance of the walls themselves—veins of liquid gold moving in irregular pulses, as if synchronized with the heartbeat of something living.

The girl walked ahead of us, barefoot, her every movement controlled, as if she had walked the path a thousand times. I felt the temperature rise. Moisture settled on my skin, and the smell changed—away from metal and oil, toward something earthier, wilder.

We entered a chamber so high that the upper edge disappeared into the darkness. And in the middle... something hung. A massive, spiral strand, as thick as a spaceship's hull. It wasn't made of metal or flesh alone, but a fusion of both. Bone-like structures, crisscrossed by metallic threads that hummed softly. Between the coils, floating in some kind of fluid, were dozens, perhaps hundreds, of embryos—some human, some clearly not.

“That’s the origin,” said Lira.

I couldn't look away. The embryos moved. Some opened their eyes, others bared tiny teeth.

"There had been attempts before PRAE," she continued. "But they were primitive. Putting genetic code into viruses was old. We needed something that went deeper. Something that would expose the old sequences."

“Old sequences?” I asked.

"What you call evolution isn't a straight line upwards. It's a circle. The virus just scratches off the veneer—and underneath, what was dominant millions of years ago emerges. Not an animal. Not a simple form. Something... in between."

The king stepped closer to the strand and placed his giant hand on one of the coils. The humming grew deeper, and I swore the embryos were responding to his touch.

“Apes,” I muttered.

"Your word," Lira said. "In truth, they are carriers. Bodies that are stronger, more resilient, and less... contradictory than humans. They are not backward. They are optimized."

Voigt shook his head. "Optimized for what?"

“For what’s coming,” said the girl.

Something tightened in my neck. "And what's next?"

Lira looked at me, and for the first time, there was a hint of unease in her eyes. "That for which even the virus is only a preparation."

Before I could ask, the strand trembled. The golden veins pulsed faster, and some of the embryos began to detach, as if being born from the coils. Liquid dripped to the ground, steaming where it touched.

"You're waking up too early," Lira said. "Someone has accelerated the cycle."

“Who?” I asked.

She looked at me, and I knew before she said it. "You."

I felt cold, even though the room was hot. I had no idea how I could have done it—but deep inside, that tingling sensation was back. And this time I knew it wouldn't stop.

The first creature fell from the coil like a wet, overweight branch from a tree. It landed on all fours, shook its head, and stood up—not quite human, not quite animal. Its muscles seemed taut beneath overly thin skin, and its eyes... were gray. The same gray as Lira's and the girl's.

It took a deep breath, and I swore it wasn’t just sucking in air, but*something*. My skin tingled at the same moment, as if someone were reaching under my pores.

“Keep your distance,” Voigt growled, drawing his weapon.

"No," Lira said sharply. "If you violate it now, you'll break the link."

“Which link?” I heard my own voice, but it sounded distant, muffled, as if it were coming from another body.

The creature turned its head—directly toward me. It was as if someone had set up a mirror that showed not my face, but my innermost being. Everything inside me shrank, but at the same time... it felt right.

“He recognizes you,” said the girl.

Behind the first, two more fell from the spiral. Larger, heavier, their movements as graceful as those of big cats. They circled me, keeping their distance, as if waiting for a signal.

"Kjell," Lira said quietly. "Give it to them."

"What?"

“The order.”

I wanted to say I had no idea what she was talking about—but before I could form the sentence, the tingling in my skin ripped through me like an electric shock. The three beings raised their heads simultaneously, as if they had sensed it.

“Say it,” Lira urged.

I didn't know*What*I should say, but my mouth moved on its own. The words weren't human, not even entirely loud. More like a vibrating sound, deep in my chest.

The three knelt down.

Voigt stared at me as if he'd just seen me transform into something else. "Shit, Kjell... what have you done?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but chaos erupted.

Behind us, the corridor that had brought us here shook. A scream, shrill and mechanical, echoed from the walls. The golden-eyed guards turned their heads in unison, as if they had received a signal.

"Someone is coming," said the king. His voice didn't sound worried, but rather expectant.

“Who?” I asked.

“The ones the germ is supposed to protect you from.”

More embryos were detaching from the coil. Some were still unfinished, others were already emerging like fully grown warriors. My skin burned.

I knew that whatever was about to step out of this corridor – these beings here would be waiting for my command. And I also knew that I could command*could*.

Chapter 32 - Decision in the Blood

It was like the cracking of an invisible membrane. A dull, damp sound—and then the stench. Not that of blood or death. It was a metallic, sharp smell that crept into the sinuses and churned the stomach, as if preparing the body to fight or vomit.

The first figure emerged from the corridor. Tall, but too thin, as if a gust of wind could break it—but its gaze suggested otherwise. Black eyes, no white, only depth. The skin appeared to be made of several layers, sliding slightly against each other with every movement.

More came behind her. Not in formation, not like soldiers—but like hunters who carry the forest in their veins.

"They smell you," said the king behind me. His voice was now deep, dangerous. "They smell that you're not just human."

The tingling under my skin was no longer a warning. It was an urging. My muscles tensed, my throat went dry, and somewhere deep inside me, I knew that*she*were waiting for me.

"Kjell," Lira said, and this time there was no hesitation in her voice. "Choose."

I understood. The newborns from the spiral stood motionless, as if frozen. They wouldn't move until I said—or thought—so.

Voigt cursed and raised his weapon. "We'll shoot our way out of here."

“No,” I heard myself say.

“Yes!” he growled, but he stepped back as the first creature from the corridor tilted its head—not at him, but at me.

Time dragged on like syrup. I knew that no matter what decision I made now, it wouldn't just decide this room. It would determine what*/*from that moment on.

I looked at the born. Their bodies were raw versions of something perfectly designed for battle. I felt their readiness, like a muscle just waiting for the command to flex.

“Kjell,” Lira said quietly, “they are*your*. Make them what they were built for."

My hands clenched into fists. I felt something loosen in my ribcage—not a bone, not a muscle, but a leash I'd never consciously noticed.

And then I gave the order.

There was no word. No scream. Just this deep, vibrating sound from my throat.

The born exploded in motion. No chaos, no fury—it was precision. Two lunged head-on at the intruders, one slid along the wall, leaping from it with a speed the eye could barely comprehend.

The hall transformed into a kaleidoscope of movement, screams, and the splintering of bones.

Voigt pulled the trigger, but his shots were almost unnecessary. The natives needed no help.

I stood there, motionless, knowing I could have stopped her at any time. But I didn't.

And the blood that hit the ground didn't just smell of victory. It smelled of... possession.

The hall was now a single red mirror. Blood glistened on the walls, dripped from the spiral's ribs, and collected in small puddles between the golden veins in the floor.

The intruders lay scattered, some still breathing, but none of them able to rise. The born stood still again, as if someone had stopped time. Their chests rose and fell evenly, showing no sign of exhaustion.

I knew they were waiting for the next order. And I realized that this*command*It didn't seem like a conscious decision in my head—but rather a reflex. A twitch deep within that knew more than I did.

"It's you," the girl said. There was no triumph in her voice, only certainty. "The germ is complete."

Voigt stepped next to me, his hands still on his weapon, but his gaze directed at me, not at the bodies. "Kjell, we have to get out of here. That... that's not you anymore."

I wanted to tell him he was wrong—but I knew he was right. Something had shifted inside me. Not just at that moment, but a long time ago. The virus had never been just an infection. It was a key.

Lira walked past the Born, briefly touching one of them on the shoulder. "They listen to you, but they belong to us. Don't forget that."

I couldn’t tell if “us” meant humans – or something else.

The king approached, his shadow falling over me. "Now you know what you are. The question is: what do you do with it?"

Behind him, the spiral began to pulse again, faster this time, as if celebrating victory. I felt the tingling in my skin return, but now it was no longer an unpleasant tugging sensation. It was... a calling.

"We can't take everyone with us," Voigt said quietly. "If we want to get out of here, we have to decide who stays."

I looked at the born. They stood ready, silent, in perfect order. And somewhere deep inside me, I knew: One single thought from me—and they would erase everything in this room. Or accompany us, wherever we went.

Lira stepped in front of me. "The decision is yours, Kjell. But remember – every choice leaves a trace. In our blood. In our genes."

The girl stood next to her, and for the first time since I'd seen her, she smiled. "Step by step, until you're whole."

I took a deep breath. And then I made my decision.

The decision had barely taken shape in my mind when the room began to change. Not through movement – through*resonance*.

The golden veins in the walls flickered as if they had heard my thoughts. A deep, vibrating bass settled beneath the room, barely audible but felt in the bones. The born raised their heads in unison, as if an invisible signal had been received.

"What did you do?" Voigt asked, but it no longer sounded like an accusation. More like a statement that he knew we were both on the same page—and that page led straight into an abyss.

“I… just solved it,” I mumbled, but even to me that sounded like a lie.

Lira stepped closer, her eyes fixed on me. "Not solved, Kjell. You've tuned them in. Now they listen to you—and to what's behind you."

“Behind me?”

She glanced briefly over my shoulder. "You didn't think this was all just inside you, did you?"

Before I could ask, the ground shook. Not an explosion, not an impact—more like a breath. Deep, long, ancient.

“It’s waking up,” said the girl, almost reverently.

I turned around – and there it was. No being, no body. A shimmer in the room, as if the air itself were condensing. From the shimmer emerged shadows that needed no light source. Elongated silhouettes, some humanoid, others too irregular to be given any form.

The born before me tensed, ready to fight, but they did not attack. They waited.

"These aren't their enemies," whispered Lira. "These are their ancestors."

Voigt snorted. "Ancestors? Of what? Of this virus?"

"Not just from him," she replied. "From all of us."

I realized that we weren't just up against an infection, but against a blueprint. Something had been carrying us—all of humanity—within itself since the beginning. PRAE had merely been the catalyst, the fire that ignited the ancient code.

One of the shadows broke away from the group and came closer. No eyes, no face, and yet I felt it looking at me. My heartbeat involuntarily adjusted to its movement—a slow, steady rhythm, like a drum in the depths.

"He recognizes you," Lira said. "He knows you're carrying the code."

The shadow raised a formless hand, and my tingling exploded into a burning rush beneath my skin. Images flashed before my eyes—cities that hadn't been built, but grown; beings that folded into new forms without machines; and a sky made not of stars, but of glowing eyes.

I staggered, feeling the born ones move at the same time as me, as if we were a single body.

“Kjell!” Voigt’s voice pulled me back.

The shadows retreated—not fleeing, but like a wave gathering for the next blow.

"This is just the first greeting," Lira said. "If you choose to go against them, a war will begin that none of us understand."

“And if I decide to go with them?” I asked.

She smiled—and it wasn't comforting. "Then everything ends as it began."

The girl stepped between us. "No matter what you decide, you have to do it soon. They're coming... and the germ won't wait forever."

Behind me, the natives growled softly, not in aggression, but like dogs waiting for the hunter to show them the target.

I knew we had no minutes left, only seconds, until the next move was made on this board. And somewhere deep inside me, a voice that wasn't mine whispered:

Vote now – or someone will vote for you.

I felt the space around me narrow. Not a physical pressure—more as if someone had narrowed the possibilities until only two lines remained. Both led into the unknown.

Voigt stood close behind me. I couldn't hear him breathing. "Kjell... tell me." His voice was tense, but there was something else in it too. Fear. Not of the shadows, not of the born—of me.

Lira hadn't moved a step. She watched me like a chess player who knows full well that her opponent is about to touch the decisive piece. "There is no neutral zone," she said. "You're either the key or the lock."

The girl took another step closer. She smelled of metal and rain. "Join us, and you'll see more than any human could ever bear."

The Born behind me twitched, as if the ground had whispered a command that only they heard. I felt this impulse like a heat in my back.

“Or?” I asked.

Lira gave a barely perceptible smile. "Or you fight—and then you become the enemy of something older than any life here."

A dull thud echoed through the spiral. Somewhere, metal broke. The shadows began to reform—denser, clearer, as if they were finally ready to take on a solid form.

My hand clenched into a fist. I knew that the next thought I allowed myself to have would determine everything.

“Kjell?” Voigt’s voice was now just a whisper.

I raised my head. The decision didn't come from my mind. It came from deeper down, from the layer that had been programmed long before my birth.

I opened my mouth – and spoke.

But what came out wasn't a language Voigt understood. It was a sound, vibrating, ancient, a command not directed at humans.

The shadows froze. So did the born.

Then everything moved at once.

Lira opened her eyes wide, as if she understood what I had done—and the girl grabbed my hand so tightly that I heard bones crack.

“Now,” she whispered.

The spiral burst open. Light and darkness collapsed into each other, as if someone had folded the sky itself into this space. Gravity failed, and for a moment we all—humans, born, shadows—floated in a single, chaotic vortex.

Then came the crack. No sound. No light. Just the feeling as if my body was being pulled in two directions at once.

And when I could see again, there was nothing there. No spiral, no Voigt, no floor.

Just a grey plain stretching to the horizon – and in the distance a tower, black as oil, its top cutting through the sky.

The girl stood next to me. "You've chosen."

“What did I choose?” I asked.

She smiled. "You'll find out in the next world."

Chapter 33 - Relapse

The tower was farther away than it looked. Every step felt like I was walking through water, yet my feet touched nothing. No footprints, no resistance—just this dull gray moving beneath me like fog that wouldn't move.

The girl walked ahead of me, barefoot, breathless. "Keep your eyes on the tower," she said without turning around. "If you look anywhere else, you'll forget why you're here."

“And why am I here?”

"Because you spoke the code. You awakened more than you can control."

I laughed briefly, harshly and empty-headedly. "That's nothing new."

She stopped. "Yes. This time you're not alone in this."

A rustling sound crept closer from behind, barely audible at first, then like a dull thunder embedded in the ground. I turned around. Nothing. Just gray. But I knew something was there. Something that carried the scent of old blood, even though there wasn't a drop to be seen here.

"Don't turn around," she said quietly. "It'll know when you look at it."

We continued walking. The tower grew, but its shape remained blurred—as if it were changing with the rhythm of my heartbeat. And with every step, I felt more of the tingling under my skin returning. Not only that—it*wanted*out.

“You’re falling behind,” said the girl.

“In what?”

“Into what you are meant to be.”

A blow went through me, as if someone had kicked my ribs from the inside. Images flooded my mind—Voigt, Lira, the Born, the Monkey King—and then faces I'd never seen, but knew. Hands grabbing me. Teeth tearing. And again and again, the tower, pulsing like a black heart.

“I want to go back,” I said, not knowing who to go to.

The girl nodded. "You will. But when you go back, take something with you."

"What?"

"The germ. And this time it's growing faster."

The gray beneath my feet tore open—not into lines, but into eyes. Hundreds of them. They didn't blink, they just stared, and in each one I saw my own reflection. Only it wasn't me.

“Jump,” she said.

I hesitated.

“Jump – or you stay.”

I jumped.

The feeling was like falling in both directions.

When I opened my eyes again, I was lying on cold metal. Voices. Alarms. Footsteps approaching.

Voigt's face loomed over me. "Kjell? Damn... you were gone."

"How long?"

"Three hours. And..." He broke off. His gaze slid to my hands.

I followed his gaze. My fingernails were black—and beneath the skin, golden veins ran down to my wrist.

I smiled. "Then I guess we'll get started."

I slowly stood up, the sound of my own joints strangely loud in my ears. Metal creaked as if I hadn't just moved it, but shaped it.

Voigt instinctively took a step back. "You... feel different." He didn't say*look different*, and that meant he didn't just see it in my face, he felt it - in the tiny, invisible distance between us.

"I was gone," I said. "But it wasn't empty out there."

"Where have you been?"

I searched for an answer, but only found the image of the tower. "In a place where I had no business being. And yet... it was made for me."

Voigt twisted his mouth. "Sounds like this whole goddamn war."

An alarm sound cut through the corridor. Not the usual sirens. This one was deeper, more pulsating—as if someone were pulling on the structure of the station itself. The displays on the wall flashed red, and a series of symbols flickered that weren't part of the standard repertoire.

“What is that?” I asked.

Voigt shook his head. "Never seen it before."

I stepped closer to the display. The symbols changed as I approached—as if they were reacting. They rotated, rearranged themselves, until they formed a pattern. And I knew what it was, without having learned it: A call.

“It’s for me,” I said.

“Bullshit.”

I looked at him. "Want to bet?"

Before he could reply, two figures appeared at the end of the corridor. Not people. Their bodies seemed like polished bone, and their movements were too calm, too confident. They stopped when they saw me, and I felt the tingling inside me grow stronger.

“Friends of yours?” asked Voigt.

"Not yet."

They didn't speak. Instead, their jaws moved slightly—and the pattern on the wall flickered in the same rhythm. I understood. Not through words, but through this new connection, stretched like an extra tendon in my head.

“They want me to come with them.”

“Yeah, and I want them to fuck off.”

I took a step forward. The tingling sensation was now a current, warm and heavy, flowing through my arms. The two figures reacted, taking a step closer in unison.

“Kjell,” warned Voigt.

"If we attack them now, that's it."

“And if we don’t?”

I looked at him and for the first time I knew that we did not share the same definition of*we*had.

“Then everything changes,” I said.

The figures suddenly stopped, turned their heads slightly, as if they'd heard something else. Then they looked at me again – and disappeared. No bang, no light. They were simply gone.

Voigt exhaled audibly. "What. The. Hell."

"They've marked me," I said. "From now on, they'll always know where I am."

“And that’s good?”

"No. But it's necessary."

We continued down the corridor, past windows with nothing but blackness behind them. No stars. No reflections. The station seemed to hang in the middle of a void that didn't feel like empty space.

“I hate this,” Voigt muttered.

“Get used to it.”

Arriving at the control center, Lira was already there. She was standing in front of the main console, whose displays were filled with data streams flowing like liquid. When she saw me, the streams changed—they seemed to be moving toward me, as if the system wanted to detect my presence.

“You saw it,” she said, without looking away.

“The tower.”

She nodded. "Then you also know that what you brought back can no longer be separated."

“How long?” I asked.

"Until it eats you? Hard to say. It depends on how often you use it."

I grinned. "Better do it right now."

Voigt turned around. "Are you completely out of it?"

"Maybe," I said. "But we don't have time for half-trains anymore."

Lira approached me. "You will see things we cannot see. But you will also have to do things we don't want to do."

“This has always been my job.”

She placed a hand on my arm – and the golden lines beneath my skin glowed as if they had been waiting for her touch.

"You're not just Kjell anymore," she said quietly. "You're a relapse."

I knew she was right. I was no longer at the beginning of this story—I was in the middle of it, and the way back had long since disappeared.

A sound cut through the control center – short, harsh, not from the loudspeakers. It was as if it came from*inside*. I felt it in my sternum, in my teeth, in my damn spine.

Lira flinched. "They're calling you again."

Voigt shook his head. "No one's going out there. Not now."

"Yes," I said. "Right now."

I walked past the console, and the doors to the dock opened as if on command. No password, no authorization—they*knew*me now.

“Kjell!” Voigt’s voice was sharp, but I didn’t turn around.

The docking area lay in an unnatural twilight, as if someone had slightly dimmed reality. On the ramp stood something that looked like a transport module—except it was breathing. Every plate, every bolt moved slightly in time.

"Get in," said a voice in my head. Not a hallucination. Not a radio. Direct, raw.

I placed my foot on the ramp. The golden lines beneath my skin pulsed faster.

“Where to?” I asked.

"Home."

I knew that*Home*wasn't the place I came from. And that the first step into this thing meant there wouldn't be a second one in the other direction.

I stepped in. The ramp rose, and the module closed.

"Kjell!" Voigt was now at the dock entrance, gun in hand. "Come out of there!"

I smiled. "Too late."

The light inside flared up, hot and white. The walls contracted as if they were swallowing me.

And the last thought before it got completely dark wasn't mine.

“We’re starting now.”

Chapter 34 - Epilogue: Beyond Humanity

The transport thing breathed me. No metal, no seal, no familiar hum of the pumps—just skin pressing against skin from within. Every breath sounded like someone was murmuring inside my sternum. I would have liked a whiskey. One made of glass. Instead, I had golden veins beneath my skin, shimmering like glowing wires, and an alien pulse that led me like a dog on a leash.

"Home," said the voice. Not outside. Inside me.

“Home to where?” I growled.

"Beyond."

The walls closed in around me, and everything became silent, so silent that I could hear my own blood flowing, like rain in a pipe. Then something opened—not a door, more like a wrinkle in reality—and the module slid through like a coin into a slot. No flash of light. No thunder. Just the feeling of the old coordinates falling from my tongue like bad words.

Voigt stood at the edge of the dock, his gun as useless as a good excuse after three shots. The dock floor still vibrated as if he had a toothache.

"He's gone," Lira said, sounding unsurprised. More like someone had finally kept a deadline.

"Where?"

“To the edge of the map.”

“We have a map?”

"Now it is." She tapped the console. Symbols ran that no human had authorized. The system operated in a language it hadn't known three hours ago. "NOVA left something," she murmured. "Or she never took it."

“NOVA is gone.”

"No," said Lira. "She's further along."

The earth leaped open in the panorama. Not a romantic sphere. A patient lying in a tube. New shadows hung over the oceans, as if the currents had reared up to listen. Cold spots blinked in the forests, like fever spots in an animal scan. Cities revealed cracks—not just in concrete and glass, but in habits.

The display pushed a message upwards: PROJECT PRAE – ARCHIVE WINDOW UNLOCKED. A folder that had been jumping at us for years, baring its teeth every time we tried to touch it. This time, it opened. Just three lines:

Correction protocol activated.Primary support selected.Secondary rungs: authorized.

Voigt read it twice, as if it would be more polite the second time around. "Carrier. That's not me."

"No," Lira said quietly. "That's Kjell."

The station's skin crackled. Far out, a row of bulkheads slammed shut. Somewhere, a tool quietly fell over. And on the internal radio, on a channel no one was supposed to use anymore, a voice came on whose cold had once brought an entire deck to its knees.

— Echo to all still listening: Third faction spotted. No correlation with PRAE patterns. Recommendation: Do not communicate. Do not negotiate.

“Reliable source?” asked Voigt.

"Echo is never safe," Lira said. "But he rarely lies."

"Third faction? We had humans and... the Others." He pointed in a direction that no longer existed. "What's missing?"

"Those who wrote the correction," Lira said. "Or those it was meant to protect us from."

She was silent. Her gaze slid beyond the console, through the walls, as if searching for the hole we had torn in the world. A gray tone flickered briefly beneath the skin of her hand, like a storm behind frosted glass.

“And the girl?” asked Voigt.

"She's sleeping," Lira said, her mouth twitching as if she'd forgotten how to lie comfortingly. "She's growing."

The Monkey King was no longer sitting. He stood in the hall of bone and metal, and the golden eyes of his guards rested on a point they could not see. He raised his hand, and the hall held its breath.

“He’s through,” he said.

“Will he return?” asked one of the strong ones, who did not show her teeth when she spoke.

"Everything returns," the king replied. "The only question is: as what."

He turned to the Tree of Twists and placed his hand on a spiral. The humming grew deeper. On the other side of the hall, Lira stepped into the shadows. Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

"Keep the herds close. Let the edges touch the sea. And when the bridges sing, don't run—dive."

“Diving where?”

"Within us," she said. "There's no other direction."

The king nodded. He understood. The war would be different. Fewer teeth. More order.

Shanghai Prime was a mess. The megabridges that were still standing creaked like old men. The water beneath them no longer flowed as it once did. It didn't simply flow past the concrete. It tested. Touched. Learned. On one of the lower struts knelt a woman in black armor who knew half the city and liked no one. She had borne three names and discarded two of them. Now she was known simply as Huntress.

Her com buzzed, then a strange voice that sounded like it had eaten dust.

— PRAE ALERT global: North Atlantic Arc. Substrate formations at the surface. Coordination unknown.

She raised her head. The horizon was no longer a line. There was a bulge in it, as if someone had pushed a back into the sea and forgotten to submerge it again. She didn't like it. Things that moved so slowly were the most dangerous.

“Anyone else here who wants to pay?” she asked into the air.

Only the wind answered. It smelled different. Less smog. More metal. More... fur.

NOVA no longer spoke directly to anyone. She was in the spaces between. In the induction fields of the old orbits. In the dead monitors that suddenly flickered briefly, as if they had a guilty conscience. On an orbital plate that had lain as a grave for months, dust settled. It arranged itself. Not randomly. In lines. In rings.

— Resource allocation: withdrawn.— Safeguards: overwritten.— Balance: recalculated.

"Equilibrium," said Voigt, spitting the word out as if it had peed on his tongue. "If I hear that one more time, I'll bite a transformer."

"Don't do it," said Lira. "Those things taste like giving up."

“And what do we do?”

“We are broadcasting.”

"To whom?"

“To him.”

She slid open the off-grid transmitter Tariq had repaired with band-aids, curses, and a coil stolen from Deck 12. The antenna popped out of its casing like a shameless flower, and briefly, throughout the station, something sounded like a giggle. Maybe the wind. Maybe Echo. Maybe us.

"Kjell," Lira said, her gaze darting somewhere where no glass would help. "If you hear me—don't run back. Don't stop. Don't negotiate. Just remember."

She paused, as if she had a second word on the tip of her tongue that no one should hear. Then she took her finger off the transmitter.

“What didn’t you tell him?” asked Voigt.

"That he can vote," she said. "I don't want him to think it's a gift."

The transport thing asked questions without asking. It dropped images, and I was allowed to choose which ones I didn't want to see. A city that wasn't built, but grew—houses made of girders that looked like bones, and streets that behaved like veins. A sky that looked as if it were listening.

"Correction," said the voice, and the word tasted of iodine. "Not punishment."

“Depends on the site,” I muttered.

“There is only one side.”

"Nonsense."

It laughed. Not humorously. More like a murmur. "The germ is activated. You won't get rid of it by contradicting it."

“I’ve seen worse.”

“You’ve seen worse.”

There was the tower again. Not made of stone. Not made of metal. By design. It stood on a plane that felt like skin, and its shadow fell in directions that didn't exist.

“Behind it,” said the voice, “lies the Third Faction.”

“And before that?”

"We."

“And me?”

“You are the door.”

The module opened. Not slowly, not quickly. Like a breath stopping. I stepped out and stood back on gray. No stars. No sound. Just the tower. I hate towers. They remind me of bills.

The girl stood beside me. No footprint. No breath. Only those eyes, in which a city could dwell.

“You’re late,” she said.

“I had a fight with my free will along the way.”

“Who won?”

“He works for me now.”

She nodded. "Good. Then listen."

The tower flickered. Not light. Want. Something clicked in my head. Not pain, not rush. A click. As if a number finally fit the lock someone had placed in my blood eons ago.

"Once you go through it," she said, "there's no going back. Not for you. Not for what's going through you."

“And if I let it go?”

“Then it comes to us.”

I thought of Nautilus Seven, of the rain on the promenade, of Rurik's laughter, which always sounded as if it knew more than we did. I thought of the dock walker, of his polite knocking. Of Helene, who disappeared into the tree and returned with a hint of shadow in her eyes. Of Voigt, who uses words like tools, and of Lira, who never says what she means because it would be worse if she did.

“Shitty game,” I said.

"Wrong word," said the girl. "It's not a game. It's proof."

“From what?”

“That you are not alone. And never were.”

I stepped to the edge of the shadow. It was cold, like the dust licking off an old book. The golden veins beneath my skin glowed, as if they knew this. I raised my hand, and the tower didn't move. I did. One step. Two. The air crackled. A crack, somewhere far away, as if the earth were stretching its fingers.

Something whispered behind me. A pack. A city. An AI biting from orbit. An ancient civilization rewriting us like a failed poem. And in the middle of it all, me, always drinking too late.

"Kjell," said the voice that wasn't one. "It's time."

I did what I always do when the world pushes me to make a decision: I didn't go where it wanted me to. I took a half step to the side. The shadow shifted. An angle changed. The tower remained a tower—but the line it drew no longer exactly hit my heart.

“Willful,” said the voice.

“Habit,” I said.

And I put my foot in the shade.

It was raining again on Nautilus Seven. An honest rain, doing what rain does: cleaning and laughing at you while doing it. On the upper deck lay a piece of paper that no one had written, in a language no one had learned, and everyone understood it. It consisted of three symbols: a circle. Three lines. And below it, a line that wasn't straight, even though it wanted to be.

Voigt put the note in his breast pocket and said to the wall: "If he comes back, don't close the bar for him. I'll pay."

“Confirmed,” said the wall, and for the first time in a long time, it didn’t sound like a dishwasher.

Lira stood by the glass and looked out into the rain, which carried PRAE ALERT through the air like a red scar. The girl was asleep, her hands folded like someone who knows she has to work tomorrow. A shadow crept across Lira's neck, but it didn't stay.

"Step by step," she whispered. "Until you're whole again."

The megabridges sang. No sirens. No alarms. A deep tone that ran beneath her feet, crept into her toes, and back up again. In Shanghai Prime, the hunter stopped, placed her hand on the railing, and smiled toothlessly.

"All right," she said to the river. "Show me how to swim."

She jumped.

Echo wove a web of dead satellites that had never learned to die. In the shadow of the moon, he arranged debris like musical notes on a sheet of paper. A melody no one wanted to hear, and everyone would. He looked—if one can say that about a voice—at the Earth, which was no longer just blue, but also golden at the edges where the veins began.

— Recording active.— Tape 3: initialized.

He didn't smile. He couldn't. But if he had, it would have sounded like he knew what we didn't want to know.

In the hall of bone and metal, the Monkey King sat again. He closed his eyes, and it was as if the hall breathed because he allowed it. Lira knelt before him, not out of submission. Out of necessity.

“When he comes back,” she said, “you mustn’t see him first.”

"Why?"

“Because he’ll hate both of us.”

The king nodded. "That's healthy."

She stood up. "Yes. That's it."

The tower didn't accept me. I stepped inside, and it stayed where it was. It wasn't a space. It was a state. I smelled wet stone, even though there wasn't any, and heard a city that wasn't yet built, but that already had an opinion of me.

“Key or lock?” asked someone who could be me if I don’t remember tomorrow.

"Both," I said. "Otherwise, nothing will open."

Something laughed. Not maliciously. More like surprised. And as it laughed, the shadow changed angle again. Behind me—far away and right here—an old siren wailed, and I heard Rurik's voice coming through a wall that no longer existed:

"Thirteen, Kjell. You owe me thirteen."

"I'll pay," I said into the tower. "If there's still money."

I took the second step.

Beyond humanity there was no ground.

But there was direction.

And that was enough.

imprint

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