**Chapter Four: Dealing with Emotions**

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

**Natalia Gates/ Valkyrie 1/ Athena**

Pythia quickly took complete control of the situation. She disarmed all of us then proceeded to tell us exactly what was going to happen and what we were going to do, and since Stone, Grimes, and I were all frozen like statues, all we could do was to stand there and listen to her obediently.

“The paralysis should wear off in a few seconds, but that doesn’t mean that I am not able to immobilize you again. If any of you exhibit any suspicious behavior or make any sudden moves, I will not hesitate to paralyze you again, and this time I will make sure that the paralysis is permanent, understood?”

As I listened to her threaten us with the same carefree tone one would use when talking about the weather, I started to get some feeling back into my body. Unfortunately, that feeling was pain. I went from standing rigid like a statue to lying on the floor, writhing in agony.

“As the paralysis wears off, there will be some residual pain. This is perfectly normal and is the result of your nervous system resuming its normal function.”

For some reason, Pythia’s blasé attitude annoyed me to no end. I knew that she didn’t do anything wrong. Judging from how she acted so far, it can even be said that she was helping me a lot, but some part of me found her emotionless white eyes looking down on me utterly irksome, not to mention the fact that she was coldly analyzing my pain with her emotionless voice. Some part of me wanted to do nothing more than to strangle her delicate little neck just to get some reaction out of her.

I closely examined these strange and unreasonable emotions, but I couldn’t find a way to explain them. They were clearly irrational and illogical, but they were just as real as the reasonable and well-thought-out ideas in my mind. Before today, I would have simply ignored them or even denied their very existence, but I couldn’t turn a blind eye to them anymore. I could no longer deny that they were affecting me; affecting the way I think, coloring the way I saw things, and influencing the way I acted.

Is this what it meant to be human? Is being human synonymous with being perpetually under the influence of emotions? Since I realized that I was no longer an emotionless robot under my mother’s control, I had been bombarded by various emotions; I felt unimaginable agony when I thought that I had lost Jonathan, I had felt incredible rage when I laid eyes upon the woman who was responsible for my cursed existence, I felt a tremendous surge of hope when I found out that I had the chance to save Jonathan, and now I was feeling annoyance for almost no reason at all.

It was strange. Jonathan ripped my heart apart when he unilaterally decided to destroy himself to save humanity. By all rights, I should have hated him, but I didn’t. Instead of despising him for the pain he caused me, I loved him more than I could possibly describe. On the other hand, my mother created me. I owed my very existence to her, but all I felt for her was loathing and animosity. Pythia was the closest thing I had to a sister and she seemed to be trying very hard to help me, but all I felt when I saw her expressionless face was revulsion.

That was when I suddenly realized why I was reacting so negatively towards Pythia. Grimes, Stone, and even mother had faces that were filled with different expressions. Each of their faces were either warped into a mask of pain, contorted into a grimace of anger, or covered in a scowl of resentment. Their faces were a stark counterpoint to Pythia’s visage which was nothing but a blank slate. Her bland, expressionless, almost vacant appearance looked like nothing more than a façade made from skin, a disguise that hid an emotionless robot. Her face reminded me of the face that I had to look at in the mirror every morning, a face that I had come to loathe, and above all a face I had come to fear.

It was another odd contradiction. I have been utterly miserable starting from the time I gained my freedom and the ability to feel emotions, but at the same time, I was completely terrified of going back to becoming the emotionless zombie I used to be. I felt great pain because of the loss of Jonathan, but at the same time, I was afraid that I would lose that sense of pain and loss. I was afraid to lose my connection with him. Not only was he precious to me, but the feelings I had for him were precious to me too. The famous poet laureate Alfred Tennyson once said that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. I had always found that particular quote confusing, but I think I finally understood what he was trying to say.

My moment of enlightenment and realization was rudely interrupted by the loud bellow of an enraged animal, or at least that was what it sounded like to me. It was actually the bellow of an enraged General. Apparently Arnold Grimes’s paralysis had also worn off, and he was now enjoying the wonderful after-effects.

“Son of a bitch! Why the hell did you do that? Frankie and I had this little lass dead to rights! We had everything under control! There was no reason to blast us all with that strange crap, and what the hell is that thing anyways? Why do I feel like my entire body is one giant sore muscle cramping up?”

Pythia smiled a strange smile that wasn’t really a smile and replied noncommittally, “I am surprised you didn’t recognize this particular technology. You used a larger version of this little device to wipe out almost all of the indigenous Africans from this land and all the nearby countries of central and western Africa. Have you forgotten your great act of patriotic heroism so easily, General Grimes?”

He immediately stopped complaining after he realized what she was talking about. He even stopped groaning and writhing in pain. He just shriveled up into a small ball with his knees against his chest, and I could have sworn I saw his eyes glimmering with unshed tears.

Frank Stone, who was using his barely functioning human arm to hold a screwdriver to fiddle around with his mechanical arm which was twitching strangely, stopped what he was doing and looked at Pythia in anger and condemnation. “That was cruel. You know that he has a trauma regarding that. Truth be told, you have been acting strangely from the beginning. You probably knew that your little friend over there was dangerous, but you failed to warn us. You also had that nifty little gadget that could have stopped her at any time, but you just stood there and watched as your mother got shot. In fact, the only time that you did act was when your little friend was in danger. I’m starting to wonder whose side you are on, Pythia.”

Mother finished applying an auto-bandage on her grizzly wound, temporarily stemming the flow of blood, and also pointed an accusatory stare at Pythia. “I was starting to get curious about that myself.”

Pythia seemed unconcerned by the vaguely threatening looks and calmly replied, “Of course I am on mother’s side. The reason I didn’t tell you that Valkyrie-1 had gone rogue is that you would have reacted drastically. You would have probably brought half of the Valkyries in Valhalla, if not all of them, in order to subdue Valkyrie-1. Mother is not exactly known for her subtlety. The only times she doesn’t use the scorched earth policy is when she uses the scorched and salted earth policy. If she had attempted to use her usual schemes in this situation, things would have become irredeemably ruined and this instance of our universe would surely be doomed. I apologize for my inaction which led to you being shot, but mother, if a gunshot wound is all you will have to suffer, it is a small price to pay when weighing it against the fate of the universe.”

Mother didn’t seem very pleased that Pythia had let her get shot on purpose. “What are you talking about? Have you gone mad?”

“I am perfectly sane. It is just that you have not fully understood the situation here. Jonathan Gates has sent fragments of his consciousness hurtling back in time in the form of tachyon seeds. These “seeds” were designed to inhabit a host and after implanting themselves, they will immediately start influence the way the host thinks. By sacrificing himself, Jonathan Gates has created a viable way to change the past. Has it worked? The answer isn’t a simple, straightforward yes or no. The temporal decay that has started in this area would suggest that it has succeeded, but it also demonstrates that it is not impossible to stop him before it is too late. According to my calculations, the “tachyon seeds” that Jonathan has created will degrade and disappear in four days. Coincidentally, or perhaps as a result of this, four days is also the projected time for the complete temporal collapse of this reality. The only solution that I can think of to save this reality is to stop the “seeds” that have been sown by Jonathan Gates. The only problem is that we have no idea where or when these seeds are located. As I have said earlier, Valkyrie-1, or rather Natalia as she prefers to be called now, is the only one capable of doing this. Not only do we need her to be alive, but we also need her to be motivated in order to accomplish this task. The only way I could see that happening is by assuring that she would have Jonathan back if she succeeds. She seems to have developed a strange attachment to him and the promise of getting him back appears to be the only incentive that would get her to be fully dedicated to this mission. My actions were aimed at guarding her safety and gaining her goodwill. It might seem that I was acting against you, but I assure you that I am trying to do my best to help you.”

Her explanation removed a lot of doubts from my mind. I had been suspicious because of the bizarrely favorable way she was acting towards me, but now I knew why she was so determined to “help” me. To be honest, it was easier to trust her now that I understood her real motives, but knowing Pythia, she was probably aiming for this outcome starting from the very beginning. Oracles are pretty deft at manipulating people and situations as they see fit, and Pythia was indisputably the best oracle that has ever been created. Her skills in manipulation make other oracles look like immature children. Her abilities to pull strings from behind the scenes were reminiscent of renowned maestro composers of the olden days who were able to control entire orchestras with but a flick of their wrists.

What this means is that Pythia is one of the most conniving and dishonest people I know despite the fact that she is unable to tell an outright lie. She overcame this handicap by using facts like a weapon. She would tell you just enough pieces of information so that you would reach the conclusion she wants you to reach. Over the years, I have learned to always remain cautious when dealing with her. It was possible that this little performance might just be a trick specifically intended to lower my guard.

I was still suspicious of her, but when I carefully remembered what she had said and the exact words she had used, I was slightly reassured. She had explicitly said that she would guarantee Jonathan’s safety while I was gone and even made sure that I had a way to escape with him when I returned. In the end, I had no choice but to trust her if I was to have any chance of saving Jonathan.

All I could do was grit my teeth, cross my fingers, and go along with whatever plans she had for me.