**Chapter Three: The Seeds are Born**

**Year 2054, New Abyssinia, East Africa**

**Natalia Gates/ Valkyrie 1/ Athena**

"I have always known that you were an agent for the Human Race Preservation Agency......"

"I was nothing but a mission to you, but I still married you and let myself fall in love with you....."

"You are just pretending to be something you are not, but I allowed myself to be fooled, to enjoy a fantasy. Does that make me a moron?"

"It was just a hologram. Funny thing is, even now, I can't bear to see you get hurt...."

"I hope you will find someone that you will love as much as I loved you......"

Jonathan’s final words buzzed around in my head like a swarm of angry bees. Each syllable out of his mouth felt like a needle that was cruelly stabbing directly into my heart. Wave after wave of pain unlike anything I have ever experienced before washed over me, unrelenting and unforgiving as it drowned me in sorrow.

I am not very familiar with nightmares. Dreams are constructs of the human mind, something made from half-remembered memories and half-forgotten thoughts, but I am not human. I looked like a human being, I talked like a human being, and I acted like a human being, but I am nothing but a highly advanced machine. I was created as an organic tool made for the sole purpose of serving my creator, at least that was what I was taught since I was ‘born’ in the lab.

These were the simple facts of my life: I am not human; I was designed to be emotionless and completely obedient to my creator; I never have dreams or nightmares. I thought that all of these things were inviolable, immutable truths.

But if these so called ‘facts’ were really immutable, then why was I feeling fear? Why did I stop caring about my mission and even my creator? Why did I suddenly find myself stuck in this nightmare?

A few minutes ago, I thought that I had everything under my control and the world made sense. I had believed that I had Joseph dancing in the palm of my hands. I thought that I was successfully deceiving him, but that illusion was ripped apart before my eyes and all I could do was watch in dismay. In the end, I found out that the only person I was deceiving was myself.

I sat on the floor where I had landed after I was blasted backwards by the strange blue pulse. I just sat there with my back against the wall, staring at the person who I had discovered to be the most important person to me, too bad that it had taken me too long to figure that out. I looked into his emerald green eyes, but I couldn’t find a trace of the man I loved. His eyes were still open but there was nothing in them.

I continued to sit on the floor, paralyzed by fear. I felt something warm and wet running down my cheek. At first I thought it was blood. Had I injured myself when I hit the wall? I subconsciously touched my cheek with my hand and brought it in front of my face. For a second, I was completely confused. Why wasn’t my blood red? Why did it suddenly turn colorless? But then it finally clicked; the thing on my face wasn’t blood, it was tears.

The realization that I was crying was the final straw that broke the camel’s back. The idea that I could even react in such a way made me break out into hysterical laughter. How the mighty have fallen! I was once hailed the most lethal weapon in the agency, the infamous White Oleander. Even amongst my own kind, I was respected as the best. I was even given the name of the goddess Athena beside my designation as Valkyrie-1, but now I was crying like a child? It was freaking hilarious. Peals of shrill, insane sounding laughter rang out from my throat and even to my own ears it sounded wrong, the discordant noise was grating against my own nerves, but I couldn’t stop. Eventually the laughter turned into a chocking noise which finally turned into sobbing.

That was how Pythia found me: sitting in the corner, in the fetal position, bawling like a baby.

“Athena? Athena? Please respond.”

Pythia was a first generation creation, just like me. For all intents and purposes, we were practically sisters. Unfortunately, she was born with some physical defects. She has learned how to function despite her disabilities, but there were some times when her methods failed her, like now. Pythia used an ingenious method of echolocation to “see” even though she was blind, but this method had a flaw when it came to detecting liquids so she had no clue that I was crying. Combining the fact that she couldn’t see my tears with the fact that her mind was inherently logic oriented, it probably never even occurred to her that I might be in my present situation.

“Natalia.”

I could see that my one word response had confused her. She tilted her head in puzzlement like a confused puppy and asked, “What does that mean?”

“My name is Natalia. I am no longer Athena.”

She paused for a second, but it only took her that second to figure out the meaning to my words. “You are free?”

“I’m free. I am no longer a Valkyrie.”

“But how? When? All of the systems installed inside of you are functioning properly, how can you be free?”

That made me laugh. You don’t usually see this kind of bewilderment in an oracle very often, let alone the smartest of all the oracles.

“It was Jonathan. We underestimated him. We thought he was just a gifted programmer. We were sorely mistaken. He probably set me free during our honeymoon. There was a large solar storm that day and all of the signals were down. He probably deactivated my control module and replaced its signal with a dummy signal. The funny part is that none of us noticed, not even me. I was free and I was feeling things I shouldn’t have, I was feeling real emotions for the first time in my life, but I chocked it up to ‘good acting’. I was no longer a marionette to our mother. He had cut my strings and set me free, but I still continued to act as if I was her damn puppet. Why didn’t he tell me? If only he just…” I couldn’t continue talking; the rest of my words stuck in my throat as deep regret made me start crying again.

Pythia frowned for a moment then chose to ignore me; I guess she decided I wasn’t worth the trouble anymore. She approached Jonathan and the machine he was sitting on before she started taking out several tools and began pointing them at the machine then at Jonathan himself. The readings she was getting must have been bad because her frown only grew deeper as time passed.

A few minutes later, she left the room with a very gloomy expression on her face and returned with four people following behind her.

All four were people that I was quite familiar with, especially the second woman that came through the door. Her name was Beatrice Queen, and for a lack of better words, she was my mother, my creator, but above all, she used to be my master. As for the rest, all three of them were people wreathed in a dangerous and threatening aura: the mechanic Frank Stone, the general Arnold Grimes, and the information specialist only known as Shadow.

When I realized who they were, my training automatically kicked in and I subconsciously got into a battle stance. Even though I was distraught, the instincts that had been drilled into me through years of training were triggered. I crouched down low while my mind quickly analyzed the situation. Once I located the source of the danger, my eyes darted around trying to find something I could use as a weapon. My sight immediately landed on the gun that I had dropped earlier. After gauging the distance and deciding that it was my best option, I performed a smooth roll and got up with the gun already pointed at them.

The surprised expression that mother had when she first came into the room quickly morphed into one of pure fury as she started to shout with spittle flying everywhere, “What is the meaning of this? Are you actually pointing a gun at me? You know that I can fry your brain before you can even pull the trigger, right? I don’t care if you are Valkyrie-1 or Valkyrie-99, I will not hesitate to destroy you.”

A threat that would have made me quiver in the past now meant less than nothing to me. I smiled provocatively at her and replied, “Go ahead.”

The bitch actually took me at my word and pressed a button on her right wrist, a button that all Valkyries knew and feared, the button known as the kill switch. She even had a truly unpleasant smirk on her face as she waited for me to die, but after a few seconds, her smug expression turned into one of confusion and then fear. She started to repeatedly press the button on her wrist in panic, but she eventually gave up when she realized that the button had no effect.

“It doesn’t matter if I can’t kill you now. There are multiple contingencies that will not allow you to hurt me, so it is only a matter of time before we hunt you down and kill you.”

My provocative smile only grew wider as I replied, “Really? How much do you want to bet on that? An arm? Maybe a leg?” I could almost see the thought being born in her head as it finally occurred to her that I might just possibly be completely free of her so called “contingencies”, but it was too late by then. I pulled the trigger of the gun after I pointed it squarely at her shoulder joint, and her right arm was nearly blown clean off. The blood from the fairly catastrophic gun-shot wound splattered all over General Arnold Grimes, soiling his neat blue uniform. He looked down at his formerly pristine uniform and said, “Shit! I just had these dry cleaned!”

Frank Stone was so exasperated that he slapped himself in the head with his non-metal hand. “She is a Valkyrie, one of the deadliest agents in the world, and not only has she just shot Beatrice, but she is now pointing a gun at us. I think there are problems that outweigh your dry-cleaning issues.”

The two sounded like they were just having a normal conversation, but I knew better than to underestimate them. They were trying to distract me from noticing that “Shadow” had already vanished from my sight. They were also trying to hide the fact that General Grimes had taken out a gun from a holster behind his back under the guise of freaking out about his uniform and Stone’s metal arm was almost imperceptibly shifting around, transforming into a weapon.

Shadow’s attack came first, a knife being thrust from directly behind me, but I had already studied how he fights so I was ready for him. I grabbed the knife’s handle with his hand still on it and performed a classic over the shoulder judo throw on him, disarming him in the process. By the time I was done, both Grimes and Stone were pointing their weapons directly at my face. I was going to shoot at Stone while throwing the knife I took from Shadow at Grimes when my body suddenly stopped obeying me. At first I thought that one of the “contingencies” in my body had activated, but then I noticed that both Grimes and Stone were frozen too.

“That is enough. We do not have the luxury to waste time like this.”

It was Pythia. She was pointing a small device towards us while calmly speaking. “I know that you probably hate mother right now, but you have to listen to me Natalia. Believe it or not, we all want the same thing. Natalia, you want to save Jonathan. I can see that you think that it is impossible, but I can assure you that it is not. Mother, you want to stop this instance of the universe from disappearing into non-existence. What the two of you haven’t figured out yet is that you need each other to achieve each of your goals.”

When I heard what she said, I felt like a bomb exploded in my head. Jonathan wasn’t gone? I could save Jonathan?

Pythia continued to talk, and I focused all my attention on her, afraid that I would miss something.

“Natalia, you need technology from our organization and even some from Mr. Stone’s personal stock to go after the pieces of Jonathan’s consciousness that have been scattered through the past. If you bring back all the pieces, I will be able to put those pieces back into Jonathan’s body, and he will be able to live again. Mother, you need Natalia because she was irradiated with a wave of Takyons that are the same frequency as the fragments of Jonathan that were sent back in time. She is the only person who is able to locate and go after those fragments. She is the only one able to stop the pieces of him from destroying this instance of the universe. Without her, we can’t find where or when the pieces are.”

Mother was on the floor, still dumbly staring at her mutilated arm, but Pythia’s words finally seemed to reach her. Her face was looking pale from blood loss and she was obviously in pain, but she still managed to say, ”Fine. You can be with your little boyfriend after you get him back.”

I was understandably suspicious that she was suddenly so magnanimous when I had just shot her. It seemed that Pythia had similar ideas. “I’m sure that Natalia won’t believe that without any guarantees, so here is the guarantee; if the safety of Jonathan or Natalia is compromised in any way by Beatrice, be it directly or indirectly, I have arranged for a cache of documents detailing all the actions of the organization known as “Ourboros” to be released to the public. The only person who can stop this release is Natalia. In five days, if this universe is still here, that means that Natalia has succeeded. If she is satisfied that she and her husband are unharmed, she will stop the release of the files. She will continue to do so until The Ark has launched and this stops being an issue. As an Oracle, I am incapable of purposely lying, so his should be a good enough guarantee.”

She was right. It was a great guarantee. There was only one question in my head: why was Pythia helping me?