

**Timestamp: April 15th, 2479**

The desolation stretches before me, endless and silent. Broken buildings jut out of the earth like jagged teeth, their walls weathered by time and abandonment. The Geiger counter on my hip clicks steadily, a constant reminder of where I am—a place forgotten by time but not by history.

Ahead, the carcass of a warship looms. Its name is emblazoned in faded letters on the steel hull: USS Kiersten. The sight of it makes my stomach twist. The ship is a relic, like so many things out here—a monument to something long dead.

I approach cautiously, my boots crunching over debris. A large breach in the hull catches my eye, a jagged tear just wide enough for me to squeeze through. Inside, the darkness swallows me whole, save for the faint light streaming through the breach. The air is thick with damp and decay, and my footsteps echo unnervingly.

To my left, faded letters mark the direction of the Hangar Bay. To the right, Armory. My gaze lingers on the latter, drawn by some unseen pull. A tattered banner hangs loosely on the wall nearby. The sight of it stops me in my tracks.

The symbol is unmistakable: a golden eagle clutching a radiation symbol. My breath catches, the sight taunting me as it always does, a reminder of the patch I wear and the questions it carries.

Something moves at the edge of my vision.

I spin, rifle raised, my heart pounding. A shadowy figure peeks out from behind the bulkhead leading to the armory. Humanoid in shape, but wrong. Its eyes—or where its eyes should be—are black voids, consuming the dim light around them.

Its tattered jacket hangs loosely from its shoulders, and my blood runs cold. The patch on its right shoulder mirrors mine exactly.

I've seen this figure before. In dreams. Nightmares. Always vague and undefined, a specter haunting the edges of my consciousness. But this time is different. It's sharper, more real.

"Hello?" I call out, my voice steady despite the tremor in my chest. The rifle remains shouldered, ready. I don't expect a reply—I never have before.

But this time, it speaks.

"Come... find us... Eleanor," it rasps in broken Ukrainian, its voice grating like rusted metal. A shadowy hand reaches out, beckoning me forward.

I don't move. "This isn't my first rodeo," I say, keeping my aim steady. "How can I trust you?"

The figure twitches violently, its form distorting as though struggling to remain whole. Its next words come slowly, haltingly. “Born... Ukraine... 2461. Abandoned... Unknown location... 2461.”

The air grows heavier, the figure’s presence pressing down on me like a weight.

“I know my past well enough,” I reply, though my voice falters. Whoever—whatever—this is, it knows me. It knows too much.

“Friend... betrayer.” the words seem to pain the figure, its body convulsing with each utterance.

“Friends... hunted...”

“Documents... redacted...”

“History... forgotten...”

The shadow steps into the light, its form shifting violently. One moment, it’s a figure in full recon gear; the next, it’s faceless. Then, it begins to change.

I see them. Petrov. Carter. Blackwell. The Thornes. Their faces flicker into focus, one after another, before dissolving into shadow again.

“Daughter... abandoned... Name... changed...”

The final form stops me cold. A young girl stands before me, clutching a patch tightly in her small hands. I recognize her immediately—it’s me. Four years old, confused and terrified, clinging to the only piece of identity I have left.

“Parents... KIA...”

“Daughter... located...”

“Overlord... intervening...”

The figure stops shaking, its movements stilling as it becomes formless once more. Its voice shifts, no longer broken but clear, deliberate.

“She must find her own answers. Trust no one.”

The shadow shifts again, this time taking the form of a young man. My stomach twists as Damien’s face comes into focus.

“The new Thorne... knows... who she is...”

My mind reels. How? How could Damien know? I’ve trusted him—told him my fears, my worries. If he knows the truth and keeps it from me, then what does that make him?

“Come... Eleanor,” the shadow says, its voice beginning to fade. “Find... answers...”

And then it's gone, dissolving into nothingness.

A deafening roar comes from outside the hull, the world shaking and crumbling around me. The floor falls away, and I'm falling, spiraling into darkness.

I jolt awake, drenched in sweat, my chest heaving. The warship is gone, replaced by the familiar confines of my quarters at the ASTP facility. I check the clock: 1:05 a.m.

"Fuck that," I mutter, swinging my legs over the side of the bed. Sleep isn't an option after that.

The cold shower doesn't settle my mind, but it steadies my heart rate. Pulling on a field uniform and grabbing my gear, I leave my quarters silently, heading toward the checkpoint.

The guard barely looks up as I approach, my badge already on the counter. "Where are you headed?" he asks, his voice groggy.

"Exclusion zone. Reactor number 5 or the vehicle graveyard," I reply evenly. "Stress from the upcoming practical," I add, half-truthful.

"You know the drill," he says, sliding a liability form toward me. "If you're not back in 24 hours, we send a search party. At 48 hours, you're MIA. Radio ahead if you need an extension."

I fill out the form quickly. "I know. This isn't my first time."

"Yeah, yeah," he mutters, stamping the form and handing it back. "Stay safe, Keener."

I step out into the cold night air, the smell of trees and earth a welcome reprieve from the sterile confines of the facility. My rifle hangs heavy in my hands as I begin the trek toward the exclusion zone.

The forest is alive with nocturnal sounds—the distant howl of wolves, the rustle of leaves in the wind. The weight of the dream lingers, but the rhythmic crunch of dirt beneath my boots keeps me grounded.

As I approach the looming silhouette of the Duga radar station, its massive frame cutting through the darkness, I feel a strange pull in my chest. This is where it began.

Where it will end—I don't know.