

### Children of Kronos

*And great Kronos swallowed them down*

*As each left the womb and reached its mother's knees,*

*So that none of these proud sons should rule on high.*

### Theogony

Amidst the roiling waves of Ladon's Great Sea, there floated a city called *Kronos*, built of rusted towers cramped so close together that they fused into a single, amorphous mass. It stood on rusted, pillar-like legs, which straddled undersea pontoons the size of battleships to give *Kronos* the appearance of a fisherman wading through a pond back on Mother Earth.

Not that Regan had ever beheld a pond in person. The smallest body of water she'd ever known was the Great Sea, whose indigo depths covered Regan's homeworld the way fresh paint covered a ship's hull. She knew freshwater pools only by their photos, which Regan kept amongst many others in a binder inherited from her grandfather. It had come from Earth itself, filled with places that Regan so often dreamt of seeing for herself.

She thought of the pond in her binder as *Kronos*, like the fisherman, hauled its catch to the surface. But it was not a fish that *Kronos* had caught. Its prize was a city, about a fifth the size of *Kronos*, the town's legs separated from the ocean floor to dangle like those of a person amputated at the ankles. An army of scrap workers, like ants picking apart a carcass, worked tirelessly to dismantle the captured rig. They crawled up the wreck's towers and burrowed into its halls, their tiny forms hooked to safety lines to prevent them from falling into the Sea below. They worked with saws and cutting torches, the air singing with the screech of metal as acetylene fumes wafted across the yard.

“There has to be a safer way to do this,” Edmund muttered, covering his nose with his jacket sleeve.

Regan glanced at him as she spoke. “We’ve dismantled rigs like these dozens of times before. Don’t think that we aren’t taking all the necessary precautions.”

The two of them stood on a narrow catwalk overlooking *Kronos*’ horseshoe-shaped dockyard. From their vantage point, they beheld the captured city in its entirety, suspended over the Sea by several dozen winch towers positioned along the horseshoe-shaped yard.

The hulk resembled a slaughtered animal left to hang in a freezer. Regan’s memory drifted to a grisly photo from her binder. It depicted something called a slaughterhouse, a large closet containing great, skinless corpses with meat redder than any fish she’d ever seen, and limbs that stuck out in ways that felt alien; wrong. The beast in front of her was constructed of a different kind of meat. Its flesh and bones were steel, its limbs cranes, and its blood ran black with the decomposed biomass of alien phytoplankton that once colored the Great Sea green.

Its name was *Ouranos*. Regan tried to imagine the rig as it would have stood in her grandfather’s youth, before the upper levels were cannibalized to repair its hull and before its oil well had run dry. Before Mother Earth had closed her wormholes and abandoned Regan’s people to Ladon’s endless waves.

The *Ouranos* had fared better than most of the oil outposts that peppered the Great Sea. Regan’s survey team had reported a hydroponics operation inside the rig, large enough to support the rig’s three thousand inhabitants. Even still, Regan had pitied them. For on Ladon, resources were worth nothing if its owners could not defend them.

The battle had been quick—*Ouranos*’ meager garrison had surrendered the moment *Kronos* brandished its guns. After Regan’s team had secured it to the docks, the rig’s population

had been swallowed into *Kronos*' bowels to work its sweltering boilers and engines, its sunless factories and refineries. As for their home, it too would be consumed.

Heavy footfalls sounded at the base of the catwalk steps. Through the gaps in the walkway, Regan spied the glint of Ladon's red star reflected on an officer's badge. Edmund gave her a confused look. "I thought this was a restricted area."

"The Admiral goes where he pleases," Regan said, suppressing the resignation in her voice. "I'll do the talking. He doesn't like speaking with new hires."

A moment later, Admiral Liran Dross ascended onto the platform, hands resting unsteadily on both railings. Behind him walked a pair of soldiers dressed in grey-blue fatigues, each cradling a large, black rifle. Despite herself, Regan shivered at the sight of them.

"How goes progress on the *Ouranos*, Director?" the Admiral called impatiently. Dross was a few years older than Regan, temples turning grey and always looking perturbed in a way that suggested he was being delayed from his next appointment.

"It's going smoothly, Admiral," Regan replied with a well-practiced smile. She gestured towards *Ouranos*' corpse. "The scrap teams are making quick work of the upper levels and should begin moving to the midsections soon. Our experts are estimating two hundred thousand tons of steel by the time we're through."

Dross' grin was predatory. "Excellent. How many days until the work is finished? I want *Kronos* to be out of these waters before the Federation Remnant discovers us."

Over the din of machinery, the Great Sea howled, a salty, rotten smell blowing past on the wind. Regan didn't flinch. "At our current rate, we should be done in two weeks."

Admiral Dross frowned. "You can't make it go faster?"

“Sorry sir, but the scrap teams need time,” Regan said, bowing her head. She felt a pang of disgust at her need to apologize. “Much of the *Ouranos* can’t be easily cut away. There’s a full hydroponics farm on board that will take us at least a few days to extract. That’s not mentioning the time needed to comb through their medical bays and sort through all the personal items—”

“We don’t have that kind of time,” Dross interrupted. “Besides, our priority should be structural materials. It’s been too long since *Kronos* had its hull repaired. If the Remnant finds us, it won’t matter how much loot we find if we can’t take a few hits. In any case, we need to be out of their ships’ fuel range *long* before that becomes a possibility.”

Regan understood full-well the threat that the Federation Remnant posed. The last scion of Mother Earth’s galactic hegemony, the Remnant saw it as their duty to uphold order on lonely Ladon. To them, *Kronos* was a rogue city that needed to be put down. With an arsenal still comparable to that of Mother Earth, the Remnant could wipe *Kronos* off the map if they were found

“It won’t take the full two weeks to get moving,” Regan said. “Once my team is half-finished, we should be able to lift anchor without the *Ouranos* tipping us over.” Indeed, as heavy as the *Ouranos* was compared to *Kronos*, once enough of its mass had been stripped away, stabilizing anchors wouldn’t be necessary to offset its girth.

Dross shook his head, turning back to Regan. “I don’t want us lifting anchor until the entire thing’s scrapped. No point in trying to escape Remnant ships if the *Ouranos* will tip us into the Sea the moment our engines start.”

Edmund took a step out from behind Regan. “Let’s just skip the search process then and lose everything inside. Who needs more farms or medical equipment, anyways?” Regan winced

at the sarcasm in his voice. Fifteen years her junior, Edmund had a brilliant mind, but fresh out of university, he displayed a horrifying lack of professional awareness.

Dross's attention shifted to Edmund with a scowl, as if he were a stain on the Admiral's white jacket. "Careful with your tone, boy. People have been imprisoned for less."

Regan's entire body tensed. She forced herself to speak before Edmund could say more. "Forgive my assistant. He's new and hasn't finished his training courses yet." Regan prayed that Dross wouldn't see through her excuses, shooting Edmund a look to keep him quiet. He wasn't looking at her, though; Edmund's gaze was on the Admiral.

Dross met Edmund's defiance with amusement. Regan thought his eyes looked like those of a cat watching a cornered mouse, oozing with confidence and utterly in control. "See that he does. Wouldn't want new talent to go wasted on a factory floor."

Edmund spoke again. "I'm simply making a suggestion, sir."

"Your input is unnecessary unless requested," the Admiral sneered. "That being said, I agree with your *suggestion*. The steel's all we want at the end of the day. I expect a new timeline from your team by tomorrow morning. Everything that isn't scrap metal or munitions should get dropped into the sea. Best of luck with the operation."

With that, he turned and left, one of his guards leading the way down the steep catwalk stairwell, the other taking up the rear. Regan opened her mouth to object, to voice some counterargument that wouldn't fall on deaf ears, but she came up empty. All she could do was watch Dross descend out of view.

When he had stepped out of earshot, Edmund finally spoke. "Bastard."

"Quiet," Regan hissed, turning to face him. "*Why* would you suggest that we scrap the *Ouranos* without conducting a search?"

Edmund lowered his voice, averting Regan's glare but sounding no less defiant. "I thought I'd remind him of what we'd be losing. I thought he would care."

"Of course he wouldn't care. *None* of them care." Regan suddenly felt very aware of how open the dockyard was. She scanned the floor several stories below for eavesdroppers before walking further down the platform towards the laboratory building. "Come with me."

Edmund gave her a confused look but obliged. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere quiet."

Neither of them said a word until after they reached Regan's office. She spoke as she locked the door. "To Dross and the rest of the naval brass, all that matters is gunpowder and steel. Anything more complex than that is secondary—the bridge's control system is as advanced as they need."

"Surely they care about *Ouranos'* farms," Edmund said. He stood behind the chair across from Regan's desk and ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "They must understand that people need to eat, that they can't work when they're starving to death. Does High Command not realize how much more efficiently *Kronos* could run if the people below them weren't fighting for their lives?"

"High Command only cares about food when they stop receiving it." Regan said evenly. She regretted not spending more time interviewing Edmund before she hired him last month. Graduating at the top of his class, Edmund had been the ideal choice for her assistant. Now Regan wasn't so sure.

"In any case, there isn't anything we can change about it," Regan said before Edmund began another tirade. She took a seat behind her desk and sighed quietly. "I think you should take

the rest of the day off. I'll spend tonight drafting the updated timeline and give you a summary tomorrow before Dross comes for the report."

Edmund flinched at the dismissal. When he spoke, his anger had dissolved. "Director Thorne, I'm just frustrated with how Admiral Dross overruled us."

"I as well," Regan said, trying her best to smile reassuringly. "But you have to remember that Dross and the others have ears. There's very little I can do if they hear you say something... ill-considered."

"Of course," Edmund replied. He made his way to the door and opened it to leave, but he paused at the threshold, his brow wrinkled in thought. Edmund turned to face Regan. "Isn't there something we can do? Shouldn't we at the very least extract the hydroponics system? People are dying, Director. We can save them."

Regan had begun fetching files from her desk. She didn't meet his eyes. "I'm sorry, Edmund. Good night."

He didn't reply as he shut the door and left, his footsteps fading down the hall until they disappeared entirely. When she could hear him no more, Regan tried her best to flush the guilt from her conscience and began to draft the timeline.

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Ladon's star had dipped beneath the horizon by the time Regan finished the report. It was half the length of the original, each "unnecessary" part cut down until only the bare bones remained. In total, nearly thirty percent of *Ouranos*' overall mass would be lost. All that Regan could justify saving was the rig's hull, support structures, and generators. Anything else—hydroponics, life support, ballast—would need a specialized crew to remove without being irreparably

damaged. Assembling a crew and planning an extraction took precious time that Dross wouldn't let her spare.

But what had Edmund said? People were dying. Regan idly ran the numbers in her mind, the number of extra mouths that could be fed if they saved the farms, how many sets of smoke-filled lungs could benefit from a salvaged x-ray machine. Dross would argue that even more would benefit from *Ouranos'* steel. *Kronos'* hull needed repairs, and the city always needed materials for more housing. Regan felt a twinge of resentment for the Admiral. She knew he had *Kronos'* interests at heart, but his priority had always been survival. It didn't matter if some of his people were hungry so long as all of them were alive.

Regan needed a distraction. Leaving the report on her desk, she stood from her desk for a walk. It wasn't long before she was out of the lab and winding through the bustling upper halls of the *Kronos*.

The city was a maze, even in the middle levels where Regan worked. The halls were wide and well-lit, kept clean by the nightly sweepers. The block Regan walked through now was a shopping district—storefronts were open to the hall and vendors hawked everything from street food to jewelry made from sea glass and polished scrap metal. Their voices bounced around the confines of the hallway, forming a constant, unfading din.

It was a familiar place, but Regan couldn't help but feel like she was in a cage whenever she wandered this deep into the city. Some primal fragment of her yearned for the sky and the stars. Not that she would ever complain about spaces like these. There was a photo in her binder labeled *Kowloon*, depicting a dim, trash-strewn hallway with pipes, wires, and fluorescent bulbs strung along the ceiling, a man smoking beside a window that led not to the sun but deeper into a



cave of steel. That was how Regan imagined the city's lowest levels, hot and cramped and constantly thrumming with the heartbeat of *Kronos*' engines.

"Director." Lost in her thoughts, Regan had nearly run straight into the person ahead of her. He smelled like engine fumes, and specks of oil stained a familiar jacket. Regan looked up at the man and realized it was Edmund.

"Ah, good to see you," Regan said, surprised more than anything else. Edmund carried a large parcel wrapped loosely in grey cloth. One half bent over his elbow, his hands supporting a portion that sagged between his arms. She wondered what it could be. "Do you live around here?"

Edmund glanced at the shoppers milling around them. "I don't," he said hesitantly. He had the same face as earlier, before he left the lab. Regan felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. Edmund continued. "I'm going to the medical ward."

Regan blinked. "Back at the lab? You don't have access..." She trailed off as she eyed the object in his arms again, realizing with horror what it likely was. It was so small. "Is that—"

"It isn't important who she is," Edmund said. His tone wasn't hesitant now. "And you're right—I don't have clearance. But you do."

Questions raced through Regan's mind as she pieced together what Edmund was asking of her. "Edmund, we have protocols for these things. This late in the day, this last minute, there will be a queue, and that's not to mention the paperwork. We can't just skip—" The bundle coughed. Loudly. It was a choking sort of noise, wet and dry at the same time. Regan would have found it repulsive if she hadn't been trying so hard to ignore that it was a *child* in Edmund's arms.

The coughing went on, interspersed with ragged, shallow breaths. Edmund hugged the child closer to him and gave Regan a pleading look. “Just this once, Director. Get me in tonight and I’ll never ask again.”

Regan considered the costs. Letting an unregistered patient into the lab risked spreading disease and contaminating equipment. Living spaces within the *Kronos* were cramped, so High Command’s strategy for preventing outbreaks was to isolate communities within the city. The last time someone snuck past the checkpoints, nearly a hundred people on Regan’s floor had fallen ill.

“What does she have?” Regan asked. She took a step towards the wall, hoping that fewer people might overhear them.

Edmund followed her, stepping close. The smell of fumes and axle grease filled Regan’s nostrils. “Pneumonia, I think. She’s been sick for almost two weeks now and hasn’t gotten any better.”

Both Regan and Edmund had received rudimentary medical training in school. They both knew how quickly pneumonia could kill. “You think she still has a chance?” Regan asked cautiously.

Edmund gave her a dark look. “If she gets oxygen and antibiotics, then yes.”

Both were highly restricted items, reserved for members of High Command and Class A officers like Regan. They weren’t meant for those deemed expendable.

What a word. Regan’s mind drifted to latex gloves and the aluminum cans that people once drank from on Earth—those were expendable. But people. A child. Regan could make out a pair of bony shoulders through the cloth, the outline of a small head, and a scrunched wad of fabric where the child held the blanket closed.

Regan pursed her lips. “Just this once,” she whispered, barely audible over the sounds of the marketplace. She turned and Edmund followed, thanking her quietly. But Regan had stopped listening. All she could think of as she led them back to the lab and swiped her access card to enter the medical ward, was if she was a fool for trying to save a child’s life.

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No older than eight, the girl was gaunt with hunger, her skin pale under a layer of dirt and grime. More concerning, her lips and fingertips had darkened to a color Regan had only ever seen in her binder, an oxygen-starved, lilac-purple. The three of them were in a private room within the medical ward, which was empty except for the few nurses they had avoided on the way in. The girl lay asleep in bed with a plastic mask feeding air into her lungs while Edmund sat at her side, waiting for the girl to recover in silent tension. On the other side of the bed, Regan stood by the window and watched the dockyards just beyond.

The scrap workers were still toiling away at the *Ouranos*, hanging high over the sea from their safety wires. Regan couldn’t hear them through the glass, but she could see the night shift working under the light of their dim headlamps, which cast splotches of yellow light across the dead city’s surface and into the gaping wounds along its sides. Regan wondered where the workers called home, what their floors were like.

She turned her attention to the girl. By the machine oil stains on her skeletal fingers, Regan could guess which part of the city the girl was from, but that raised a host of questions about how Edmund had found her. Regan began with something simple. “Who is she?”

“My niece, Lyla,” Edmund said. He sat with his elbows resting on his knees, leaning close to the girl’s frail form. “I hadn’t visited my sister’s family in a while, and when I stopped by earlier, Lyla was like this. I had to do something.”

Regan pulled over a chair, sitting across the bed from Edmund. “Your family’s from Factor Level?”

He nodded. “My parents were forced to live down there after their home rig got scrapped. My sister and I were born not long after that.”

Regan couldn’t imagine having children in a place where smoke filled the air and quiet didn’t exist. “How did you get into university?”

“Same way you did,” Edmund said sarcastically. “I worked for it.”

They were quiet for a bit. Regan had worked hard to get into school, to rise through the ranks until she was Director of Engineering, but she had been born in a medical ward like this, far from the soot and fire of *Kronos*’ core. While children like Lyla lost fingers to Factory Level mills and got burned by turbine steam, Regan had read textbooks in her family’s study and gotten lost in photographs of Mother Earth.

“How long has she been working?” Regan asked.

“Almost a year now,” Edmund replied. He checked Lyla’s temperature with his palm. “How long until we have to leave?”

It was almost midnight—not long before the medical team’s day began. “Soon,” Regan said.

“You’re sure there isn’t a way to let her stay?”

Regan shook her head. “The doctors won’t spare oxygen or pills for her if she isn’t an officer. If they can’t treat her, they’ll send her away.”

“Then let’s leave and take the oxygen with us,” Edmund said. “There has to be a way.”

“They’ll notice if a tank is missing,” Regan said. “We would need to get oxygen from somewhere else.” Edmund peered out the window towards the *Ouranos*.

Regan had anticipated this. “We don’t have enough scrap workers to search it for oxygen tanks,” she said before Edmund could raise any ideas. “Besides, anything we find would get sent straight to the upper levels. Stripping their medical supplies won’t help us.”

“Only if a scrap team did the searching,” Edmund said.

Regan frowned, “What do you mean?”

“There’s a... contracting team I know,” Edmund said carefully. Regan was already apprehensive. “If we let them onto the *Ouranos*, they can run through the whole rig while the night shift is working above them. Anything they find, we can give to people on Factory Level. Hell, we could start a whole hospital down there with what’s on board the *Ouranos*.”

Regan was shaking her head before he had finished talking. “Edmund, you’re suggesting *stealing* equipment from High Command. If your team gets discovered, they’d all be killed. If this plot gets linked back to us, we could lose our lives as well.”

“Then we don’t let them get caught,” Edmund said matter-of-factly. “My niece *needs* that equipment and you’re the Director of Engineering. You must be able to pull some strings to get my team out with their lives.”

He wasn’t wrong, necessarily. With a few orders, Regan could theoretically clear a path for Edmund’s thieves to escape with the equipment. However, doing so would directly tie her to the heist. If High Command found out, she would be hanged just like the *Ouranos*.

“I’m sorry, Edmund,” It pained her to reject his idea with Lyla asleep right beside her. “I wish I could help, but I won’t risk my life or anyone else’s lives to break into the *Ouranos*.”

He gave her a disdainful look and sighed. Methodically, Edmund removed the oxygen mask from Lyla’s face and began bundling her in the same cloth she had arrived in. “Fine then, I’ll find my own way.”

“Where are you going?” Regan asked with a frown. “We still have time before the medical team arrives.”

“I’m taking Lyla home,” Edmund said. He lifted a swaddled Lyla off the bed and made his way to the door. “If all goes well, she won’t need to come back here.”

Regan rose to follow him. “You’re not going ahead with this heist, are you?”

“I’m going to do what’s necessary to save my niece, Director,” Edmund said, easing the door open with his foot. “Please understand enough not to stop me.”

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In the hours before dawn, Regan watched *Kronos*’ dockyards from her apartment window. She lived by herself near the top of the city’s forest of towers, giving her a perfect view of the *Ouranos* before all the lights illuminating its corpse suddenly went out.

Regan was blind to the ensuing events. By the light of the stars, a dozen shadowy figures bolted across the deck, weaving through the confusion to the gap between the dock floor and the hanging corpse of the *Ouranos*. A two-meter gap separated them from their destination. Far below, the Great Sea churned.

What followed was a delicate operation. As a fisherman in one of Regan’s photos might cast his line at dawn, so the thieves cast hooked cables into the night, anchoring themselves to the lifeless city before swinging across and infiltrating its halls. Neither Regan nor the scrap teams saw a thing.

While the lights of the *Kronos* flickered back to life, those of the *Ouranos* remained dead. With no stars to guide them, the trespassers used dim, red-light torches to light the way, navigating the rig’s halls in near-darkness. Above and around them, the scrap teams’ muffled footfalls echoed through the walls.

Following the *Ouranos*' surrender, Regan had ordered a map be made of its interior. The survey had revealed the locations of residential blocks, generators, farms, and—most important to this mission—medical centers. Having received the map from Edmund, the thieves moved with purpose, passing apartments with food rotting on the table and childrens' toys still scattered on the floor. They ignored the loose knick knacks in abandoned shop windows and only briefly peered into one of *Ouranos*' neglected greenhouse rooms. Half an hour of climbing steps and winding through hallways brought them to the rig's main hospital. To Regan's alarm, she saw red light shining through its windows. She wasn't the only one.

Too late, the thieves flicked off their lights as they got to work. One team picked the lock to the medication room as another loaded their packs with oxygen tanks and plasma bags left by bedsides. Outside, a technician alerted security to the intruders' presence. Regan imagined Edmund and his thieves lined up across from a firing squad. In her mind's eye, she saw Lyla's purple lips and starving form. She had to do something. Heart racing, Regan began to move.

Meanwhile, the thieves moved with haste. They could hear the scrap teams being recalled off the wreck. Zipping up packs laden with medical supplies, they ran.

As the thieves descended to their exit point, Regan rushed to an elevator. Edmund's men wasted no time looting storefronts or exploring desiccated farms. Flying down the steps, they reached the exit point just as the hues of dawn had begun to bleed up from the horizon, coloring the undersides of clouds crimson as the rest of the sky slowly faded from night-black to indigo.

It was at this point that all the lights on the *Kronos* blinked out once again. Regan, still inside the elevator car, was cast into complete darkness. Outside, only a sliver of Ladon's rusty star had risen over the Great Sea, its light obscured by the corpse of the *Ouranos*. The dockyard

security team was effectively blind as their targets swung across the gap. The thieves weren't so lucky as they made the final dash from *Ouranos*' shadow to the safety of *Kronos*'s halls.

The burst of automatic rifles made Regan freeze. She was too late. Her elevator had just reached Dock Level, the door sliding open directly down the hall from a door that led to the outside. Return shots answered the security team's hail of gunfire, followed by a cacophony of frantic shouts. Regan blinked, realizing what sort of chaos she had nearly thrown herself into. People would die, she had warned Edmund. How had Regan thought she could change that?

She was just about to close the elevator when Edmund burst through the door, half-running, half-limping down the hall with a heavy sack hanging from his shoulder. A moment later, he was in the elevator, slamming his fist against the button to Factory Level before sliding to the floor. Regan stared at him in silence. She knew Edmund was going to try something bold, but she hadn't thought he was foolish enough to enter the *Ouranos* himself.

"Stop!" A lone soldier in blue fatigues sprinted in through the door. He brandished his black rifle, its muzzle steaming in the chilly morning air. Crouched behind the corner, Edmund was safe from its fire. For now.

Regan glanced from the soldier to her assistant. Regan's memory drifted to a photo in her binder, of painting in a museum that had given her nightmares since Regan was a girl. It depicted a naked man with grey unkempt hair, a half-eaten child in his arms. The photo was labeled *Kronos Devours His Son*. One last time, she weighed the cost of a life. She thought of the oxygen and medicine in Edmund's pack and all those who could be saved. She thought of how many more they could save if they worked together.

The soldier called out once more as the elevator doors began to shut. Regan barely registered his demands. For Regan had made up her mind. *Kronos* had eaten enough.



**Revision Note.** For my research edit, I read more about how oil rigs work as well as how the Kowloon Walled City worked as inspiration for the *Kronos*. Additionally, I read a bit about why people join violent rebellions to inform why Edmund and Regan decide to rebel against High Command.