**Chapter Five: The Hunt Begins**

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

**Natalia Gates/ Valkyrie 1/ Athena**

None of us were very happy with the arrangement, but we finally decided to establish a temporary truce based on our shared objectives. As Pythia had pointed out, my main goal was to rescue Jonathan and by doing so, I would also be serving their interests which lay somewhere in the area of self-preservation.

Once we decided to table our hostilities for a later time, our next course of action was to figure out how to send me back in time as soon as possible. According to Pythia’s predictions, we had a little less than four days before this universe suffers a complete temporal collapse, and more importantly, four days was also the amount of time Jonathan had before he disappears into nonexistence. With what little time we had left counting down so rapidly, we were understandably a little flustered. Thankfully, we had somebody who was as steady as a mountain minding the tiller of our little sinking ship, so we didn’t completely lose our heads and start running around like headless chickens.

Pythia once again took control of the situation and promptly herded all of us into her personal transport without even explaining where she was taking us. She simply stuffed all of us into the rear passenger compartment of the shuttle and took the steering wheel at the front. Grimes tried to make some inappropriate joke about letting a blind little girl drive, but a single imperious look from Pythia made him freeze like a small animal under the gaze of a predator and quelled any further comments from him. The rest of the journey was spent in awkward silence. We weren’t trying to kill each other anymore, but we weren’t exactly best friends either, so we didn’t really have much to chat about.

Mercifully, the ride was short and it came to an abrupt end when the shuttle shuddered as it landed. The viewing panels had been turned off, so none of us actually knew where we were, but all of us were in a rush to get free of the cramped space of the shuttle so we hurriedly made our escape, ignoring the possibility that there might have been dangers awaiting outside.

Once I untangled myself from mother and her cohorts, I looked around and found myself in a completely unfamiliar warehouse. If I had to use one word to describe it, I would probably pick massive. The place was large enough to fit a decently sized neighborhood inside of it, complete with school and park. From the looks of it, the place used to be an abandoned hangar before someone repurposed it for something else, something slightly more industrial. It was filled with a whole plethora of machinery assembled into what looked like a complex chain of assembly lines. Looking around at the gigantic industrial complex, I noticed that there wasn’t a single living human being in the entire building, but that didn’t mean that the place was empty. Quite the opposite really, the place was bustling with activity.

Robots. The entire place was jam packed with robots. There were big ones that were nearly two stories high, small ones that could barely reach my knees, but the overwhelming majority of them where strangely humanoid looking androids. All of these different robots where milling about like ants and working on the different machines. It was a bizarre scene; machines working on machines. It was also very dramatic. There were bright lights flashing everywhere and occasionally one or two dazzling sparks can be seen as metals crashed together. The metal gears made a low rumbling grinding noise, different things banged into each other with thunderous results, metals let out earsplitting squeals under heavy pressure. All in all, the place was very loud and hectic.

For a few seconds, I was a gob smacked by the outlandishness and enormity of what I was seeing, and it took me a while to fully process everything. Judging by their reactions, Mother and Grimes were also having trouble trying to take in everything they were seeing. The only person who acted differently was Frank Stone. He was also surprised but for a completely different set of reasons.

“Wait a minute, this is my workshop. What are we doing in my workshop? How did we even get here? How did you know about its location? How did you get past my security system?”

His eyelids were twitching dangerously and he looked like he was going to have some sort of mental breakdown as he furiously questioned Pythia. She, on the other hand, was perfectly composed as she answered, “We do not have time for that right now. All that you need to know is that I need to use your cold fusion reactor. It is the only thing with enough power to run and sustain our first generation temporal flux generator.”

She had barely finished speaking when two shuttles landed behind us. One was a rather large and bulky looking cargo carrier while the other one was a small and slick personal transport. The two vehicles might have been polar opposites of each other, but the two women who jumped out of each shuttle were eerily similar; two beautiful women who looked about twenty with the same green eyes and chin length blonde hair. I was very familiar with those features, so I didn’t need to see their identical pink and white jump suits to know that they were Oracles.

The two of them politely greeted mother before they bowed deeply towards Pythia and kneeled before her like obeisant servants. Technically they should have been more respectful to mother, but the Oracles were all like that; they obeyed mother, but they were almost fanatical when it came to their devotion to Pythia. It was almost like they worshipped her as their goddess. The Oracle that had gotten out of the small shuttle presented a silver case with a black symbol of infinity painted on top of it up to Pythia like a sacred offering while the one from the large shuttle offered up a key fob in the same grandiose manner.

Pythia first took the silver case and opened it. Inside lay a small gray metal ball that was about as big as my closed fist. Pythia picked it up and turned towards me. ”We do not have a lot of time, so I am going to try to keep all of my explanations as brief as possible. This little device here is from our immortality project. One of the things that we Oracles were tasked with researching is to find out if there is a way to live beyond a normal human’s lifespan. One of the methods we devised to get over the limitations of an aging mortal body is to simply move the mind to a younger body. Unfortunately, when we tried inserting a foreign consciousness into a brain that it did not belong to, the brain rejected it and the subject died. Even though our experiments failed, we did manage to develop a device capable of storing a human consciousness in a static state. This little metal ball contains a special material inside of it that is able to mimic the neural activity of the human brain. I am going to reprogram this device to only extract tachyons so you can safely extract the pieces of Jonathan’s consciousness, wherever it might be. The operation of the device is simple; just place these two metal pads on the temples of the subject and the machine will do the rest. The only important prerequisite is that the subject must be fully conscious at the time.”

She handed the silver case with the metal ball to me which I received gingerly. “So you have never successfully implanted a consciousness into a brain?”

“We have never successfully implanted a foreign consciousness, but you have to remember that we are just returning Mr. Gates’s consciousness back into his own brain so rejection will not be an issue.”

She then took the key fob from the second Valkyrie and led us all to the large shuttle. With a press of a button, she opened the back door of the shuttle to reveal a mag-lev forklift carrying a large blue plastic crate. She got into the forklift and made us all follow her as she drove it into the depth of the strange robotic city.

In the heart of the large complex, we stopped before a colossal door that looked like it could stop even gods, let alone normal human weaponry. Pythia turned towards Frank Stone who just sighed in defeat and did something to the door which made it open.

Inside the intimidating door was a large egg shaped device with lots of wires coming out of it. The strange silvery blue egg was emitting an eerie glow that surrounded it like a halo. Frank went up to a console in front of the egg and started to type furiously before turning towards us with a large smile on his face. “You should all be very proud that you are here standing before what might just possibly be the greatest invention in the history of mankind. This is my proudest creation, the cold-fusion reactor.”

I don’t know what he was expecting, maybe he was expecting shock and awe, or maybe he was expecting applause. If he was expecting something like that, then he was sorely disappointed. Pythia ignored him and drove the forklift up to the giant egg. She lowered the plastic crate that the forklift was carrying onto the ground and started to unpack it with the help of the two other Oracles. Together, they quickly assembled a silver capsule and connected it to one of the cables coming out of the cold-fusion reactor.

Pythia then then turned to me. “This capsule is one of the very few working prototypes made by our time-travel division. As you know, the concept of time travel was abandoned since we believed that it was a fruitless endeavor, but before it was abandoned, one of the things we discovered about the nature of time is that time could be treated like a field. Everything that exists at this moment is vibrating at the exact same frequency, but because everything is vibrating simultaneously, it is almost impossible to detect. We have conclusively proved that this vibration is what keeps us “stuck” in the space-time field. This capsule stops whatever is inside of it from vibrating. Imagine that the vibration that we are talking about acts as an anchor that keeps us in the here and now. If the vibration of an object stops, that object will literally fall through a crack of space and time, but you are different Natalia. When we stop the vibration that corresponds with the frequency of “here and now”, there is another frequency that will keep you from simply vanishing. When you were hit by that pulse of tachyons, you automatically started to resonate with them, so when we put you in that capsule, you will be drawn towards wherever and whenever the pieces of Jonathan’s consciousness are. We do not have a lot of time so I will need to perform a few calibrations on your body to prepare it for the journey. This is going to be a very delicate procedure so I will ask that we not be disturbed in the meantime.”

After she finished speaking, she grabbed my hand and took me to an empty side room. She closed the door behind us and started to lightly rub some gel on my wrists, the back of my knees, elbows, and neck. While she was doing that, something unimaginable happened; her perpetually emotionless visage displayed an actual human emotion. Her mouth twitched and spread out into a sad little smile.

“I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry for what happened.”

At first I couldn’t comprehend what was going on, but then it finally dawned on me. “You are also free? You found a way to break free of mother’s control?”

“That is not quite right. The control modules have never worked on me.”

I was so astonished by her revelation that all I came out of my mouth was a single word. “Why?”

Even though it was just a single word, it was chocked full of meaning. If she was free, why did she stay with mother? Why didn’t she escape? Why did she continue to help her? Why did she continue to further mother’s agendas? Why did she let her make more of the Valkyries and Oracles who were cursed existences born into slavery?

“Mother wasn’t always like she is now. Once upon a time, she was actually quite similar to your Jonathan. She was also quite brilliant but instead of electronics and programming, she was a genius in the field of genetic engineering and biotechnology. When the great cataclysm happened, she also lost the ones she loved. Her husband died in the solar storms, but what really devastated her was what happened to her daughter. Mother was lucky enough to escape the disasters. What she didn’t know was that she was pregnant at the time. When she later found out, she was over the moon with happiness. She had lost her husband, but now she felt like she was getting a piece of him back. Unfortunately, even though she had escaped the solar storms, she had been exposed to a fair amount of radiation. When her daughter was born, she was deformed, unhealthy and weak. Mother did everything she could to save her daughter, but she died before she reached her first birthday. That was when mother decided to bring back her daughter using her research into genetic engineering. If it was just a matter of cloning her daughter, that would have been easy but she wanted to cure her. She wanted her to be healthy, strong and have as many advantages as possible. She wanted her daughter to be as blessed with as many gifts as she was cursed in the past. The first results of her work were the two of us. You turned out perfect; a beautiful baby girl, but I turned out like this, a freak. For a few years, she was happy. She truly loved you while she tolerated my existence, but slowly she started to realize that you and I weren’t really the daughter she had lost. She started to slip back into depression. That was when a powerful group that called themselves “Ouroborus” noticed her research and its potential. They poisoned her mind with their rhetoric and pushed her down a dark path. You weren’t old enough to remember all this, but my mind had developed very early. I was just a child at that point, but I had matured enough to realize that I was nothing but a failed experiment while you were perfect and received all the love and affection. I grew jealous and bitter, but I had one ability that you didn’t. I was able to learn quickly, understand many things, and create wondrous inventions, and out of a misguided sense of resentment, I did something unforgivable; I created the control modules. I thought that if I helped mother with whatever she wanted, she would start caring for me. At that time, she was obsessed with finding a way to control people, so I made the control modules for her. What I didn’t know was that mother’s mind had already been twisted by the words of Ouroborus, so she didn’t even hesitate to plant the modules inside you and me. She then proceeded to create a whole army of Valkyries and Oracles using us as templates. Eventually she became the woman you know today. As for me, I acted like the modules worked on me. I watched as my mother enslaved my sister with the collar that I had created, and all I did was bury my head in the sand. I am sorry Natalia. I am sorry for what I did.”

At that moment, Pythia was no longer the legendary, awe inspiring Oracle, she was just a confused little girl saying sorry to her sister. I wanted to be mad at her, but I just couldn’t. Besides, I had no time to think about this right now.

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Because this might be the last time that we ever get to see each other. The chances that you will succeed are abysmally low. If you don’t collect all the pieces of Jonathan before your time is up, you fail. If you do something that alters the flow of history too much, you fail. I’m not even sure that it you should be doing this. Jonathan has gone back in time to try and fix all of the crappy stuff that has happened. I’m not sure we should stop him. He could prevent the world from becoming the disaster that it is today.”

When I realized that Pythia was finished applying the medication, I got out of the side room with Pythia following right behind. I went directly to the capsule, and as everyone looked on, I jumped inside.

“I don’t care about the world. The world could burn in hell for all I care. All I am concerned about is Jonathan.”

Pythia just smiled wryly and lowered the lid of the capsule.