

THE IRON HORIZON



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The Iron Horizon

«АВТОР»

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THE SKY WAS THEIR CAGE. THE RAILS WERE THEIR PRISON. Humanity survives aboard the Behemoth—a massive city-train tearing through a frozen wasteland of ash. When mechanic Elias Thorne uncovers a forbidden AI, he becomes the Syndicate's prime target. Forced to flee into the dark with scavenger Lyra, he must cross the treacherous Ash Sea to reach the Midnight Terminal—the only place that can clear the skies. Stop the engines. Let the world breathe.

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The Iron Horizon

Глава

S K

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Stop the engines. Let the world breathe.

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Глава 1

CHAPTER 1: THE ASH AND THE ENGINE

The world did not end with a bang, nor did it perish in fire. It simply ground to a halt under a suffocating blanket of gray ash.

Elias Thorne wiped a mixture of grease and sweat from his forehead, leaving a dark smudge across his pale skin. He was buried deep within the belly of the Behemoth, a massive, iron-clad city on tracks that had been rolling across the barren wastes of the European continent for over three centuries. The engine room was a chaotic symphony of screaming steam, turning gears, and the rhythmic, heart-like thumping of the main piston. To anyone else, it was hell. To Elias, it was the only home he had ever known.

«Pressure is dropping in Sector Four, Thorne!» yelled Chief Engineer Vance from the upper catwalk. Vance was an old man whose lungs were half-ruined by coal dust, but his voice could still cut through the roar of a turbine. «Fix that pressure valve before the whole damn deck loses heating!»

«On it, Chief!» Elias shouted back.

He grabbed his heavy wrench, slung a canvas tool bag over his shoulder, and climbed up the iron ladder. The air grew hotter and thicker as he ascended toward the primary exhaust line. The Behemoth was old, and its metal bones were tired. Lately, the maintenance shifts had grown longer, and the spare parts scarcer. Everyone in the lower decks knew the truth, even if they didn't dare say it aloud: the train was dying.

Elias crawled into the narrow maintenance conduit of Sector Four. The steel beneath his knees vibrated violently. He reached the faulty valve — a rusted brass wheel that was leaking scorching, high-pressure steam into the crawlspace.

He fit his wrench onto the bolt, bracing his boots against the riveted wall. He pulled with all his might. The rusted metal resisted, groaning in protest, before finally giving way with a sharp crack. The steam hiss died down, replaced by the low, steady hum of stabilized pressure.

Elias exhaled, leaning his head against the cold iron hull. He wiped his magnifying lens and looked out through a tiny, scratched porthole nearby.

Outside, the world was a featureless desert of black sand and swirling ash storms. The horizon was a sharp, jagged line where the dark earth met a perpetually bruised twilight sky. No trees. No birds. No sun. Just the endless tracks, laid down by a forgotten generation, stretching out into the dark.

But as Elias stared into the gloom, something caught his eye.

A sudden flash of blue light flickered in the distance, about a mile away from the train's current path. It wasn't the dull yellow of a lightning strike or the orange flare of a burning coal pocket. It was a sharp, pulsing, electric sapphire light. It emerged from a massive mound of metallic wreckage — the remains of a long-dead sister ship, another moving city that had broken down decades ago and been left to the elements.

The blue pulse flashed three times, in a perfectly rhythmic pattern, and then vanished.

Elias lowered his lens, his heart hammering against his ribs. That wasn't a natural phenomenon. It wasn't a dying battery either. That was a signal. A distress beacon using an encrypted military frequency that hadn't been heard since the Old Collapse.

«Elias! What's taking so long up there?» Vance's voice echoed through the conduit.

«All clear, Chief! Valve secured,» Elias replied, his voice trembling slightly. He looked back out the porthole, but the blue light was gone, swallowed by the swirling ash.

The Behemoth would pass the wreckage of the sister ship in less than an hour. The train never stopped — stopping meant freezing, and freezing meant death. The iron laws of the High Council forbade anyone from leaving the moving tracks. To step off the train was treason.

Elias crawled backward out of the conduit, his mind spinning. He looked down at his hands, stained with oil and rust. He had spent twenty-four years maintaining a dying machine, watching humanity slowly fade into nothingness.

Three pulses, he thought. A call for help. Or a warning.

As his boots hit the metal floor of the engine deck, Elias made a choice that would tear his quiet, structured world completely apart. He wasn't going to let the train roll past that light.

Глава 2

CHAPTER 2: THE FROZEN WRECKAGE

The freezing wind hit Elias like a physical blow.

He stood on the lowest external maintenance platform of the Behemoth, gripping the icy handrail with both hands. The storm outside was a roaring monster of black sand and freezing ash. Behind him, the massive steel wheels of the train screeched against the tracks, throwing sparks into the dark. Ahead of him lay nothing but the void of the wasteland.

Elias checked his breathing mask. The filter hissed, feeding him thin, metallic-tasting air. On his back, he carried a heavy magnetic grappling line. On his belt, his repair tools clinked softly.

He looked ahead. The jagged silhouette of the dead sister ship, the Leviathan, was looming out of the storm. The Behemoth was passing it now, moving at a steady twenty miles per hour. The distance between his platform and the rusted hull of the wreck was less than forty feet.

He had only one shot.

Elias unslung the grappling launcher, raised it to his shoulder, and aimed at a broken cargo bay door on the Leviathan. He squeezed the trigger.

Thump.

The magnetic anchor shot through the roaring wind, trailing a high-tensile steel cable. A split second later, a loud, metallic clang echoed through the storm. The anchor had connected.

Without giving himself time to hesitate, Elias hooked his harness to the cable and jumped into the abyss.

The wind tore at his heavy coat. For a terrifying three seconds, he was suspended over the crushing, grinding wheels of the train. Then, momentum swung him forward. His heavy boots slammed hard against the rusted iron side of the Leviathan. He gasped, the impact knocking the air from his lungs, but his grip held.

Clambering through the broken cargo bay door, Elias unhooked his harness. He was inside.

The interior of the Leviathan was a graveyard of cold iron. It had been abandoned fifty years ago when its main reactor failed. Frost covered every surface, turning the ancient pipes and gears into skeletal, frozen monuments. The silence here was absolute, broken only by the distant, muffled howling of the storm outside.

Elias pulled out his hand-cranked flashlight. A narrow beam of yellow light cut through the pitch-black darkness.

«Where are you?» he whispered, his voice muffled by the mask.

He followed the residual energy readings on his wrist-monitor. The signal was drawing him deeper, away from the cargo holds and down into the structural underbelly of the dead city. He walked past ruined living quarters, shattered communal kitchens, and frozen skeletons still sitting in their iron chairs. These people hadn't evacuated; they had frozen to death in the dark when the heat died.

After twenty minutes of navigating the frozen labyrinth, Elias reached a heavy steel door marked with a symbol he had never seen before: a stylized bird rising from a stylized gear.

The door was sealed tight. But right next to the electronic lock, a small console was pulsing with that same, sharp sapphire light he had seen from the porthole.

As Elias stepped closer, the sapphire light suddenly shifted. It became a thin, vertical beam that swept across his face, scanning his eyes and his clothes.

Click. Whirrrrr.

The heavy steel door, unmoved for half a century, slowly groaned open. A wave of surprisingly warm, pressurized air rushed out, hitting Elias's face.

He stepped inside, his flashlight illuminating a pristine, immaculate laboratory. Unlike the rest of the rusted train, this room looked completely untouched by time. Advanced computer terminals lined the walls. In the center of the room stood a large, glass sphere filled with dark, swirling liquid.

As Elias approached the sphere, the dark liquid began to glow with thousands of tiny, blue bioluminescent lights, mimicking the structure of a human brain.

«DNA match confirmed,» a voice echoed through the room. It wasn't a metallic, robotic voice. It was soft, melodic, and terrifyingly human. «Welcome back, Master Thorne.»

Elias stumbled backward, pulling down his breathing mask. «Who... what are you? My name is Elias. I'm not a master.»

The blue lights inside the sphere pulsed gently in sync with the voice. «I am Aurora. A Class-4 Autonomous Intelligence, created by Project Horizon. You are Elias Thorne, grandson of Chief Engineer Arthur Thorne. Your genetic signature is the primary administrative override for this facility.»

«My grandfather died on the Behemoth,» Elias said, his mind racing.

«Correction,» Aurora replied. «Arthur Thorne died in this laboratory fifty-two years ago while attempting to save the core. Before his cessation of life, he locked my primary database and instructed me to broadcast a localized beacon only when a matching genetic frequency passed within range.»

«Why?» Elias asked, stepping closer to the glass sphere. «What is this place?»

«This train was not a city, Elias. The Leviathan was a mobile terraforming laboratory. My core contains the atmospheric restoration codes — the formula to clear the ash from the sky and restart the planet's ecosystem. The High Council of the Syndicate knows this.»

The sphere suddenly flashed a violent, warning red.

«Warning,» Aurora's voice lost its calm melody, becoming sharp and urgent. «The beacon transmission has been intercepted. A Syndicate hunter-drone detachment has just boarded the upper decks of the Leviathan. Their objective is my destruction. And your termination.»

From the dark corridors above, the distant, mechanical screech of cutting torches began to echo through the dead ship.

Глава 3

CHAPTER 3: THE HUNT IN THE FROST

The screech of cutting torches grew louder. Sparks drifted down through the ventilation grates of the ceiling like dying stars. The Syndicate hunters were already inside the Leviathan.

«They are bypassing the secondary blast doors,» Aurora's voice rang out, her blue light pulsing erratically against the glass. «Estimated time until laboratory breach: three minutes. Master Thorne, you must extract my memory core now.»

«How?» Elias shouted, rushing toward the central console. His hands flew over the controls, but the interfaces were completely alien to a mechanic used to physical levers and heavy steam valves. «I don't know how to operate this tech!»

«Underneath the central sphere. Look for the copper lever. Pull it down and rotate it ninety degrees clockwise,» Aurora instructed calmly, though the flashing red emergency lights in the room suggested otherwise.

Elias dropped to his knees beneath the glass structure. His flashlight beamed through a maze of fiber-optic cables and coolant lines. There it was: a heavy, mechanical copper lever that looked completely out of place among the advanced electronics. It was his grandfather's design — a safety override meant for a human hand.

He grabbed the lever. It was freezing cold. He pulled down with all his body weight.

Clunk.

The liquid inside the glass sphere began to drain rapidly into subterranean tanks. The blue bio-luminescent lights condensed into a small, metallic cylinder no larger than a thermos flask. With a sharp hiss of pressurized gas, the cylinder ejected from the console. Elias grabbed it. It was surprisingly heavy, and it vibrated with a faint, warm heartbeat.

«Core detached,» Aurora's voice now emanated from the small cylinder in his hand, sounding slightly muffled. «My portable battery will sustain my primary functions for twelve hours. We must evacuate. The drones are directly above us.»

A sudden, deafening explosion shook the laboratory. The heavy steel door blew inward, warped and melting from a thermite charge.

Through the smoke, two tall silhouettes stepped into the room. They weren't human. They were Syndicate Stalkers — humanoid combat drones built of matte-black carbon fiber, their heads replaced by a single, horizontal glowing red optical sensor. They moved with terrifying, insect-like precision.

One of the Stalkers raised its right arm. The limb retracted, revealing a high-velocity projectile barrel.

«Down!» Elias screamed to himself, throwing his body behind the heavy steel console just as a volley of kinetic rounds tore through the air. The glass sphere above him shattered into thousands of razor-sharp pieces.

He was trapped. He had no weapons, only his heavy mechanic's wrench and a magnetic grappling line.

«The primary ventilation shaft behind you,» Aurora whispered from his tool bag. «The exhaust fan is dead. It leads straight to the lower maintenance underbelly. The Stalkers are too wide to follow you there.»

Elias didn't look back. He scrambled on his hands and knees toward a small square grate in the back wall. He slammed his heavy wrench against the rusted fasteners. One broke. Two. He kicked the grate with his steel-toed boot, sending it clattering down into the dark shaft.

A second burst of gunfire chewed through the metal of the console right above his head. Sparks showered his coat.

Elias threw his tool bag into the shaft first, then dove in headfirst just as a Stalker rounded the corner. He slid down a steep, icy metal chute, the darkness swallowing him whole as the angry red light of the drone's sensor faded far above.

He fell for several seconds before crashing hard into a pile of frozen debris and discarded metal parts. He groaned, rubbing his bruised shoulder, but he forced himself to stand up. He was in the crawlspaces beneath the Leviathan's lowest deck. It was a freezing, claustrophobic nightmare of pipes and structural beams.

«They are tracking our heat signatures,» Aurora warned. «They will calculate your exit point in less than ninety seconds. You cannot go back to the tracks. The Behemoth is already too far away.»

Elias pulled himself up, using a pipe for support. He looked at his wrist-monitor. The Behemoth was gone. He was alone in the dead heart of the frozen wasteland, hunted by killing machines, with the future of the human race ticking away in his canvas bag.

«If I can't go back,» Elias whispered, his breath pluming in the freezing dark, «where do we go?»

«We go to the Midnight Terminal,» Aurora replied. «The birthplace of the world. And the only place left to fight.»

Глава 4

CHAPTER 4: THE WHITE DESERT

The structural groans of the dying Leviathan faded into the rhythmic, howling roar of the wasteland wind.

Elias staggered through the knee-deep black ash, his boots heavy, his breaths coming in ragged, frozen gasps. Every muscle in his body screamed from the impact of the jump and the frantic crawl through the vents. Behind him, the massive silhouette of the derelict train was already being swallowed by the swirling blizzard. Ahead of him lay nothing but an endless, frozen void.

He pulled the canvas tool bag closer to his chest. Inside, the metal cylinder containing Aurora's core pulsed with a faint, reassuring warmth. It was the only source of heat he had left.

«Aurora,» Elias rasped, his voice cutting through the hiss of his respirator mask. «Can you hear me? I need a heading.»

A soft click echoed in his earpiece, followed by a wave of digital static. «Signal weak, Master Thorne,» her voice hummed, noticeably dimmer than before. «My external sensors are heavily obstructed by atmospheric particulate. However, according to internal structural logs, there should be an old maintenance trench three hundred meters north-east of your current position. It will provide shelter from the gale.»

«North-east,» Elias muttered, squinting into the gray darkness.

The environment outside the moving city was terrifyingly foreign. On the Behemoth, the world was defined by iron walls, the smell of sulfur, and the predictable vibrations of the tracks. Here, the ground shifted beneath his feet. The sky was not a ceiling of rusted pipes, but a vast, terrifying emptiness that felt as though it might crush him.

He walked for what felt like hours, though his wrist-chronometer indicated only twenty minutes had passed. The cold was a living thing, clawing through the seams of his heavy mechanic's coat, numbing his fingers inside his leather gloves.

Suddenly, the ground gave way.

Elias cried out as he slid down a steep, hidden embankment, tumbling through loose shale and frozen ash. He crashed hard onto a flat, concrete surface. Groaning, he rolled over and shined his hand-cranked flashlight upward.

He had found the trench. It was a massive, subterranean canal — part of a forgotten infrastructure project built before the Old Collapse. The high concrete walls blocked the worst of the biting wind, creating a eerie, dead silence.

«Warning,» Aurora's voice suddenly sharpened in his ear. «Multiple acoustic anomalies detected at the upper rim of the trench. Distance: one hundred and fifty meters. Closing fast.»

Elias froze, extinguishing his flashlight. He pressed his back against the cold concrete wall, holding his breath.

High above, at the edge of the trench, a sharp crimson light cut through the swirling snow. It was the horizontal optical sensor of a Syndicate Seeker drone. The machine moved with silent, hovering grace, its anti-gravitational thrusters emitting only a low, electrical hum. It was scanning the ash, looking for his footprints.

Elias reached down to his belt, his numb fingers wrapping around the handle of his heavy iron wrench. It was a pathetic weapon against a military-grade hunter drone, but it was all he had.

The crimson light swept across the floor of the trench, stopping just three feet away from Elias's boots. He squeezed his eyes shut, his heart hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird. If the drone found him here, in this enclosed space, the journey to the Midnight Terminal would end before it even truly began.

The drone paused. The mechanical click of its scanning lenses adjusting echoed clearly in the quiet canal.

Then, a sudden, sharp crack echoed from the opposite direction. A loose piece of masonry had fallen from a ruined bridge a hundred yards away. The Seeker drone's head snapped toward the noise. With a sudden surge of thrust, it vanished into the storm, chasing the distraction.

Elias exhaled a long, shuddering breath, his forehead resting against the icy concrete. He was alive, but he was completely trapped in the frozen dark, miles away from civilization, with a dying artificial intelligence as his only guide.

Глава 5

CHAPTER 5: THE BLIND FEEDERS

The concrete trench stretched ahead like an endless, grey throat swallowing the dark.

Elias kept his flashlight off, relying instead on the faint, ambient blue luminescence radiating from Aurora's cylinder inside his pack. The air inside the canal was heavy and stagnant, thick with the smell of wet sulfur and ancient limestone. With every hundred steps, the temperature seemed to drop a fraction of a degree, turning his ragged breaths into thick, ghostly plumes that hung suspended in the still air.

«Master Thorne,» Aurora's voice whispered in his earpiece, her digital frequency shaking slightly from the low battery reserves. «The Seeker drone has moved outside my primary acoustic grid. However, I am detecting a localized atmospheric shift. The moisture levels in this sector are abnormally high. There is liquid water nearby.»

«Water?» Elias muttered, his voice sounding hollow against the concrete walls. «How? Everything on the surface is frozen solid.»

«Geothermal heat pipes,» Aurora explained. «The Old World grid used sub-surface steam conduits to keep these transportation trenches clear of ice. If the core infrastructure is still functioning at a minimal capacity, there may be a live terminal ahead.»

The prospect of warmth spurred Elias forward. His boots spluttered through shallow pools of dark, brackish water that had begun to accumulate on the canal floor.

After a mile of tense, silent walking, the trench opened up into a massive underground junction. Huge, rusted iron pipes — each wide enough to drive a steam truck through — converged into a central drainage vault. From somewhere deep within the pipe network, a low, rhythmic thump-thump-thump echoed. It sounded like a mechanical heartbeat, but to Elias's trained ears, it was the sound of a malfunctioning pneumatic piston.

He turned on his flashlight, casting a narrow beam across the vault.

The light caught something that made his blood run cold.

The walls of the vault weren't just made of concrete and rust. They were covered in thick, pale, vein-like structures that pulsed in sync with the distant piston. It looked like a bizarre fusion of industrial machinery and biological growth.

Before Elias could step back, a sharp, wet clicking sound echoed from the dark interior of the largest pipe.

Two eyes illuminated in the beam of his flashlight — but they weren't normal eyes. They were completely milk-white, covered by thick, protective cataracts. The creature that crawled out of the pipe resembled a wolf, but its skin was completely hairless, translucent, and gray as the ash outside. Its elongated jaw was filled with needle-sharp, overlapping teeth designed to crush frozen bone.

«An Ash Scavenger,» Aurora warned, her voice dropping to a rapid, urgent whisper. «They are completely blind, Master Thorne. They hunt entirely by sound and heat. Stand perfectly still. Do not let your heart rate spike.»

Elias froze. He didn't even dare to exhale. The creature slinked down from the pipe, its long, clawed paws clicking softly against the damp concrete. It raised its snout, sniffing the air. The heat from Elias's body, radiating through his heavy coat, was a beacon in the freezing vault.

The scavenger crept closer, stopping just five feet away. Elias could smell the foul, sulfurous stench of its breath. His hand slowly slipped down to his tool belt, his fingers wrapping around the cold grip of his heavy iron wrench. If he swung and missed, the noise would bring the rest of the pack down upon him.

Suddenly, a drop of condensation fell from a rusted pipe overhead, striking the surface of a water pool thirty yards to their left with a loud plop.

The scavenger's head snapped toward the sound. With a terrifying, guttural hiss, it launched itself toward the splash, its claws tearing up the wet soot on the floor.

«Time to go,» Elias breathed, turning on his heel and sprinting toward a smaller, metal-runged ladder that led up to an auxiliary maintenance platform.

The sound of his heavy boots immediately alerted the beast. A chaotic chorus of shrieks erupted from the surrounding pipes as three more blind scavengers emerged from the darkness, chasing the sound of his footsteps with terrifying speed.

Elias climbed the ladder frantically, his hands slipping on the frozen iron rungs. Just as he hauled his body onto the high metal platform, a pair of snapping jaws slammed shut inches below his boot, the metal ring of the ladder ringing like a bell under the force of the strike.

He lay on the grated floor of the platform, panting heavily, looking down at the pack of blind monsters circling the base of the ladder in the dark. He was safe for the moment, but he was trapped on a high ledge, his flashlight battery was dying, and the path forward was blocked by things that thrived in the dark.

Глава 6

CHAPTER 6: THE STEAM OVERRIDE

The cold metal grating of the platform bit through Elias's clothes as he lay there, listening to the wet scratching of claws on the iron ladder below. The blind scavengers weren't leaving. They circled the base, their pale, translucent bodies moving like ghosts through the beam of his dying flashlight.

«Master Thorne,» Aurora's voice hummed in his ear, her digital signal wavering. «Your core body temperature is dropping. Staying on this open platform for more than twenty minutes will cause severe hypothermia. We must find a way to clear the vault.»

«I'm working on it,» Elias whispered, his teeth clicking together.

He crawled backward on his hands and knees, keeping his head low. At the far end of the catwalk, buried under a thick layer of yellowed frost and dust, stood an old control booth. It was an iron box with thick, reinforced glass windows, designed to let engineers monitor the drainage system safely.

Elias pushed the heavy metal door open. It groaned on its rusted hinges, a sound that caused a furious outburst of shrieks from the creatures below. He slammed the door shut behind him and turned the heavy locking wheel.

Inside, it was slightly warmer, shielded from the drafts of the giant pipes. Elias wiped the dust off the central console. To his surprise, a single analog dial was pulsing with a dull, amber light. The mechanical systems of the Old World were incredibly resilient; they ran on deep-bore geothermal steam that outlived the civilization that harnessed it.

«Aurora, can you read this layout?» Elias plugged a universal interface cable from his tool belt into the console's maintenance port, linking it to the cylinder in his pack.

The amber lights on the dash suddenly shifted to a sharp, familiar sapphire blue. A schematic of the entire vault projected above the cracked glass.

«This station controls the thermal purge valves for Sector Five,» Aurora reported, her voice stabilizing as she drew power from the station's residual line. «There is a high-pressure steam reserve directly beneath the floor plates where the creatures are gathered. If we open the primary bypass, we can vent the heat directly into the vault.»

«Will it kill them?» Elias asked, looking through the cracked window at the pale monsters sniffing the bottom of the booth.

«No. Their hides are adapted to geothermal environments. But the intense heat and sudden acoustic shock will force them back into the deep drainage tunnels. However, the manual pressure lever is jammed from the outside. I cannot override it digitally.»

Elias cursed softly. He looked out the window. The jammed valve was a large, iron wheel located on the catwalk just ten feet outside the booth. To reach it, he would have to step out into the open, right above the snapping jaws of the pack.

«I need a distraction,» Elias muttered, his hand wrapping tightly around his heavy wrench.

«I can overload the station's diagnostic terminal,» Aurora offered. «It will create a high-frequency electrical arc on the opposite side of the vault. It will give you exactly twelve seconds before they realize the sound is a trick.»

«Do it,» Elias said, placing his hand on the door wheel.

«Initiating in three... two... one.»

From the far corner of the vault, a deafening CRACK exploded as a high-voltage transformer short-circuited, throwing a shower of bright blue sparks into the dark. The scavengers shrieked, their sensitive ears overwhelmed by the sudden noise, and they scrambled toward the flash.

Elias threw the booth door open and bolted down the catwalk.

He reached the iron wheel. It was covered in ice. He fit his wrench onto the central bolt and threw his entire weight against it. Nothing. The rust held it tight.

«Come on!» Elias roared, his muscles straining.

Down below, the alpha scavenger realized the trap. It turned away from the sparks, its blind white eyes locking onto the vibration of Elias's boots on the catwalk. It launched itself toward the ladder with terrifying speed.

Elias slammed his boot against the wrench.

CLANG.

The ice broke. The wheel spun.

Deep beneath the floor plates, a heavy mechanical valve slid open. A deafening roar filled the vault as a massive wall of white, scalding geothermal steam erupted from the floor vents. The temperature in the room spiked instantly. The scavengers screamed in agony, completely blinded and disoriented by the roaring heat, and fled into the dark recesses of the drainage pipes.

Elias collapsed against the handrail, coughing as the warm, wet fog enveloped him. For a moment, he simply breathed in the humid, hot air, letting it thaw his frozen limbs.

«Excellent work, Master Thorne,» Aurora said. «The path below is clear. But we must move before the steam dissipates.»

Elias stood up, wiping the condensation from his mask. He turned to walk back to the ladder, but stopped dead in his tracks.

On the wall of the control booth, freshly scratched into the thick layer of frost and rust that he hadn't cleaned, was a single, hand-drawn symbol. It was a crude drawing of a bird rising from a gear — the exact same symbol he had seen on the blast doors of the Leviathan.

But this wasn't fifty years old. The frost around the edges of the scratches hadn't even had time to reform.

Someone had been standing on this platform, watching him, just minutes before he arrived.

Глава 7

CHAPTER 7: THE COAL SCOUT

The steam was already beginning to thin, condensing into heavy, warm drops that dripped from the ceiling like a slow, metallic rain.

Elias lowered himself from the catwalk, his heavy boots splashing into the warm puddles below. He kept his flashlight beam low, tracing the edge of the control booth's base. There, clearly imprinted in the thick, wet soot of the floor plates, were tracks. They weren't the chaotic, clawed gashes of the Ash Scavengers. These were the clean, patterned treading of reinforced survival boots.

Someone had stood right beneath the platform, watched him fight the creatures, and then slipped away into the shadows when the steam erupted.

«The tracks are fresh, Master Thorne,» Aurora's voice hummed in his ear, her tone analytical yet cautious. «The stride length suggests a human height of approximately five feet, eight inches. The indentation depth indicates they are carrying a heavy pack. They went into the secondary dry exhaust line.»

«Why didn't they help me?» Elias muttered, tightening his grip on his iron wrench as he stepped into the mouth of the dark, circular exhaust pipe.

«In the wasteland, survival is a zero-sum game,» Aurora replied softly. «Trust is a resource more expensive than coal or clean water.»

The exhaust pipe was wide and dry, lined with old ceramic tiles that insulated the space from the biting cold of the upper trench. Elias walked cautiously, his ears straining for any sound over the distant, muffled thudding of the geothermal machinery.

After a few hundred yards, the smooth pipe abruptly ended, opening into a small, square maintenance chamber. Elias stopped, instantly lowering his flashlight.

In the center of the chamber, built inside an old iron junction box, was a makeshift camp. A small, ingenious stove made from a hollowed-out engine cylinder was throwing off a faint, cherry-red glow. It burned not with the foul, sulfurous coal of the Behemoth, but with a strange, sweet-smelling dried moss that filled the room with a pleasant, earthy aroma.

A single sleeping mat made of patched industrial canvas lay near the stove. Scattered around it were tools that made Elias's breath catch in his throat: old circuit boards neatly stripped for copper, a hand-cranked shortwave radio, and several empty tins of corporate rations bearing the old insignia of the Leviathan.

«They're a scavenger,» Elias whispered, stepping into the light of the stove. He reached out to touch the metal of the stove; it was piping hot. They had left in a hurry.

«Look to the workbench, Elias,» Aurora said.

Elias turned his flashlight toward a rusted iron crate serving as a desk. Spread across it was a hand-drawn map on thick, greasy drafting paper. It didn't look like the simplistic, rigid route maps used by the High Council of the Behemoth. This map was beautifully chaotic. It showed the entire northern sector of the continent, marked with red ink showing the moving paths of all the major Syndicate city-trains, their hunting grounds, and their blind spots.

And right in the center of the map, circled in thick black charcoal, was a jagged mountain range labeled: The Midnight Terminal.

«They're looking for it too,» Elias said, his mind spinning.

«I'm not looking for it, mechanic,» a sharp, cold voice cut through the silence from the darkness behind him. «I'm trying to make sure no one else finds it.»

Elias spun around, his wrench raised defensively.

Standing in the shadows of the exit tunnel was a young woman. She wore a tight, patchwork flight suit made of dark leather and reinforced canvas, covered in carbon-dust smudges. Her face was half-hidden behind a sleek, high-tech respirator mask with two circular brass filters. In her hands, balanced with terrifying steadiness, she held a short-barreled pneumatic rifle. The pressure gauge on the side of the weapon was locked in the red zone.

«Drop the tool,» she said, her grey eyes locking onto Elias's face through her protective goggles. «And take your hands off my map.»

Глава 8

CHAPTER 8: THE SCRAP TRADER

The pressure gauge on the girl's pneumatic rifle hissed softly in the tense silence of the chamber. Elias stood perfectly still, his heavy iron wrench feeling entirely inadequate against a weapon compressed to three hundred atmospheres.

«Her rifle is primed, Master Thorne,» Aurora warned in his ear, her voice dropping to a hyper-receptive frequency. «The kinetic energy of that projectile will puncture your armor plate at this distance. Do not make sudden movements.»

«I'm not a Syndicate spy,» Elias said slowly, lowering his wrench just an inch to show he wasn't looking for a fight. «I'm a mechanic from the Behemoth. I fell off the lower maintenance decks during the storm.»

The girl didn't lower her rifle. Her grey eyes narrowed behind her protective goggles, scanning his grease-stained coat and the specific brass rivets on his tool belt. «A floor-monkey from the Behemoth doesn't survive a three-hundred-foot drop into the Ash Sea. And they certainly don't navigate the drainage canals without being eaten alive by the blind feeders. Try again.»

«I had help,» Elias said honestly. He reached back slowly, unbuckling the top flap of his canvas bag.

The girl instantly shifted her footing, her finger tightening on the pneumatic trigger. «Hands where I can see them!»

«Look,» Elias said, tilting the bag forward just enough.

The pale, sapphire light of Aurora's cylinder spilled out into the dim room, casting long, sharp shadows across the concrete walls. The blue glow caught the copper wiring on the girl's custom respirator mask, reflecting off her glass lenses.

The reaction was immediate. She didn't lower the gun out of trust, but out of sheer shock. Her breath hitched inside her filters. «A blue core... An untethered autonomous drive. Where did you dig that up?»

«From the Leviathan wreck,» Elias replied, sensing the shift in the room's gravity. «My grandfather was Arthur Thorne. He left it for me. She calls herself Aurora.»

At the sound of her name, the cylinder hummed, and Aurora's soft, digital voice resonated through Elias's earpiece, loud enough to echo slightly in the quiet chamber. «Greetings. I am currently operating on twelve percent power reserves. If you possess a compatible DC charging terminal, I can trade ancient structural schematics of the local sectors for five hundred watt-hours of electrical energy.»

The girl stared at the cylinder, then at Elias, her rifle slowly dipping toward the floor plates. She let out a long, dry laugh that turned into a cough from the stale air. She pulled down her respirator,

letting it hang around her neck. Her face was young, sharp, and smeared with dark coal dust across the cheekbones.

«Arthur Thorne's grandson,» she muttered, shaking her head. «No wonder the Syndicate pulled an entire tactical detachment off the main line. They aren't looking for a runaway mechanic. They're looking for her.»

She swung her rifle onto a leather strap over her shoulder and walked past Elias toward her makeshift desk, completely ignoring him now as she rolled up her drafting paper.

«I'm Lyra,» she said without looking back. «A scrap trader, a runner, and apparently, the biggest idiot in Sector Five for not leaving this trench twenty minutes ago. Pack your things, mechanic. If you brought that core in here, it means their long-range arrays already have a lock on this grid.»

From the upper shaft of the exhaust pipe, a low, mechanical metallic whine began to echo. It wasn't the sound of the wind. It was the high-frequency vibration of tracking rotors.

Глава 9

CHAPTER 9: THE THERMAL TRAP

The high-frequency whine of the tracking rotors was vibrating through the ceramic tiles of the exhaust line. It was a sound Elias knew all too well from his years on the lower decks of the Behemoth — the cold, digital hum of Syndicate Hunter-Seekers.

«They're inside the secondary pipe,» Lyra whispered, her face pale under the smudges of coal dust. She snatched her rolled-up map from the desk and shoved it into her flight suit. «We have less than forty seconds before they turn the corner.»

«If we run down the main tunnel, they'll cut us down from behind,» Elias said, his eyes scanning her makeshift camp with mechanical precision. His gaze locked onto the small, cherry-red stove made from the hollowed-out engine cylinder. «Lira, what kind of pressure valve is on that moss stove?»

She blinked, confused by the sudden technical question. «It's a standard liquid-propane injector line adapted for pressurized bio-moss. Why?»

«Aurora,» Elias dropped to his knees beside the glowing stove, his heavy iron wrench already in his hand. «Can you hook into the automated fuel regulation system of this unit if I bridge the copper contacts?»

«Affirmative, Master Thorne,» Aurora's voice hummed through his headset. «If you remove the safety limiter on the pressure regulator, I can cause a controlled thermal runaway. However, the resulting blast radius will be approximately fifteen meters.»

«That's the whole room,» Lyra gasped, instantly realizing his plan. She raised her pneumatic rifle, aiming it toward the dark mouth of the entrance pipe. «You're going to blow us up!»

«Not if we're behind the reinforced bulkhead,» Elias pointed to a heavy, rusted iron pressure door at the back of the chamber. He jammed the teeth of his wrench into the stove's brass safety valve, twisting it with all his strength. The metal groaned, and a sharp, hissing sound filled the air as the pressurized fuel line began to leak directly into the combustion chamber.

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