# PROLOGUE II

Immediately after I opened the bottle, the acrid smell that had been accumulated for many years rushed right into my nostrils and nearly made me gag. The fumes were so bad that I felt tears in my eyes as I carefully poured the amber liquid into a crystal decanter.

"What foul concoction is the Queen Bee brewing for us this evening? Are you planning to murder all of us a week before the launch? Seems a bit heartless if you ask me."

I didn't even have to look up to recognize that lazy frivolous tone.

"Heartless? I guess nobody would be more of an expert on that particular subject matter than the man who was nicknamed "the butcher", and for your information, this isn't some foul concoction. This is one of my most prized possessions, one of the last bottles of Gold Label whisky ever made. I would have never wasted such a precious drink on a bunch of philistines who couldn't appreciate it, but unfortunately, the custom officials wouldn't let me take it aboard the Ark. They said something about vintage whisky not being a necessity for the preservation of life."

I finished setting up four glass tumblers on the slightly worn out, elaborately carved, Mahogany table and sat down on my favorite red velvet recliner which was placed at the head of the table. Once I was nice and comfortable, I looked up to face the owner of the frivolous voice.

General Arnold Grimes was a man of many contradictions. His florid state was at complete odds with his role as the leader of the armed forces of the United Earth government. His messy silver hair, which made him look like he just passed through a hurricane, clashed terribly with his neat navy blue uniform with the five golden stars on each of his shoulders. The sloppy smile and the many wrinkles on his face would have made him look like a friendly grandpa but the cruel glint in the depths of his frosty gray eyes would cause a shiver down most people's spines. All in all, he looked like a wolf in sheep's clothing if the wolf hadn't done a very good job disguising itself.

I couldn't help but sigh when I saw his nearly bipolar state. "Would it kill you if you combed your hair? You look like a cartoon character that has been electrocuted."

His smile just grew broader and he completely ignored my comment as he plopped himself down on the chair to my right, a rocking chair that looked comfortable if it hadn't been for the painful looking straight back. It wasn't surprising that his favorite chair was as bipolar as he was. "Hey Queen Bee, did you say that they wouldn't let you have that bottle of whisky aboard the Ark? Why didn't you just tell them that it was rocket fuel? You wouldn't even have to lie, I'm sure that it has enough alcohol in it to be a decent substitute for rocket fuel."

The immature bastard didn't even wait to finish his own joke before he started guffawing like a lunatic. Unfortunately for him, laughing so hard made him completely unaware of the dark shadow that was creeping up on him, so when the dark figure lightly placed his hand upon his shoulder, Grimes was so surprised that he fell out of his chair and started to curse. "God damn you Shadow, I thought I told you to stop sneaking up on me! You nearly gave me a heart attack you dodgy bastard," after he noticed that cursing at Shadow had no noticeable effect, he turned his ire towards me instead, "Why didn't you tell me that Shadow was coming Queen Bee? You know that he likes messing with me."

"First of all, would you please stop calling me that awful nickname? Not only is it juvenile but it is also offensive. Secondly, I'm glad that you decided to stop skulking in the corner Shadow. I don't know why you always insist on hiding yourself in a room for at least ten minutes before you show yourself, we are all allies here."

Shadow was the only known alias we had for the person that had scared the living daylight out of Grimes who was still lying on the floor and quietly mumbling insults while breathing heavily. There was precious little we knew about this person; we didn't even know his real gender, so we just refer to him as male due to habit. Shadow was always covered in an impenetrable cloak of shadows even when he was standing under bright lights, so we had no ideas what he looked like. His height, body shape, and even his voice constantly changed from day to day. This person just showed up one day with the ring engraved with the signet of our organization, the Ouroboros symbol, and has been our information specialist ever since.

"Did you notice that I was here Beatrice? I am undetectable to all known forms of surveillance, how did you find me?"

The surprise in his voice made me smile. It was nice to know that I could rattle the great Shadow himself. "There is your problem Shadow. You assumed that I was using *known* forms of surveillance."

"Oh, so the Queen Bee has a way to thwart my little tricks. I'm sorry, I forgot that you hate being called that, don't you? I wonder why? It is actually a very accurate description of you, a woman who used her own genetic material to manufacture a new breed of super soldiers and agents. You are just like a queen bee with its hive of workers and drones."

Although his androgynous voice sounded as emotionless as ever, Shadow's words obviously had a hostile edge to them. It seems like I injured his professional pride a little when I managed to find him while he was still trying to remain hidden, but that didn't give him the right to disrespect me.

"Measure your next words very carefully Shadow. If you insist on making me your enemy, I shall oblige you and I doubt you will enjoy that experience, however brief it might be. If my actions have antagonized you somehow then I apologize, but if you continue to talk in such a disrespectful way, I shall count you as one of my adversaries. Before you make your decision, I would like you to remember something. You might be an unfathomable wraith to everybody else, but the only reason that your identity remains a secret is because you are a useful ally. If you choose to break all decorum with me then I shall use all my resources to hunt you down and the great mystery of your identity will not remain a mystery for much longer. Friend or foe, the choice is yours."

Grimes had settled back down on his chair by the time I finished speaking and he had his trademark insolent smile plastered on his face."Dude, you really should apologize. I might tease Beatrice now and then but you crossed the line. I know that she might look like a harmless little lady but I honestly believe that she is the scariest person alive today. They might call me names like "the butcher" but she scares the shit out of me. I gained notoriety because I set off a Posotronic Pulse bomb in central Africa to eradicate the natives in order to pave the way for resettlement. I was personally responsible for the death of tens of millions of people: men, women and children whose only crime was the fact that they were living on land that we wanted," Grimes still had a silly smile on his face but his eyes became haunted as he continued to speak, "They called me a monster behind my back while hailing me as a hero to my face, they called me a pragmatic patriot who was willing to make the difficult choices. The funny part is that I didn't act because of patriotism or bravery. The reason I acted was because I owed Beatrice a favor and she asked me to clear out central Africa. What I did wasn't a difficult act of sacrificing my morals for my country, it was a simple act of self preservation. What I'm trying to say is that I know things about Beatrice that would give you nightmares; in fact, the things I know give me nightmares every night when I close my eyes. I chose to kill millions instead of antagonizing her. Let me give you some advice, if you walk out of here her enemy, you will live just long enough to see everything you love destroyed and everything that is even remotely connected to you crumble before your very eyes. Compared to the sheep out there, we might be gods, but Beatrice is a demon. Did I say demon? No, she is the devil. If you are smart, you will apologize and take a seat."

I winked at Grimes and smiled. "You say the sweetest things Arnold."

For a few seconds, Shadow just stood there doing nothing, but he eventually just sat down on his designated seat which was directly opposite mine. Shadow's seat wasn't a chair per say but rather it was just a slightly raised platform with a mat on it and Shadow sat down on it by crossing his legs like some sort of yogi.

Shadow had barely settled down when my final guest arrived, tech genius extraordinaire Frank Stone. He was a burly bald middle-aged man of African American descent. He was wearing a simple white T-shirt and jeans, both stained by grease and other such liquids. He would have looked like any normal mechanic if it wasn't for his shiny silver cybernetic right arm. He immediately sat on the chair to my left and said, "Sorry I'm late, I got held up with some last minute preparations on the Ark. What did I miss?"

Grimes responded before I could, "Nothing much, just Shadow pissing off Beatrice and nearly getting on her shit list."

Frank's beady little eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. "What did you say? I think I must have misheard you. Did you just say that Shadow pissed little Betsy off? Have you told him that pissing off Betsy is a profoundly stupid idea, something that is ranked just above performing surgery on yourself with a chainsaw and diving naked into a black hole?"

"Yup, I gave him the fire and brimstone speech and he seems to have calmed down a bit."

I cleared my throat before the two could really get into their little comedy shtick. "That's enough of the Frankie and Grimes comedy show. Now that we are all here, let's get down to serious business. Considering the fact that this is our last poker night before the launch next week, I propose we make it a little special."

Frankie raised one of his dark bushy eyebrows in suspicion. "What do you have in mind?"

"High stakes."

"Playing with millions of credits on the line isn't high enough?"

"Come on Frankie, you know that money means very little to us by now. Let us make things interesting by betting things that we truly value, things that we cherish."

Frankie and Grimes exchanged uneasy looks. They looked like they were going to bolt out of the room with their tails tucked between their legs.

"Relax, I'm not trying to extort things from you. Any bets would have to be deemed to have equal value by at least two of the parties involved and if you think the bets are unfair at any point, you can simply pull out. Does anybody have any objections? No? Alright, let's begin."

I poured some whisky for everybody and took out a pack of unopened cards. After everybody made sure that the pack had nothing untoward done to it, I shuffled the cards thoroughly and dealt the first round.

I didn't even look at my cards before I said, "Since everybody is unfamiliar with the new gambling system, I shall start the ball rolling by placing the first bet. I bet two of my Valkyries. If you want to stay in this round, you have to bet something of equal value."

All of the three guys were looking at their cards when they suddenly froze. Frankie was the first one to recover but he was still stuttering when he said,"Wait..? V..V..Valkyries..? You mean..?"

I threw two unremarkable looking computer chips onto the table top. "Each Valkyrie that we produce is designed to be super strong, agile, and have inhuman reflexes. They are smarter than average humans and have been implanted with the knowledge to instinctively handle every weapon on earth and to be proficient in every known discipline of combat on earth. They look and act like any normal human female, so they are ideal for any covert operations or assassinations. Each Valkyrie is implanted with a unique control chip when they are born to assure complete obedience. These two chips are the keys to those chips. They will allow you to have complete control over the two Valkyries that I just bet."

The corners of Frankie's mouth started twitching and I could have sworn I saw drool coming out of Arnold's mouth. For a second, they just stared ravenously at the two computer chips on the table then Grimes suddenly started laughing like a deranged hyena. "So this is what you meant by high stakes? Alright then, I bet two regiments of infantry drones. It should be just enough to match the value of two of your Valkyries."

I nodded my head to show that I had accepted that his bet was valid and things started happening quickly after that. Frankie bet two fighter class shuttles, Shadow bet a very interesting camouflage technique, I added another Valkyrie and things continued that way for a couple of rounds.

Four hands later, I had won one hand and lost three. Things were starting to escalate really quickly.

Frankie: "I bet an imperial class cruiser."

Me: "I bet two of my specialized Valkyries, the Hawks. Remember those pilots that smoked two of your carriers using nothing more than a dingy with two cannons in the simulation battle last week? Those were Hawks."

Grimes: "I bet a Latvide crystal twice the size of the one you are using to power the Ark."

Shadow: "I bet this ancient relic."

Frankie: "Are you fucking kidding me? Do we look like we are history fanatics who give a damn about such things?"

Shadow: "Use a specialized matter spectrograph to scan it."

Frankie was still scoffing until he used a small device to scan the relic, but after he looked at the results on the small screen, his expression changed completely from ridicule to shock. "Holy shit! That thing is completely out of phase with the rest of the universe! Its almost like it doesn't even exist! How the fuck did you get something like this?"

Shadow: "Is it valuable enough to use as a bet?"

Frankie: "It is. Betsy, it's your turn. Do you have anything with similar value? Maybe you can bet one of your Oracles?"

Me: "I will not bet an Oracle. The cost of making and training one in terms of both resources and time is astronomical."

Grimes: "So, are you out Bee?"

Me: "I will not bet an Oracle, but I am willing to bet the method used to make one."

Things were getting more and more interesting when my communicator started making a shrill noise. Frankie looked at me reproachfully and said, "I thought you said that we should all turn off our communicators?"

"Don't look at me like that, I did turn off my communicator. Someone must be trying to get through to me using the emergency channels. I'm afraid that I must take this call."

I picked up the annoying little device and accepted the incoming call, "This better be the end of the world."

A surprisingly calm female voice answered, "Ma'am, one of our end-of-days protocols have indeed been triggered. There is a large temporal flux originating from sector 6A. The waves of disturbance seem to be originating from the home of one of our shadow assets, but the more worrying matter is that the disturbances seem to be escalating exponentially."

Very few things in life make me feel fear. At that moment, I found one of those very few things."How advanced is the temporal decay? What is the projected time for complete collapse?"

"If nothing changes, complete temporal collapse will occur in less than four days."

Less than four days? We had less than four days before the entire universe collapsed? What the fuck happened? "Wait, did you say sector 6A? That is near the southern border of the New Abyssinian settlement, right? The only shadow asset we have in that area is that programmer. Is he the one responsible for all this?"

"The shadow asset's name is Jonathan Joseph Gates. He was a gifted programmer that we were very interested in, but unfortunately, psychological tests showed that he was too unstable to bring into our organization. Since his work was deemed to be too important to just ignore, a caretaker was assigned to him and he unwittingly became one of our shadow assets."

"Who was assigned as his caretaker?"

"The codes he produced were essential in a lot of our projects so he was given top priority. As such, we appointed our most competent Valkyrie as his caretaker, Valkyrie alpha-1."

"Athena? You assigned him with Athena? What is her status?"

For the first time, the calm female voice hesitated before answering,"Athena's condition is abnormal but she doesn’t appear to be in any immediate danger. Jonathan Gates on the other hand has suffered brain death. The source of the temporal disturbance seems to be a machine at his home that I cannot fully understand. Ma'am, I am Oracle alpha-1, code name Pythia, and even I can't make heads or tails of the situation here. My recommendation is that you come to the scene personally."

I put down the communicator and looked at the three people in front of me trying to pretend like they didn't hear anything. "Don't even try to feign ignorance. I'm assuming that you all heard every word of my conversation. Gentlemen, I'm afraid we are going to have to cut this game short. Stone, I need your expertise in analyzing the mysterious machine, so you are coming with me. In fact, maybe it is better if you all came with me."

They all quickly agreed and a few minutes later, all four of us were in a shuttle heading to New Abyssinia.

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A forty minute flight later, we landed on the private shuttle-pad of Gate's estate. It was clear that Jonathan had done well as a programmer. His home was a veritable mansion built into the summit of the Entoto Mountains, but that didn't come as a surprise. According to the reports I read on the genius programmer, Jonathan Joseph Gates or JJ as he is known to his friends, owned the patents to several programs that would allow him to make millions without lifting a single finger. In fact, he probably would have been one of the wealthiest people on earth if he didn't donate the lion's share of his income to charities around the world.

After the shuttle landed and the house's anti-radiation shield closed above our heads, Grimes was the first person out of the shuttle and he found himself face to face with a frail looking little girl whose milky white eyes lacked irises and pupils.

"Umm....what is happening? What is a child doing here?"

His surprise and perplexment was understandable. People usually had similar reactions when they first met Pythia.

"Everybody, I would like to introduce to you our top oracle, Pythia. She was the very first oracle that we had ever produced and as you can see, our attempts to maximize her thinking capabilities using genetic manipulation had unintended consequences. Her growth is permanently stunted at this stage and she is completely blind. We have fixed these problems when we produced subsequent oracles, mainly thanks to the efforts of Pythia herself, but even with her handicap, Pythia is the most valuable member of my organization."

Pythia smiled shyly and said, "Thank you for the compliment ma'am. Now if you can follow me, the machine that is causing the temporal anomaly is down this hallway. That is also where we will find Athena and the shadow asset."

She led us down the corridor at a brisk pace. She had no problem navigating the hallway that was filled with various curios, knick knacks and other obstructions without tripping or running into things which obviously surprised Frankie so I answered his unasked question, "She really is completely blind, but she has devised a way to transcend the condition. Do you see that backpack she is carrying? It has various sensors scanning the area around her at all times and it sends this data to her in the form of small vibrations on her back. She uses these small vibrations and the raw power of her mind to create a real-time, three-dimensional rendering of her surroundings. She may be "blind", but she is able to see more than any of us can."

I had just finished explaining Pythia's unique way of "seeing" when we finally arrived at our destination and the scene playing out before my very eyes left me shocked to the point of disbelief.

I thought that it was strange that Pythia was being cagey about the state of Athena when she was reporting the situation, but now that I was seeing it for myself, I finally understood the difficulty that she was facing. A temporal disturbance that threatened to destroy the universe was hard enough to believe, but what was happening right before my eyes was completely beyond comprehension.

Athena, arguably the greatest Valkyrie we have ever made, was crying.