

A WORLD OF WOMEN AND ASHES



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To my son Azel.

Because there will never be a New World without a New Man.

Chapter I – Kaela

You're it!

Kaela quickly tapped Lumina's shoulder and then ran away at full speed, letting out a high-pitched cry, a child's laughter. Lumina chuckled and then chased after her friend, shouting, "You cheated, Kaela! I wasn't even ready." But Kaela had already disappeared from her line of sight, slaloming between the tanks with the agility of a goat.

Lumina had to rely on the faint muffled laughter to navigate through this gigantic maze of tanks.

Although they were forbidden to do so, this place remained their favourite playground. The punishment, however, was not long in coming, materialized by the authoritative voice of Kaela's mother.

— "Kaela, Lumina, I've told you more than a hundred times not to play among the hibernation pods! Come back here immediately!"

Feeling sheepish, the two girls returned slowly, their heads lowered and eyes filled with "sorry, we didn't mean to" expressions. Despite being uncompromising when it came to the safety of the tank room, Gencha, Kaela's mother, couldn't help but feel a slight pang in her heart when she saw her daughter's apologetic gaze that couldn't entirely hide her mischievous nature. Such an active child, so quick-witted, that she sometimes felt guilty for imposing such responsibilities on her at such a young age, as if she were stealing a part of her innocence, part of her youth.

As daughters of the Guardians of the Ark, Kaela's future was predetermined. She would become a Guardian herself, then pass on that honour and knowledge to her descendants.

The same applied to Lumina.

It was a unique position within the foundation, surrounded by both prestige and secrecy. Apart from a few initiated engineers and members of the "Council of Sages," no one truly knew what was happening in the basement of this building, which was subject to special security measures, including the dreaded cellular recognition drones.

Gencha made the two culprits sit down and once again explained the importance of their future role. — "You both know very well that it is a great honour bestowed upon our families; an honour that we must prove ourselves worthy of, proud of, and above all, responsible for. We are the Guardians of the

Ark."

Kaela and Lumina understood. It must have been the hundredth time, once again, that they were being reminded of the importance of their future role.

They knew this room by heart, knew all the names and faces of these now-familiar characters suspended in that strange pinkish liquid. All these individuals seemed frozen in those peculiar aquariums, yet an observant eye could detect slight tremors coursing through their skin at times, indicating without a doubt that their hosts were indeed alive. Similarly, the subtle rapid eye movements that occasionally appeared on their eyelids left no doubt about their brain activity.

Both Gencha and Lyre (Lumina's mother) had already explained to them how to maintain the tanks and perform all the necessary checks.

In addition to their regular studies, like the other girls in the foundation, Kaela and Lumina received additional training specific to the important role they would play. So, both of them knew how to read the control monitors, interpreting the various signals and lines constantly appearing on the screens. But most importantly, they knew how to perform routine maintenance exercises, such as replenishing the nourishing trays or, even more unpleasantly, emptying the natural waste trays, a task they detested more than anything else.

They also had to check and maintain the refrigeration engines attached to each pod and occasionally intervene in case of malfunction. Of course, in those specific cases, they positioned themselves as observers while Lyre or Gencha carried out the repairs, but in doing so, from a young age, they understood how these units functioned, which were essential for maintaining the temperature inside the tank and thus the life of their host.

They had even witnessed the complete replacement of the cataleptic solution once. It was a rare and delicate operation that, if not performed with the necessary precautions, could result in the occupant's death. It had happened to another team of Guardians a few years ago, and tragedy, shame, and dishonour had befallen their family.

When the colour of the cataleptic solution turned from pinkish to light brown, it was imperative to change the entire liquid within 24 hours, or else the subject's prognosis would be compromised. The process involved emptying the pod through the evacuation hatch, also known as the purge hatch, located below the tank, while simultaneously replacing the old solution with the new one through the filling hatch located at the top of the tank. The new solution, being of higher density, didn't mix with the old one.

This operation had to be carried out simultaneously to ensure that the host

remained fully immersed in the solution at all times. Kaela and Lumina had both felt the tension and extreme nervousness of their mothers when they performed this intervention.

The basements housing the Ark had a gigantic maintenance workshop where all the necessary spare parts were stored, including the essential elements for creating the famous cataleptic gel.

There was also the maintenance of the friction generators, a much more delicate task that Gencha and Lyre always performed together, making their young students repeat the various necessary steps for the smooth running of the operation.

In brief, between school, homework, and the additional tasks associated with the prestigious title of "Guardian of the Ark," there was little time left for play for these two adorable girls, who, with their ever-playful mood, didn't hesitate to defy parental authority for a game of hide-and-seek or tag in the middle of this enormous room.

Yes, Kaela and Lumina knew all the names and faces of the tanks by heart. They often spent time staring at them, wondering what their lives had been like before immersing themselves in this cataleptic solution for a sleep that seemed never to end.

Who were they really? What were their stories?

They had lived before the terrible war, before the apocalypse, and had experienced the world before it transformed into a massive field of ruins and desolation. Oh, the stories they could tell... Lost in thought, they both gazed at these strange beings from a distant, almost forgotten past for long minutes.

They invented stories for them, imagined professions, and even created couples. Pod 27 with Pod 32, Pod 11 with Pod 24 – they would be perfect together, they imagined the children they would have once awakened from their slumber, married, and started a family.

They also had their favourites, their "darlings," as Lumina would say, laughing. Lumina's favourite was Pod 14, a strong and athletic Caucasian man with rugged and angular features, almost caricature-like but remarkably refined – an undoubtedly attractive and charming man. His profile also assured impeccable genetic heritage, with rare complex green eyes, well-aligned teeth of pearly whiteness. In short, the ideal man for most women, but a choice too obvious for Kaela, who preferred Pod 22.

Pod 22 enchanted her with his coppery skin, almond-shaped eyes, and deep black hair with dark-blue reflections. Tall and slender, he possessed a kind of

discreet nobility, like someone full of hidden resources. He may not have had the striking beauty of Pod 14, but he exuded a mysterious allure that irresistibly attracted Kaela.

Pod 22 was also chosen by the women of the foundation, but not to the same extent as Pod 14's popularity. In fact, replicas of Pod 14 could be found everywhere in the entire compound. Being a highly appreciated model, it was one of the most cloned "pseudos" in the entire city. Thus, Pod 14 was frequently encountered in the corridors of the buildings, in the park's alleys, at the mansion during grand collective meals, and, of course, at all the meetings and other collective gatherings.

No, Kaela preferred Pod 22, who was also regularly cloned but not as "famous" as Pod 14 or Pod 42, the gigantic male with black skin and a muscular, sinewy body. One of the ladies' favourites, including my mom," Lumina burst into laughter, torn between amusement and embarrassment.

Naturally, they didn't know much about these "grown-up affairs," but at the age of twelve, they had a perfect understanding of the human reproductive system. Even though all births were the result of "in vitro" fertilization, they were not ignorant of the erotic games that the adults engaged in, to varying degrees of openness.

Kaela often felt sorry for certain "models" like Pod 28 or Pod 46, who were rarely seen among the clones of the foundation, despite the decree issued by the Council of the Elders in the year 2122, which stated that there should be at least 10 representatives of each clone model listed in the catalogue actively present in the city at all times.

Moreover, when this was not the case, one of the missing clones was automatically conceived and assigned to the next woman reaching the age of 21, which was the legal minimum (and mandatory) age for "adopting" a clone, a pseudo.

However, Kaela found them not devoid of interest, and although they were all available for order, rarely did any of the women or girls of the foundation choose one of them. Kaela, however, was not hypocritical and refused to deceive herself. She knew perfectly well that once she reached her "majority," she would choose Pod 22, the love of her life, and she dreaded being automatically assigned one of the least sought-after clones. She had seen the disappointed looks on the faces of the women who had to make the best of it and be satisfied with the "chubby little one" with a round face, flabby belly, and alabaster skin.

If only all the women of the foundation knew that the "original" of each

pseudo model in the catalogue was actually right here, alive and well, simply waiting for someone to awaken them from their endless sleep...

"That would certainly create enormous problems and jeopardize the very foundations of the Ark", her mother had confided to her one day with a grave and sad expression.

The existence of the Ark, formerly known as "Project Oracle," was thus one of the best-kept secrets of the foundation.

The Guardians of the Ark numbered 24, or rather 48, as each guardian was required to have a child whom she would train to replace her and who would accompany her in all her tasks from a very young age.

The guardians worked in teams of two, each covering a four-hour shift, 24/7, with a rotating schedule of one day on and one day off per team. The additional team, or the binomial team as it was called, handled replacements in case of leave or various absences.

In addition to the tasks assigned to an Ark guardian, they were also required to undergo the same combat training as the aspirants to the Praetorian Guard. One aspect of their training that Kaela particularly loved and eagerly awaited every day.

Kaela didn't really know what the "Praetorian Guard" meant, but she knew it referred to elite soldiers. In the city, they maintained order, not that they were often called upon, but their mere presence often prevented overt conflicts. This elite guard answered directly to the Council of the Elders, also known as the "Council of the Ancients." Besides their duties as the foundation's security force, the Praetorian Guard also protected the expedition teams outside the dome from the terrible hordes of "Tchernos" that spread terror in the outside world.

Kaela didn't know exactly what the term "Tchernos" meant, but she knew that behind this strange word were monstrous beings with hideous, almost inhuman faces and relentless adversaries for the expeditions beyond the dome. Since firearms no longer existed and were forbidden anyway, they armed themselves with their formidable high-density halberds, which sliced through almost any type of material as if it were butter, ensuring the protection of the teams venturing outside the dome. These strange weapons were also capable of emitting an electric charge beam, shooting at a distance of over 20 meters, a sort of mini lightning bolt that completely paralyzed the nervous system of anyone who had the misfortune of being targeted – the equivalent of a super powerful taser, her mother had once explained, but Kaela hadn't quite grasped it. It didn't matter to her; she had never laid her hands on one of these fabulous weapons,

but she secretly dreamed of it.

For now, Kaela, like the other students, made do with training exercises using a staff.

According to her teacher and the envious glances from other students that she occasionally noticed, she excelled at it.

At the age of twelve, she could easily outmatch 16-year-old "grown-ups" with her agility, speed, and precision, making her a formidable opponent. She was still too young to participate in the annual competition organized by the Praetorian Guard, but her teacher, Mistress Jaho, had once confided in her that she had never had such a gifted student, and soon the honorary title of "champion of the guard" would adorn the wall of her room.

In truth, this part of her "extra-curricular" education delighted her. She had even dared to ask her mother one day to switch her training and join the ranks of the Praetorian Guard instead of pursuing her education as an Ark guardian. This led to a long and serious discussion with her mother, who remained calm but made her understand how being educated as an Ark guardian was an honour and a privilege for their family. That day, Kaela truly understood the importance of her role, the significance of this heritage, this family legacy that she was obliged to continue with her own descendants. She represented the future of a healthy humanity, and upon her shoulders rested the renewal of the entire human race.

Kaela had never seen a "real" man outside of the occupants of the tanks or in the numerous films and documentaries drawn from the collective archives of the city, as the last "natural man" of the foundation had passed away many years before she was born.

The Elders still spoke about it with misty eyes and a tremor in their voices.

For a reason unknown to all, 90% of the births in the Foundation were girls. No males seemed willing to come, and when a male birth was finally recorded, the child was often frail and, despite all the advances in medicine available in the city, perished most of the time within the first three years. Few made it through adolescence, and the vast majority turned out to be sterile, or even impotent for many of them.

Thus, was born the idea of clones.

The women, having seen men gradually disappear from their lives, decided to develop a cloning project using cells from individuals "stored" in the Ark. The cloning techniques initially faced significant failures with success rates below 2%. However, after a few years, they achieved resounding success. Unfortunately, once they had better control over these practices, they quickly