

CHAPTER 1

It's sunset, and the sky is aflame, not with clouds or dust, but with the iridescent feathers of a million genehacked passenger pigeons. They soar across the sky like a live impressionist painting in brilliant swirling arcs of tangerine and gold. Their strange cries sound like pebbles tossed against a window, and they move in perfect unison, blocking out the sun.

Amateur coders in Nevada rebuilt the long-extinct pigeon's DNA, then spliced it into something new and bold. Razor-tipped beaks. Metabolic hijacks. Colour-shifting feathers to signal danger to the flock with a single muscle twitch.

Through years of work, they crafted the pigeons to be stronger than their ancestors. They're leaner, smarter, fiercer.

And they made them look like *fire*.

I lean out over the cabin's porch railing, my hips pressed into the wood, squinting through the scope of my father's rifle. Without magnification, the flock is just a blur of stippled colour,

but through the scope, with my ocular tech sharpening my vision, the colours resolve into the wings and chests of individual birds.

‘Come on, little birdy,’ I breathe, squeezing the trigger. The shot echoes off the mountains, and the scent of gunpowder fills the air. That’s homemade powder. Low sulphur, fine grade, nanoprinted in the basement, rigged to fire a tranquillizer dart and bring me down a bird without killing it.

The dart whistles through the air, a mere blur even with my tech. My audio filters peg it at Mach 2, which is far too high. My calculations were wrong again. I look away too late and see the dart hit a pigeon, blowing it into a puff of coloured feathers.

‘Dammit,’ I snap, dropping the rifle, not bothering to flick on the safety. It’s now a thirty-pound paperweight, since I’m officially out of ammo. Well, not if you count the bullet swinging from the chain around my neck. But that’s my insurance bullet, and it only comes off as a last resort.

The dead bird drops like a stone, tumbling down to land on the rocky shore of the cabin’s tiny private lake. The flock shifts direction instantly, letting out a deafening warning cry that echoes off the steep mountain slopes like a hail of gunfire.

‘I know, I know,’ I mutter. The flock scatters angrily, their plumage twitching to crimson, telegraphing the attack. I didn’t *want* to hurt it. The bird was supposed to be a present. A little genehacked pet for my neighbour, Agnes, to keep her company. Now I’ll have to bury it, because I sure as hell won’t eat it. Barely anyone eats meat any more, not since the outbreak.

The last two years have taught us what we could not forget: that animals taste a lot like people.

The porch's wooden railing squeaks as I launch myself over it and jog through the yard to the circle of feathers near the lake. A breeze dances through the knee-high grass, sweeping in across the water, carrying the cries of the pigeons, the chill of the evening and the rich, deep scent of the forest.

It's wild out here. This secluded valley nestled deep in the Black Hills has been my home for the last three years and my sanctuary from the outbreak. Steep, forested mountains rise on either side of the lake, and my ramshackle log cabin sits just a short walk back from the shore. It's so well-hidden that you almost have to know where it is to find it, but close enough to town that I can ride in on my bike. All things considered, it's a perfect place to spend the apocalypse, with only one downside: the comm reception sucks.

'Hey, Bobcat. This . . . Agnes . . .'

I tilt my head as Agnes's elderly voice crackles in my ears, blasting through my subdermal comm-link. She checks up on me nearly every day but refuses to text me. Always calls, even though I can't hear her. I close my eyes, drawing up the mental interface to send a text, but her voice breaks through in a burst of static.

'Urgent . . . danger . . .'

Her voice cuts out. No static, nothing.

I spin round, bolting straight up the side of the mountain.

'Agnes?' I shout. Damn Russian satellites. They're a century old, but they're all we can use now that Cartaxus has taken over every other network on the planet. My comm-link can get texts in the cabin, but every time I want to take a call I have to run half a mile uphill.

Static fills my ears. '. . . reading me . . . Bobcat?'

‘Hang on!’ I yell, racing up the rocky slope. The path between the trees is still wet from last night’s rain. I skid as I race round a switchback, scrambling to keep myself upright.

She might be hurt. She’s all alone. The old girl is armed and tough as nails, but there are things in this world you can’t fight. Things that have no cure.

‘Almost there!’ I shout, forcing myself up the final stretch. I burst into the clearing at the summit and double over. ‘Agnes? Are you OK? Can you hear me?’

A beat of satellite-lag silence hangs in my ears, and then Agnes’s voice returns. ‘I’m fine, Bobcat. Didn’t mean to scare you.’

I drop to my knees in the grass, trying to catch my breath. ‘You nearly gave me a heart attack.’

‘Sorry. But I guess I figured out how to make you answer your comm.’

I roll my eyes and push the sweat-soaked hair from my face. ‘What’s so urgent?’

‘You up on your hill?’

‘Well, I am *now*.’

She chuckles, her voice popping with static. ‘I just got a call from one of the locals. They spotted a jeep out near your place. Big black thing. You see anything from up there?’

I push myself to my feet and scan the forest. From this outlook, on a clear day, I can see for miles. The Black Hills roll out before me, tumbling granite draped with pines, dotted with the flash of lakes and a web of leaf-strewn roads. This time of day two years ago, the highway to the east would have been lit up with a steady stream of headlights from the evening commute. There would have been planes flying into Rapid and the glow of houses

through the trees, but instead the hills are dark, and the highway is an empty stretch of black.

All the houses are shuttered, and the land is dotted with craters. It always makes me sick to see it like this, but it's the only place I can get reception.

'No headlights,' I mutter. 'They might be using infra-red. You sure it was a jeep?'

'Brand new, they said. Has to be Cartaxus.'

The hair on the back of my neck rises. I've never seen a jeep out here before. Cartaxus always sends its troops out in camouflaged trucks, with whining drones for air support. I scan the forest again, straining my ocular tech until my vision starts to glitch.

'I tried calling you,' Agnes says. 'A few times, the last couple of days.'

'I've been in the lab,' I mutter, scanning the roads. 'Trying to make gunpowder.'

'That sounds dangerous.'

A half-smile tugs at my lips, and my fingers twitch instinctively, running over the sensitive, newly regrown skin on my palms. 'There were some minor explosions. Nothing my healing tech couldn't handle.'

Agnes clicks her tongue. '*Bobcat*. When did you last eat?'

'Um . . . yesterday?'

'Do you have clean clothes?'

I glance down at my filthy sweater, my dirt-encrusted jeans. 'Uhh . . .'

'Get yourself over here right now, young lady. I don't like the sound of this jeep, and you need to get out of that godforsaken lab for a night. Right now, you hear me?'

I bite back a laugh. 'OK, Yaya. I'll be there soon.'

'Damn straight you will. And bring your dirty clothes with you.'

The connection clicks off in my ears with a hiss, leaving me grinning. Agnes isn't really my *yaya*, though she certainly acts like it. We don't share DNA, but we've shared food and tears, and ever since the outbreak, that's all that really counts. Sometimes I think the only reason either of us is still alive is that we can't bear the thought of leaving the other alone.

I stretch my arms over my head, scanning the forest one last time before dialling my ocular tech back down. The embedded panel in my forearm that powers my tech chews through a few hundred calories a day even on standby, and food isn't exactly plentiful any more. My vision blurs as my eyes refocus, and it takes me a second to realize there's a plume on the horizon that wasn't there before.

'Uh-oh.'

I freeze, counting the seconds until the *crack* hits my ears. The plume rises before spreading, mushrooming out across the sky. The flock of pigeons fragments into wild, panicked streams, racing away from the billowing cloud. The sound takes fifteen seconds to hit me, which tells me it's three miles away. Too far to make out the details, but I can tell the cloud is a sickly shade of pink.

That's the colour of a human body when its cells are ripped open, blown into mist and spat into the air.

A Hydra cloud.

My stomach lurches. Depending on which way the wind is blowing, this distant cloud just might kill me. One breath is all it

takes. One lungful of swirling, airborne virus particles that will swarm through every cell in your body. You'll get a fever; you'll incubate; then two weeks later you'll go off like a grenade, infecting everyone in a mile-wide radius.

There's no cure, no treatment. There's one way to get immunity, but it's been twenty-six days since I last took a dose.

Agnes's voice crackles in my ears. 'That . . . near you?'

I close my eyes, using a mental command to switch my comm over to text mode. It's slower – I have to focus harder, bringing up each word separately in my mind – but it doesn't need a clear signal.

3 miles, I send. Blowing further east. Probably out of infection radius.

haul out quick, she replies.

I will. She doesn't need to tell me twice.

I pause as I turn back to the trail, watching the cloud drift. It's twice as big as the clouds I first saw in the outbreak, two years ago. The virus is evolving, and the blasts are getting stronger. If they keep growing, pretty soon there won't be anywhere left to hide.

I push the thought away, jogging back down the mountain, trying to dodge the worst of the mud. There's no need to panic about a cloud as far away as this, but without immunity, I can't help but feel a little nervous.

I glance back as I descend into the trees, telling myself that it's miles away, that I'll be fine. I'll go to Agnes's place, and she'll feed me lentils and her disgusting liquorice sweets like she always does. We'll fire up her woodstove and play a game of cards. Simple. Easy. But just as the cabin comes into view, another *crack* tears through the air, and I jerk to a stop.

A second plume shoots up, pink and leaf strewn and terrifying. Close enough that I forget to count the seconds that pass until I hear it. The mist billows into the air like a living, heaving thing, unfurling through the forest, sending the pigeons scattering. The wind is dragging it away from me, but the wind can change in a heartbeat.

This cloud is far too close. I'm going to have to run.

Agnes's name pops up in my vision as I race down the mountain.

another one

I KNOW, I reply, skidding to the bottom of the hill.

dont like this bobcat, she says. shdnt let ur immunity lapse.

There's nothing I can say to that because I know she's right; it was reckless to let myself run out of doses. There was a reason, but thinking about it now makes my cheeks burn with its sheer stupidity.

I bolt up the cabin's stairs to the porch and grab my rucksack and knife, picking up the rifle before throwing it back down. Dead weight. I race out to my bike, an old BMX with a rusted frame that can handle dirt trails like nobody's business. I sling my rucksack over my shoulder, slip my knife into my belt and haul the bike out from the bushes I keep it hidden in. One leg is over it, my grip tight on the handlebars, when an alert from my audio tech sends me flying into a crouch.

Rustling. Nearby. An unenhanced ear wouldn't hear it, but my filters sharpen the sound into slow, heavy footsteps. Laboured and staggering. The way people move when they're infected.

They're just beyond me, in the trees, and they're coming my way.

‘Oh shit,’ I breathe, my hands shaking.

near me, I send to Agnes, my mind spinning so fast that I can barely form the words.

HIDE NOW, she replies.

The command is so unlike her, so frantic and bizarre, that I don’t even pause to question it. I just drop my bike and run.

The cabin is too far, but there’s a willow near the lake, and I haul myself up through the branches, my newly healed palms scraping against the bark. I kick and claw my way to a high branch in a matter of seconds, flying up the tree on sheer adrenaline. As soon as I find my balance, a man crashes through the bushes, and I hold my nose at the exact moment he splashes into the lake.

It’s a blower, no doubt about it. He falls to his knees in the shallows, sucking in a wet, laboured breath. He’s badly wounded. Scarlet rivers run down his arms, trickling from innumerable gashes and bite marks covering his skin. It looks like a mob got him. I can see his teeth through the stringy hole in one cheek, and his eyes are swollen shut, his ears reduced to stumps of cartilage.

He’s bleeding out and feverish. Definitely infected. Second stage, probably a day away from detonating. Even with my fingers clamped over my nose, I can still feel my body starting to shake in response to his scent.

There’s nothing quite like the scent of infection. No odour or perfume matches the sharp, sulphurous clouds that roll off a Hydra victim’s skin. Some people liken it to the scent of burning plastic or the air after a lightning strike. I’ve always thought it smelled like the hot springs I visited as a child. Whatever the

comparison, nobody gets much time to think about it, because as soon as the scent hits you, it takes your breath away.

And that's not all it does.

I grit my teeth, fighting the response building inside me. My fingers curl instinctively, clawing into the bark of the tree. Breathing the scent won't hurt me – blowers aren't infectious until they detonate – but the scent will crawl into my mind, igniting a response that's impossible to control. Even forcing myself to breathe through my mouth, I can still feel it whispering, rising inside me like a curse. It wants me to grab the knife sheathed at my thigh, to drop from my perch in the tree.

To unleash the monster that wakes in me at the merest whiff of infection.

But I don't want to yield to it. I tighten my grip on the tree, shake my head, and invoke my comm-link. *In . . . tree . . . above him*, I send to Agnes.

The man tries to get up, but he's too weak. He falls to his knees, letting out a moan. The wind lifts his scent into the branches, and it hits me like a punch.

u must do it, Agnes replies.

I blink the words away. My chest is shuddering, my vision starting to blur.

no choice bobcat. its the only way

I won't, I write, then delete it, because she's right. Or maybe it's because the scent has me by the throat, shattering my self-control. Either way, there's a cloud less than a mile from me, and there's only one way to guarantee that I'll make it out of this alive. I need immunity, or I'll die. The maths is simple. I draw my knife, my stomach turning at the thought of what I have to do.

The man below me starts to cry, oblivious to my presence. The blood flowing from the bite marks on his skin forms swirls of scarlet in the lake's clear water. A single mouthful of his flesh, choked down in the next few minutes, will give me immunity from the virus for the next two weeks. This is the Hydra virus's cruellest side: it forces the healthy to eat the sick. To hunt and kill and feed on each other to save ourselves. Nature designed this plague as a double-edged sword: it either takes your life, or it takes your humanity.

I shift on the branch, staring down at the man, my knuckles white on the knife. My other hand is still locked on my nose, holding back the scent in a desperate attempt to fight it for just a moment more. My comm-link hisses wildly in my ears. Agnes knows me well enough to guess that I'm hesitating, and she's trying to call me, screaming that he'll be dead soon anyway, that he'd *want* me to do it.

But I don't want to hear it. I don't want to justify this, to keep the circle of death going. This is why I stopped taking doses, why I let my immunity lapse. I just wanted a few precious weeks of something like a normal life, without someone else's blood itching in my veins. I wanted to keep the monster locked away, to rise above my instincts.

But deeper down, the hunger is growing.

This man's sharp, sulphurous scent has clawed its way into my lungs, and my hands are already shaking. It's a neurological response. The scent pounds against my mind like fists against a cracking wall until I can't hold it back any more.

When I finally drop my hand from my nose and let the smell sweep into my lungs, it feels like drawing breath for the first time.

For a moment I'm free, weightless and euphoric, like the moment at the top of a roller-coaster before you hurtle down.

Then it hits. A jolt. A cataclysm of rage, rocketing through my muscles, curling my lips back in a snarl.

My eyes snap down to the man below me, the knife gripped in my hands.

The world blinks to scarlet, and I launch myself into gravity's arms.

CHAPTER 2

Two Years Earlier

‘This looks like fun,’ Dax says. ‘What are you up to, Princess?’

‘If you call me Princess one more time, I’m going to shoot *you* instead.’

The sky is a clear, cerulean blue, the sun pitched high above me, its light catching the feathers of a flock of passenger pigeons. They shimmer gold and white, dazzling as they loop and swirl, filling the air with their strange, percussive cries. I’ve been standing on the cabin’s front porch, aiming my father’s rifle at them for the last five minutes, but I just can’t pull the trigger.

‘You know, Princess, you’re holding it wrong.’

I groan and spin round, but find Dax standing right behind me, and the barrel of the rifle swings into his chest. He grabs it in a flash, flicking on the safety before I can blink. ‘Well,’ he says. ‘I suppose I should have learned to take an Agatta at their word.’

‘Sorry,’ I blurt out, staring at the rifle. ‘I . . . I wasn’t thinking.’

‘Not thinking? Now *that* would be a first.’ He leans the rifle

against the cabin's side and crosses his arms, giving me a playful smile that sends my heart rate skyrocketing.

Dax is my father's lab assistant, and he's lived at the cabin ever since he showed up alone, begging to work with the *great* Dr Lachlan Agatta. He's just seventeen, two years older than me, and he had no references, no degree, but Dax is the kind of guy who's impossible to refuse.

He also happened to be the author of a hepatitis app that my father said was one of the most beautiful pieces of code he'd ever seen.

'I've had some issues with my genkit,' he says, stepping closer. 'Someone's reprogrammed it to play videos of porpoises whenever I type a command.'

'Oh?' I ask, leaning back against the railing. 'That's odd.'

'Yes,' he says, moving forward until I can feel his breath on my skin. 'They seem to have some strong opinions about my coding abilities in relation to yours. Quite disparaging. They suggested saving my work to `/dev/null`.'

I stifle a smile. 'Clever porpoises.'

'Indeed.' He steps away and glances at the rifle. 'Doing a little hunting?'

I shrug. 'I was trying to distract myself from this whole end-of-the-world thing.'

From the broadcasts on every channel. From the hourly reports of new infections, and the video of Patient Zero they keep replaying, showing him throwing his head back, showing him *detonating*, showing the clouds of pink mist racing through the streets of Punta Arenas.

'Right,' Dax says, nodding seriously. 'And we're taking it out on

the pigeons, are we? Fair enough. I've never liked their beady little eyes.'

I can't help but smile. 'I was trying to get a sample to sequence. This flock looks like a new strain. I think they might have the rest of the poem.'

The poem is a sonnet. I already have the three quatrains, and I've been waiting four months for the couplet to arrive.

'Ah,' he says, snatching up the rifle. 'No time to waste, then. We have some birds to shoot.'

When the genehacked pigeons first appeared in our skies six months ago, it was my father who shot one down to take a look at their DNA. Their genes were expertly coded, except for one tiny section, a messy string of DNA that didn't seem to fit. My father said it was junk, but it bugged me, so I took a sample to analyse on my own. I ran it through my genkit, my portable genetic sequencer, but none of the built-in search algorithms could find a pattern. Finally, on a whim, I translated the base pairs into binary, then ASCII and into a string of alphanumeric letters.

Then it all made sense. It wasn't a gene – it was a message. That odd patch of G, T, C and A was hiding the words of a poem.

That's the beautiful thing about gentech – the science of genetic coding. You can get lost in the minutiae, but then you step back sometimes, and patterns appear like sunlight bursting through clouds. Reading the genetic code behind a feather or a cell can make you feel like you're reading poetry written by God.

Unfortunately, the poem in the pigeons was written by amateur genehackers, and it's not the best thing I've ever read, but I still want to know how it ends.

'One or two? Big or little?' Dax squints through the rifle's scope

at the swirling flock of birds above us. His shoulder-length red hair is tied back in a low ponytail, a few loose strands hanging around his face. One streak is white blond, more a boast of his coding prowess than a fashion statement. A whole head of hair is easy to hack, but you have to be a coding wizard to zero in on just a few strands.

I cross my arms, looking up at the birds. ‘You really think you can just hit one?’

‘I know I can.’

I roll my eyes, but he’s probably right. Dax’s ocular tech is state-of-the-art, along with every other app running from the panel embedded in his arm. It stretches from his wrist to his elbow, a soft layer of nanocoded silicone glowing in a stripe of cobalt light beneath his skin. Inside it, tiny processors run gentech code, packaged up as individual apps to alter his DNA and change his body. Those apps govern everything from his implanted sensory upgrades to his metabolism, even the streak in his hair.

The computers that can handle manipulations on DNA were once the size of a room, but they eventually became small enough to bury inside your body. The gentech panel is a perfect combination of hardware, software and *wetware*, generating constant streams of algorithmically designed nanites. Those nanites move through a network of cables inside your body, then bleed through your cells, building and destroying coils of synthetic DNA. Gentech can grow wires and circuits the same way your body grows bone, or it can grow your hair in perfect ringlets even if you were born with it straight. Almost everyone has a panel, budded at birth to grow inside them, and most people carry hundreds, even thousands, of apps.

My wrist holds just six lonely dots. My hypergenesis, an allergy to the nanites that run most gentech, means the panel in my arm is little more than a glorified phone. I have standard healing and sensory tech, and a glitchy twelve-kilobyte comm that my father personally coded for me. But if I download anything else, even the simplest of apps, the nanites will shred through my cells and kill me within hours.

It's ironic, really. I'm the daughter of the world's greatest gentech coder, but I'll never be able to experience most of his work.

Dax fires the rifle. A shot rings out, and feathers puff through the air. A single bird arcs up parabolically, then tumbles to the ground. He lowers the rifle, leaning it back against the wall, and arches an eyebrow. 'What do you say, first one to the bird gets to finish the poem?'

My jaw drops. 'No, this is my project. You can't finish it. That's not fair.'

He launches himself over the porch and lands in the grass with catlike grace, then tilts his head to smile up at me. 'Life isn't fair, *Princess*.'

'Oh,' I breathe, cracking my knuckles. 'You are so in for it now.'

I bolt down the stairs and race through the grass, my long dark hair streaming out behind me, veering left as Dax tries to block my path. He's stronger, but I'm faster, and I dart past him, skidding to a stop on the lake's pebbled shore, snatching up the bird with one outstretched hand.

I'm fast, but not fast enough. Dax hurtles into me, knocking me to the ground, yanking the pigeon from my hand. I roll over on the grass and scramble up just in time to grab a fistful of his hair.

I yank it back, hard. He lets out a cry, dropping the pigeon, and spins to face me with a wild look in his eyes.

A few seconds ago we were two coders discussing DNA, but now we're like wolves, circling each other, fighting over something neither of us need. The pigeon doesn't matter. Any one of the feathers littering the ground could yield its DNA, but this isn't really about the bird, or even about the poem. This is about Dax and me, and the tension that's been building between us since he kissed me last week when my father was away. We haven't talked about it since. I tried to pretend it didn't happen, too frightened that my overprotective father would find out and fire Dax. We've spent the week trying to work together, to ignore the energy crackling between us, like two humming electrodes just waiting for a spark.

My eyes drop to the pigeon. I make the slightest move towards it, and Dax's arm whips around my waist, lifting me clean off my feet. My heart pounds at the feeling of his chest against my back, but his feet slip, and for a heartbeat we sway together before tumbling into the lake.

'Dax, no!' I shriek, scrambling away, shoving my sopping hair away from my face.

He just laughs. He flicks his head back, sending up a glistening Mohawk of water. 'I wasn't going to take the damn bird.'

'Then why did you *start* this? How are we going to explain this to my father?'

He grins. 'That's what I came to tell you. He knows, Princess. We had a chat, and he's OK with it, but he kept telling me that some things are better when you *wait* for them.'

I almost choke. 'Are you kidding me?'

‘Nope. I don’t know if it’s the whole apocalypse thing or not, but I got the Agatta stamp of approval. I hope you know that when we get married, I’m taking your name, and then we’re calling all our future children Lachlan, after your father. It might be hard on the girls, but I’m sure they’ll understand, and –’

‘Catarina!’

We both spin round as my father throws open the front door.

I glance at Dax, whose face has paled. My stomach drops. He was lying. There was no conversation, no Agatta stamp of approval, and now the two of us are dead. I’m fifteen. It’s reckless. I should have known better than to let us get so close, and now everything is going to be ruined.

Dax will be sent away. I’ll go back to boarding school. The brightest, happiest time of my life will be over before it’s begun.

‘Both of you in here, now!’ my father shouts.

‘We were just . . . I shot a pigeon,’ I say. ‘The poem . . .’

‘I know,’ my father says. ‘Forget about the damn bird and get inside.’

Dax and I exchange nervous glances as we hurry up to the cabin. My father only curses when he’s angry, but it doesn’t sound like he’s angry at us. Dax hops on one leg to pull his sneakers off while I unzip my wet sweater and drop it on the porch.

Inside, my father is standing in the centre of the living room, dressed immaculately in his lab coat, staring at the walls. Only he’s not really staring at the walls. He’s not even really *staring*. He’s back in a virtual reality session, watching something through his panel. A live feed of images, sent from his panel through fibre cabling inside his body, pulsed directly into his optic nerve. To his brain, there’s no difference. The feed from his panel and his eyes

merge and intersect, creating a single, seamless image. When my father stares at the wall, he could see a screen with video footage, or a painting, or a scrolling stream of headlines.

Or he could see something else entirely. A beach. The stars. His panel could thrust him from the cabin into a fully rendered world. At least that's what I'm told. I've never tried it myself. The only graphics card that works with my panel is too weak to render VR. All I have is an ancient chip that can run basic ocular filters and sketch a few lines of text in my vision. That's enough to send messages through my comm, but not enough to watch movies, play games, or even *code* the way the rest of the world does.

One sleeve of my father's lab coat is rolled to his elbow, and his crypto cuff is strapped around his forearm. It's a sleek sheath of chrome that scrambles the transmissions from his panel's wireless chip, and he only wears it for important calls, to stop Cartaxus from listening to his conversations.

I stare at the cuff, my stomach lurching. My father wasn't angry at Dax and me. He's been talking to someone about the outbreak. Whatever he heard, it's left him practically shaking.

'What's going on?' I touch his elbow to let him know I'm here. His eyes are glazed; his vision is probably 360 degrees of pure VR.

'The virus has swept through Nicaragua,' he says. 'Now that it's past the canal, there's nothing left to stop it. They're planning airstrikes.'

'On *civilians*?' I glance at Dax. 'Who's considering that?'

My father blinks out of his session. His eyes refocus, and he turns to me. 'Everyone, darling. Every government in the world is considering it.'

I swallow, taking in my father's bloodshot eyes, the strain in

his face. Everything about this outbreak is terrifying, but none of it worries me as much as the lines etched into his brow. He's the world's greatest gentech coder. He wrote the cure for Influenza X, and I've never seen him like this.

We must be in serious danger.

'Nicaragua,' Dax repeats, his brow furrowed. 'That's close. It only broke out two days ago. If it keeps spreading that fast, it could be here within days.'

'Hours,' my father says. 'It's spreading exponentially. It's going to be chaos when it hits the cities. There'll be panic until a vaccine is released, and I fear that might take a very long time.' He grips my hands. 'There's food in the basement, clean water in the lake, and new solars on the roof, and you can always hide in the old mine shafts in the mountains.'

'What . . . what are you saying?' My eyes drop to the crypto cuff. 'Who have you been talking to?'

As if in response, a low thumping sound starts up in the distance, and the cries of the pigeons crescendo into a roar. But it's not the pigeons I'm listening to. It's the sound of helicopter blades growing louder with each passing second until the windows shake. Through the glass, I can make out two black Comox quadcopters swooping into the valley, their bellies slashed with a white logo.

I'd know that symbol anywhere. I've seen it in my nightmares. Stylized white crossed antlers.

It's Cartaxus.

Not the military, and not a corporation, but a massive international amalgam of technology and violence. A mix of public and private interests that has become the world's biggest

provider and controller of gentech. My father worked with Cartaxus for twenty years, until he couldn't take it any more and finally wrenched himself free of their iron grip. He told me this day might come, that they might show up and drag him away even though he swore he'd never work for them again. Not after the horrors he saw. The horrors that keep him awake at night, that he still can't bring himself to talk about.

Now they've come for him, just like he said they would. He turns to me, resignation traced into every line of his face.

'No,' I blurt out, my voice breaking. 'They can't just *take* you.'

'They can, and they will. This isn't influenza, darling. They're rounding up everyone they think can help.'

'But you can hide,' I plead. 'We can *run*.'

He shakes his head. 'No, Catarina, they'll find me wherever I go. They think Dax and I can write a vaccine for this virus. We have no choice but to go with them.'

Dax steps back. 'They want *me*? I'm not going anywhere.'

'You mustn't fight them,' my father urges. 'I worked for Cartaxus, and I know what they're capable of. They want your brain, but they don't need your legs.'

Dax blanches. The copter rotors grow louder, the vibrations sending puffs of dust drifting down from the ceiling. They're already landing on the grass outside, sending up frothy waves from the lake. The windows rattle as a storm of grass and dust hits the cabin, the front door slamming shut in the gale.

My father grips my hands in his. 'Get in the panic room, Catarina. You have to stay here. I know you can do this.'

'No!' I yank my hands away. 'I'm coming with you. I can help with the vaccine. Nobody knows your work better than me.'

'I know that, but you can't come, darling. It's not safe. You don't know what these people are like. They'll torture you if they think it will make me work faster. They'll *kill* you to break me if I try to resist them. You must stay away from them.'

'But you can't *leave* me.'

'Oh, my darling. I wish I didn't have to, but I have no choice. I know you can take care of yourself, but you must promise that you will never let them take you. No matter what happens, you have to stay away from Cartaxus. Promise me you'll do that.'

'No,' I choke out, starting to cry. 'No, I'm coming with you.'

The sound of shouting voices cuts through the roar of the copters. My father turns to Dax. 'Hide her,' he snaps. 'Quickly, they're coming.'

'No!' I grab my father's coat, but Dax wrestles me away. I kick and thrash, but his grip is tight as he jogs to the back of the house with me clutched against him.

It's no use. I can't fight. All I can do is cry. Cartaxus is going to take my father, and I didn't even get to say goodbye.

The voices outside grow louder. Heavy boots stomp across the porch. Dax drops me and yanks open the panic-room door.

'Be safe, Princess,' he whispers. He shoves me into the cramped, padded closet, then kisses me urgently, crushing his lips to mine.

The last thing I see is his face, white with fear, as soldiers burst into the house.

Then he slams the door on me, and everything goes silent.

I know there are Cartaxus soldiers outside, and I know they're shouting, smashing, swarming into the cabin, but I can't hear a thing. The only sound I hear is my heart as it pounds against my

ribs, loud enough that the padded walls and their interference circuits can't possibly be enough to hide me. The soldiers must hear me. I clutch my hands over my mouth to muffle my breathing, waiting for a black-gloved fist to yank open the door.

But nobody does.

Ten minutes pass in blank, terrified silence, until my traitorous heart begins to slow of its own accord. There's only so much adrenaline your body can manufacture while you're standing in complete sensory deprivation. An hour passes, then two. Finally, I can't wait any more and force myself to flick the pressure lock on the panic room's wall and swing open the door.

Night has fallen, and the cabin's lights are out. The living-room window has been shattered, but the glass is already regrowing in snowflake-like crystals that split the moonlight into rainbows. The room is a mess. Dead shards of glass are strewn across the floor, along with scattered gold feathers, muddy boot prints and a pool of glistening blood.

I stand on shaking legs above it, gripped with a fiercer anger than I have ever known.

They shot him. I know it without checking. Cartaxus burst in here, and they shot my father and dragged him away.

My genkit confirms that the blood belongs to my father, and I find no bullet casings even after scouring the room. My rudimentary panel can't show me the VR feed from the security cameras, and they don't convert easily into 2D, but I finally manage to coax out a grainy, black-and-white feed on my little laptop genkit's screen. It shows my father kneeling on the floor beside Dax, both their heads lowered, their hands raised as twelve soldiers storm into the room.

Orders are shouted. Twelve semi-automatic rifles are aimed at two unarmed men – two scientists Cartaxus needs to build them a vaccine. My father turns his head and stands suddenly to reach for something on the wall, and when I see this on the video, I start to cry. I know what he's reaching for. He wants the photograph of my mother, from when I was nothing more than a gentle curve beneath her dress. As my father stands, he barely manages to take a step before a soldier fires two bullets, the flashes saturating the feed.

One bullet in the thigh, another in the bicep, avoiding the femoral artery, doing musculature damage that healing tech will fix in a week.

In the grainy, stuttering video, my father slumps to the floor, and Dax screams. It's silent, but I can *hear* him screaming. The soldiers drag him and my father out of the cabin, and the copters send a hurricane of feathers through the windows as they leave.

The night burns into morning. I sit alone in the empty cabin as the viewscreen reports a steady stream of outbreaks around the world. I kneel on the floor with the photograph of my mother in my hands, beside a pool of my father's blood, and make him a promise I intend to keep.

No matter what happens, I will do what he told me. I will stay safe, and stay free.

I will never let them take me.