# ELYSIUM SANCTUARY OF THE FUTURE

TEAM GAMETHERAPY



# DEDICATED TO ALL WHO WISH TO FIGHT FEAR

# AUTHOR'S NOTE THE PLOT AND CHARACTERS IN THIS BOOK ARE A WORK OF THE AUTHOR'S IMAGINATION. THE BOOK IS NOT A TEXTBOOK, NOR A GUIDE ON HOW TO LIVE.



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### CHAPTER 1

### ELYSIUM: A SANCTUARY FOR THE FUTURE

Elysium – the sanctuary of the future, hidden deep beneath the Earth's surface like a mechanical temple rising from darkness instead of sunlight. Beneath its steel dome, under layers of concrete and cables, sprawls a city that pulses to the rhythm of algorithms, where every step is programmed and every breath permitted by the system.

The end of the world did not come in a single explosion. It was not a moment humanity would remember as the end of everything. It was a series of steps, each one bearing the face of a decision. Each one carried the signature of mankind.

First, the rivers turned into dusty beds. Fields that once fed nations became gray ash. The weather worsened. Droughts lasted for years, rains were rare and cruel. The oceans rose, yet drinking water vanished. People began to realize the planet was no longer breathing.

Then came the energy crisis. Oil rigs dried up, solar networks failed, and the world was plunged into darkness. Cities that never slept fell into eternal slumber. Nations that once shook hands drew weapons. New wars began—not for land, but for water, air, the most basic right to survive.

Weapons that had once been only scarecrows in warehouses became the language of diplomacy. Nuclear warheads left their bases and soared into skies we had long stopped watching. Then they fell back, in rains of fire and radiation.

The planet changed. Not slowly, but desperately. Nature withdrew into the shadows, retreating before the poisoned winds. Forests burned, animals went silent, oceans were veiled with a deadly film. And people? Those who survived sought refuge, a place to hide.

Thus Elysium was born.

Not as hope. Not as a new beginning. But as an answer. As the last breath of a civilization that realized far too late that the planet cannot be owned, only shared.



"The Future is below. The chosen survive."

When my ancestor first stepped into this underground sanctuary, his notes shone with hope. He described Elysium as a miracle of technology—clean lines, sterile corridors, perfectly timed sounds echoing from loudspeakers at every step. To him it was a flawless world. Order and structure gave the feeling of safety, certainty, a system that replaced everything lost.

Every morning began with the same ritual. Three tones rang out from the central loudspeakers—always the same, emotionless, yet precise. Their echo spread through the empty spaces, bounced off metal walls, and opened the day like an ancient trumpet. Gradually, the lights came on—not yellow, not warm, but cold, distributed with calculated precision. Their white beams awakened the sectors as if the heartbeat of a giant artificial organism had begun to beat.

The air was controlled. The temperature adjusted. Water flowed only at designated minutes, and only where the system allowed. Food was dispensed by machines that identified residents by scanning their irises. Everyone received exactly what they needed—no more, no less. Flavor was not part of the offering. Only nutrition. Only survival.

Silent discipline reigned in the corridors. Everything carried the spirit of necessity. Hydroponic farms glowed with white light that imitated the sun's rays, yet lacked its warmth.

Plants grew in gel-filled vats, without soil, without the touch of earth that had once been the source of life.

Children learned in virtual worlds. They walked through forests they had never felt beneath their feet. They looked at skies they had never seen. They touched virtual trees that had never rustled with leaves. This is how they learned about a world that had become only a memory. In human minds it survived as Aether.

My mother told me about it in the evenings. By the flickering light of an old generator, in the silence of her own nostalgia, she whispered that forbidden word: Aether. A place where the sky still lived. A place where the wind still blew. A place we had lost.

When I look at the ceiling above my head, I see only ventilation grids, pipes, and metal plates breathing like the lungs of the system. But in my imagination, I see a blue sky stretching endlessly. Clouds moving to their own rhythm. Sunlight that does not only illuminate, but warms. Wind that smells of rain.

Elysium is our everything. Our home. Our prison.

Decades ago, the massive gates closed. They sealed us off from the world we had destroyed. We built a lifeless hope, where an artificial intelligence —Tark'han—rules every aspect of our lives. It became our god in a digital temple. Without emotion, without compassion, but with flawless efficiency.

Every molecule of water here is captured and recycled. Every milligram of food is grown, every breath permitted by filtration. The system knows no errors. But it knows wear.

In the past few days, I felt something changing. The sounds of Elysium shifted. Instead of the quiet hum came a faint creak. The system's pulse faltered. As if Elysium itself had begun to breathe harder.

And so did I.

Last night, I couldn't sleep. I tried to calm my mind with breathing exercises I had learned with Viator. It is a strange feeling—to have a holographic mentor by your side who knows every fear of yours better than you do yourself.

"Listen to your breath, Miles. In the silence between inhale and exhale lies your victory," came Viator's voice in the stillness of the room. His sphere of light flickered faintly.

But in my head, the old images returned. That room appeared again—without light, without an exit. Darkness like a living organism pressing into my lungs. My first memory of claustrophobia. Sometimes I told myself I should be strong. I must be strong to endure my fears. But when I found myself in narrow corridors, my body remembered every moment of that room, that storage space where I was trapped as a child. Darkness crawled into my lungs, the air burned, my fingers trembled. I felt fear creeping over my shoulders like a living creature. That childhood trauma kept me captive. I still feel that darkness; the fear became a part of me that I am learning to control.

"Breathe deeply, Miles." Viator's voice in my mind stopped me.

"Focus on your breathing." The words struck like lightning.

Breathing. What seemed so simple now became the key to my control. Viator had taught me many times that how I breathe determines how I respond to fear. "Breathing is a reflex," he once said. "But how you breathe—that is a skill. And this skill you can master."

I inhaled deeply. Controlled breathing. I began to notice consciously how I was breathing. Each breath was slow, deep. I realized that what I did with my breath had an immense effect on how I felt.

"Always remember, Miles, breathing will calm you," Viator repeated.

I focused on my breath. Slowly, with control.

"Try it with me, Miles," said Viator. "Breathe in deeply, hold for a moment, and exhale slowly. Slowly, slowly."

I closed my eyes and began the exercise. I inhaled through my nose, held my breath for a few seconds, then exhaled slowly through my mouth. Each breath deeper, each exhale slower. Viator's sphere pulsed with the rhythm of my breathing—its color shifting with precision, as if responding to my progress. Controlled breathing—something I had to master. And Viator was right. Each breath eased me. When I focused on breathing, I felt my body calm. Fear began to dissolve, its grip on me slowly fading.

"Well done, Miles." Viator's voice was calm, with a hint of relief. He always told me that when I learned to breathe properly, all those confined spaces would no longer feel so unbearable. To focus on breath meant to take control of what I once thought insurmountable. "Every day is your training regimen, Miles," Viator said, his voice firm with resolve. "You're not here just to survive. You're here to triumph over what once held you back."

And he was right. When I decided to fully focus on breathing, suddenly all the confined spaces weren't so oppressive. The corridor seemed wider, the air lighter, my steps less heavy. I began to doubt the chains that bound me. And I know this is only the beginning—each step I take will grow stronger, because I know I am already slowly overcoming fear.

This morning, as I walked through the corridors of Zone D, the system reminded me once again how fragile and dependent we are.

The displays on the walls repeated constantly:



"Obey the System — It Keeps You Alive."

The sound of fans, dimmed lights, the hum of recycling pumps... these sounds are our rhythm of life here. And the rhythm of death, if anything fails.

When I reached the control room, Damien Kael, my friend and colleague, was already waiting.

"Miles... we've got a problem," he began without a greeting. "The turbines in sector C3 stopped filtering air properly this morning. Nothing critical yet, but... look at the curve."

I leaned toward the terminal. The blue oxygen graphs flickered slightly. Up, down. An uneasy, dangerous movement.

"Software glitch? Diagnostics?"

"No. Mechanical stutter. The rotor cycles irregularly. If this repeats in other zones..." Damien didn't finish. He didn't need to.

As we both stood silently over the screen, Viator's sphere drifted closer.

"We're going to the turbines, Damien," I decided. "I want to see them with my own eyes."

The corridor led through a maintenance shaft—narrow, long, with pipes hissing overhead like distant snakes. The walls swallowed our breath, as if we were walking through the spine of some massive machine. Lights flickered above us, but held. Too quiet. Too cold.

"This air..." Damien muttered. "Something overheated."

I didn't reply. I felt it too. The smell of scorched plastic and oil. Maybe just old piping. But maybe not.

Ahead, the technical doors of engine room C3 opened. Damien entered the access code and the heavy lock retracted with a growl. The doors slowly parted.

We stopped.

The turbines. Four massive units, the heart of the ventilation circuit. And yet... something was wrong.

One stood still. The second spun, but irregularly—its cycles jerking, shuddering slightly at times. The third emitted a faint, uneven scrape, as if something inside was rubbing. The fourth hissed—thin, moist steam escaping from a side pipe, condensing against the metal and forming a damp film on the wall.

Damien was silent. He carefully stepped closer and ran his palm over the console. I bent down toward the bearing of the second unit.

"This isn't right," he finally spoke. "Look, the connecting pin is deformed. Not from manufacturing."

I leaned in closer. Indeed. The metal was slightly bent—not broken, but strained, as if something had overloaded it.

"Could it have been pressure? Vibration?" I suggested. "Maybe old material. Wear. You know how long these units run without ever being shut down."

Damien didn't answer right away. He moved to the next turbine and examined the leaking steam.

"Damage like this usually doesn't happen all at once."

I looked at him.

In Elysium, there was no room for deliberate mistakes. We were all here together, sealed in one system. Every step, every decision could cost us survival.

"Maybe just a bad batch from the factory. A hidden defect. But we need to report it," Damien muttered.

"And what about Tark'han?" I asked. "Why didn't it detect this? Not a single one of these faults."

Damien shrugged. "I don't know... I can't explain it."

In the silence of the engine room, beneath the faint roar of the failing turbines, it was clear—something was wrong. I stared at the crack in the pipe and realized that some things in Elysium were breaking too soon, and that our future was becoming uncertain.



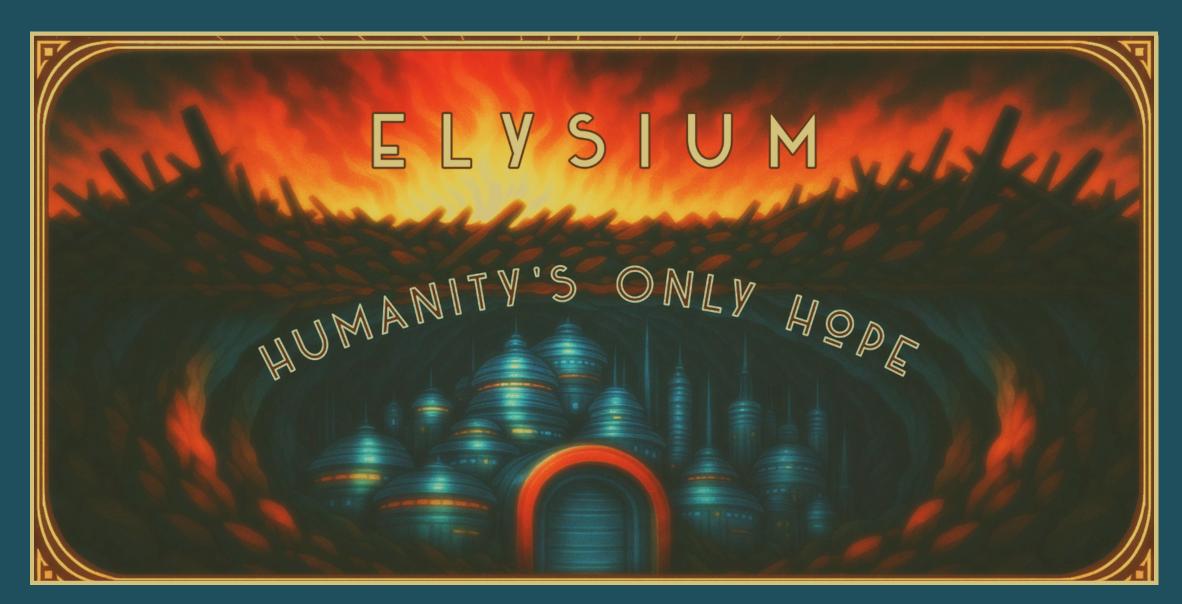
No, I am no hero, if that's what someone thinks. I am an engineer. An explorer, if you want to use that word. But in reality? I am just a man trying to keep this underground world alive.

And so, every day I repair, improve, adapt. I wait for the moment when I will stop being just an engineer in Elysium. When I finally break free, even though I know it means more than just fixing a machine. Perhaps that is my greatest curse—the longing for freedom that always pulls me forward, yet at the same time distances me from the very goal.

But it was she, too—my mother—who taught me never to give up. "Never let yourself drown in your own fear, Miles. Even if the doors are closed, always try to open the ones no one has yet seen."

The great steel doors of Elysium rise before me, like a colossal mechanism. The entrance is guarded by blue lights blending with deep shadows.

Above the doors looms a massive inscription—white letters on a black background glowing in blood-red light that casts eerie shadows around me, as if the very gateway were created to drag me into an unknown world. My eyes fix on the giant letters emerging from the darkness.



"Elysium: Humanity's Only Hope."

The words seem carved into the very metal, impossible to forget. *Elysium—the only hope of mankind*. For us who have lived here our whole lives, it is not just a slogan. These are the words that keep us alive. Words that give us hope, even if we are not entirely sure that hope is truly real. Everything circles back to that one declaration, assuring us that Elysium is the final answer to what became of the surface.

## CHAPTER 2

#### COLLAPSE

Everything worked perfectly. Electricity, water, oxygen, food—everything was strictly monitored and distributed so that nothing went to waste. Elysium was created as a flawless mechanism to ensure humanity's survival underground. Every part of it, from ventilation to water distribution, was designed to leave no room for error. The systems were interconnected, and Tark'han constantly monitored their state, adjusting conditions to keep them optimal for survival.

Everywhere I looked I saw the inscription: *Obey the System – It Keeps You Alive.* Carved into iron walls, scrawled by human hands, sprayed in colors across murals—wherever my eyes turned, those words stared back. And we, the citizens of Elysium, believed. We believed that if we obeyed the system, we would stay alive.

That's how I, Miles Lucis, saw it—as if we humans lived inside a perfect machine. Every gear in this mechanism had to function flawlessly. Every movement, every number, every cycle was carefully planned. All the systems that kept Elysium alive were interconnected, and when one failed, its effects immediately echoed through the others. It was a fragile balance that had to be maintained at all costs.

But then came the day when everything began to change. I can't tell you the exact day of the year it was, but the first failures crept in quietly. Doors that closed on their own. Lights that flickered without cause. Unnoticed, step by step, as if some unseen presence tiptoed around us, the operation and life of Elysium began to deteriorate.

\* \* \*

I woke with a sharp gasp, as if something was pulling me back into the deep abyss of fear. It was only a dream, but inside my chest the feeling of

unbearable weight returned. That dream of entrapment... it felt far too real.

Drenched in sweat, I clapped my hands heavily and the light above my head flicked on. Another demanding workday awaited me, broken only by a lunch break in the cafeteria reserved for Sector D.

I stretched my lean, long limbs, rubbed my pale green eyes, and with damp palms tried to tame the unruly dark hair that fell in waves just below my ears.

I left my apartment and walked toward my workplace. I barely noticed the corridors anymore, the artificial lights, the people hurrying past me to their sectors. I moved quietly because everything around me vibrated with a loud, relentless energy.

When I entered the control room, nothing seemed different than usual. The familiar instruments that answered every question about air quality, oxygen, and pressure blinked steadily, as always. The screens displayed the same data I had long taken for granted. I checked the operation of the turbines in Sector C3 and reassured myself that we had already fixed the mechanical fault.

And yet I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Maybe it was just a vague impression, like a grain lodged in your throat that keeps choking you.

That was when Damien stepped into the control room, his footsteps silent. His complexion was pale, like most people in Elysium—an effect of the lack of sunlight. The wrinkles on his forehead and around his eyes came from long hours spent in cramped technical spaces, repairing malfunctions. His light hair, uneven from occasional trims, he now ran through nervously with his hand. He wore the same as we all did: a dark gray jumpsuit made of durable composite material designed for underground work. Small neon lights on his shoulders served as illumination. He took off his heavy-rimmed safety goggles, and when he saw me, he spoke with difficulty.

"Miles, something's wrong."

His voice was filled with unease—something rare for him. "All turbine tests are showing small but unusual fluctuations."

I shot up from my chair. "How is that possible? I just checked them in Sector C3!" I gestured nervously toward the monitor.

"It's not just Sector C3, but all of them. And it might not be only mechanical damage—it could also be software."

"But Tark'han—" I didn't finish the sentence.

Damien nodded. We were both thinking the same thing: yes, technology should point out an error, alert us, or fix it for us—but none of that was happening.

"I'm going to the turbines," I ordered, heading toward the distant Sector C3 to check their operation. I passed through the maintenance corridor, entered the access code to unlock the door, and slowly stepped inside. I looked at the turbines before me and suddenly heard a faint hiss, a subtle sound lost among the hum of fans and the deep heartbeat of Elysium's machinery. It reminded me of a steam leak—something I had heard a thousand times and learned to ignore. But this time, something inside me froze. Instinct—or maybe just a quiet voice in the back of my mind—refused to let me dismiss it.

I glanced over my shoulder. At that exact moment, a sound rang out that could not be mistaken for anything else: a sharp, metallic crack, as if something massive and ancient had finally given way after years of strain. A split second later came the explosion. Not fiery—but brutal. The sound of tearing metal, pipes bursting under the pressure of water. The ground shook. My whole body resonated as the vibrations surged through the floor.

I raised my arm, but it was already too late. A violent blast knocked the air from my lungs and hurled me backward. My back slammed into a hard panel, I slid down the wall, and hit the floor, where chunks of ceiling and shattered pipework crashed down over me. The air filled with the hiss of steam and smoke, the sharp stench of burned insulation stinging my nose. I lay there, pinned as though nailed to the ground. My shoulder throbbed in time with a heart heating too fast. My breath came in ragged gasps—

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Then it struck—the old, familiar force.

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I could move only a few centimeters. Then it struck—the old, familiar force.

My heart skipped. Each breath was a struggle. The pressure on my chest turned into panic. My fingers trembled, trying to grip the metal edge, but without strength. My body weakened, my mind quaked. And that old voice—my inner critic—screamed: You won't get out. You'll stay here. This is how it ends.

I felt a faint pulsing, not in my body, but in the air. A strong light flickered above me. Viator.

"Miles," his voice came, soft yet clear. "I am here with you. Hold on."

The light took form, the shape I knew well—a glowing sphere, gentle and calm. It wasn't real, but in that moment, it was more real than anything else.

I drew a deep breath. Through my nose. Slowly. I held it, just as he had taught me. I counted. Then exhaled through my mouth, controlled and steady. Once. Twice. Ten times. Until I felt my body again—not paralyzed beneath fear, but alive, able to act.

Smoke, steam, debris—but now I had control. I clenched my teeth, shifted sideways, twisted my shoulder, and began pushing the panel that pinned me. It was heavy, but no longer insurmountable. The pressure on my arm eased. I inhaled deeply.

I could move.

With effort, I pulled myself onto my knees, gasping, when I noticed someone lying across the room. A man. His body twisted unnaturally, arms spread, his bloody face frozen in a death grimace. Motionless.

I froze in horror.

But no one was supposed to be here, I thought. I hadn't seen anyone. Then how... The thought remained unfinished.

I stepped closer, staring at the bloodied face. It was Tomas, the new technician in our department—but he wasn't supposed to be here today.

He had no shift. How had he gotten in? And what was he doing here?

I knelt beside him, scanning his body. Tools lay beside him, his bloodsoaked face carrying an expression that seemed almost... confused.

Then I heard a piercing whistle. At once, I knew: if I stayed even a second longer, the fumes from the ruptured pipe could kill me.

Almost to myself, I said aloud: "Overload in the secondary system. If it blows, the rest of the sector will be gone."

I shot to my feet. Step by step I made my way through the wreckage. My shoulder screamed with pain, but I could still walk. It wasn't over yet. One last glance back at the man lying among the ruins brought a flash of grief—and confusion.

When I returned a few days later from the infirmary to my workplace full of computers, gauges, and tools, I realized something. All those years we believed we were masters of the system—that we were safe here underground, in this supposed zone of protection from the outside world—it was never as reliable as we thought. The systems that kept us alive were weaker, more fragile, increasingly prone to failure. And the failure was already here. Because of our mistakes—and the system's—people had begun to die.

My thoughts were broken by a soft knock and the creak of the already half-open iron doors. When the grinding stopped, I saw my superior, Valen, standing there.

"Miles, I need you upstairs," he cut through the silence of the room.

At his words, I straightened instantly, even though I knew that when he issued a firm order, it meant trouble. Whenever Valen called for me, it meant something was happening. Something serious.

"Upstairs. To the Council's office. Now, Miles."

"Understood, sir," I replied shortly, and without hesitation began gathering the sheets that had been printed out from the control panel. The restless feeling still gnawed at me, but now it was no longer just personal. If something wasn't working in Elysium, leadership was the first to know. And when Valen was ordered by them to investigate a problem, it meant it was already far too late to ignore the signals.

Zone A—the leadership of all Elysium—was located at the very top of this underground world, an untouchable zone accessible only to those with exceptional roles. It was entirely separated from the rest of the system, as if it sought to detach itself from the daily grind of life below. The rest of Elysium was merely a factory of survival, while here, in this administrative zone, both present and future were shaped.

The corridors leading to this sector were always meticulously guarded. Everything was under cameras and protection, from the doors to the bright ceilings with lights that evenly illuminated every room, every corner. There was no darkness here, no uneasy zones where something might go wrong. Every step a visitor took was prescribed and monitored.

While life in the lower sectors was about daily survival, the leadership's offices felt a world away from the constant fear and struggle we endured. Here, everything ran on cold logic. Here, spatial instability did not exist.

The heart of Elysium—Zone A—always struck me as a place where oxygen and energy didn't flow from our systems but from relentless control. Control over everything. For me, someone who knew every detail of technology and understood that a system was only as strong as its weakest point, this was the stark contrast between what we lived and what we were shown was possible.

As we approached the Council's main hall, silence dominated. Silence so thick it could be cut.

"Commander of Systems," addressed a young woman behind a desk, nodding to Valen Draegor. "The Council is expecting you, along with Miles Lucis." She pointed toward the massive iron doors.

Then we both entered. The room was almost a sanctuary. Records that determined our future were laid out on the tables, but there was something heavy, merciless in the air. A chill ran down my spine. The Council members appeared before me—stern faces, rigid hands.

Mara Solis, the unyielding head of logistics, ran her fingers through her gray hair and watched me with a cold gaze.

"How are you feeling, Miles?" She pointed to my bandaged shoulder.

"It still hurts a little. It was dislocated, but it will be fine."

"We lost one of our own," she stated, as if for everyone, but her eyes were fixed only on me, as if she wanted to read my thoughts and feelings.

I did not look away, though many questions burned on my tongue.

The others remained silent, merely nodding.

"So?" Mara prompted after a moment, curtly.

"We prevented a possible explosion in Sector C3," I began, "but we observed serial failures in other mechanical parts—turbines, bearings, pumps.

It's slow, but systematic. Unless we start full-scale revisions, a chain failure of the ventilation circuits could occur, leading to loss of life."

Joran Valtor, the Technical Director, tapped his pen nervously against the table.

"Surely it's not that critical, Miles?"

"Based on my experience, I must conclude that it is," I countered.

"But you only work in Sector D, so you cannot know the situation in the other parts," Joran corrected me sharply.

"We receive reports from all sectors, Joran," my superior Valen Draegor answered for me. "So the data is available, and Miles is the one best suited to interpret it out of all my engineers."

Joran raised his hands defensively, his smile almost an apology. Then he asked, "How many cycles' worth of spare parts do we have?"

"Three replacements at most for each critical unit," I replied quickly.

Celeste Ashar, head of supplies, furrowed her brows. "If more break down, we have no reserves. Spare parts are a luxury. Energy resources for producing new ones—unavailable."

"And Tark'han? Why didn't it predict this?" Korrin Eros from Security demanded, staring at Valen in confusion.

Valen fixed his gaze on the holographic projection of the system. The AI was silent. It had been for days. Diagnostics still reported stable circuits—yet they were failing.

"We don't know," Valen Draegor whispered. "Tark'han... has stopped actively monitoring and repairing certain functions. We've tried resetting it multiple times, but without success."

Silence filled the room.

Mara once again fixed her unnaturally blue eyes on me and continued heavily. "There is another problem. Oxygen is running out quickly, and while at first it looked like a minor technical issue, we no longer underestimate any signals. Air is depleting faster than projected, and the systems are beginning to fail. Elysium is on the brink of full overload. We've received reports that in sectors where ventilation has stopped working, people are collapsing, the elderly and sick are dying in their sleep, panic is spreading—and panic is our greatest danger."

The Council sat stiffly, their eyes shifting between me and Mara. Silence was broken only by Joran, the Technical Director. "Do we have any idea what's causing these fluctuations? Could it simply be a minor fault in the recycling unit?"

Mara shifted uneasily in her chair. "Our data confirms this is a major problem, beyond the recycling unit. Let's not forget—if filtration collapses," her voice trembled with fear, "all of Elysium collapses. We already have several critical sectors on the edge. If this continues, we'll need to relocate people to safer zones. If we cannot stabilize the situation quickly, we must be prepared for evacuation. Do we have any other reserves?"

She turned to Valen, who was still staring at me, eyes unwavering. When she called his name, he turned back to Mara. "Zone Z," he began, "is the last place where systems are still functioning and reserves are known. Decades ago, our predecessors stored supplies there. They built Zone Z as a final solution, a refuge in case of Elysium's failure. But even here, ventilation turbines are struggling, and chemical filters show fluctuations. These problems are spreading fast, and unless immediate action is taken, we'll soon have scarce or even no breathable air. I believe we must decide now and move all remaining reserves there."

Mara turned to Celeste. "What does supply say?"

"We agree."

"And the Security Office?"

"Zone Z is our last chance," Eros began, "but we must also consider other options. Repair everything we can. Zone Z is the smallest, and its capacity is limited. I doubt all Elysium's inhabitants can fit there. We also can't forget that Zone Z is sealed, and opening it requires the full Council's approval. If we move everyone there, we'll face a critical problem not only with supplies but also with security."

The room fell silent again until Korrin Eros's voice cut through once more. "I think we must be prepared for the worst when it comes to security. If technological failures keep spreading, evacuation will be a massive risk. Who can guarantee it will be safe to move all inhabitants into Zone Z? And what if its systems are insufficient to sustain their lives?"

"You're right, Eros," Viktor Hale cut in, "but we've only just begun the repairs, and already we've exhausted much of our reserves. As for a long-term plan, we must consider alternatives. The creation of new zones may become necessary."

Valen Draegor looked around at everyone present and allowed Viktor's words to linger in the room. The tension was palpable—the air itself felt heavy. Finally, Draegor stood, his gaze sweeping across the Council, his voice carrying the weight of decision.

"We must begin systematic repairs of all damaged components and also determine why Tark'han is not responding. The risk is too great, but we must try. All systems must be prepared to withstand this new situation. But let us also keep in mind the transfer to Zone Z as an option. If it comes to that, the Council must vote for evacuation. With this decision, we begin immediate repair and diagnostics. Miles, your skills will be crucial in analyzing and repairing the systems and machines. Do you all agree?"

Everyone nodded—some with uneasy eyes, others with a firmness that only half-concealed their fear.

I looked at those around me. This step, this decision, might be the only way to keep Elysium alive—but not everyone would survive. And yet one question still gnawed at me: why could no one explain how Tomas had gotten to the turbines in Sector C, or what he had been doing there? I had found nothing in the records, and no one had authorized his entry. Access codes changed daily for security reasons. How had he obtained them? I frowned, feeling my whole body tense. Suddenly, I felt Viktor Hale's hand on my shoulder. "Are you all right, Miles?" he asked.

I had to speak the truth. "I don't know. Maybe," I whispered.

\* \* \*

But what was my inner struggle compared to the crisis now consuming us all, awakening like some wild beast?

It was five in the morning, and I was on my way with my colleagues to service node seventeen.

The door opened with a metallic groan. Before us stretched a narrow tunnel coated in dust, its walls scraped down in places to raw metal. The lights here had long since died. The darkness was thick, like oil.

Behind me walked the technicians Damien and Keller, each with a helmet lamp and a pack of tools.

This was our first mission: to check the water core 4B—one of the deepest and most forgotten in all of Elysium.

With every step, I felt my chest tighten. The passage narrowed, and with the walls just centimeters from my shoulders, I was forced to breathe shallowly.

In my mind, I repeated Viator's words. "Inhale through the nose, Miles. Exhale through the mouth. Focus. This isn't a prison. This is just space. Just air and metal."

Slowly, I calmed. But memories rose up on their own. Claustrophobia. No escape.

Keller stumbled over a loose metal plate. The clang thundered through the silence, echoing down the tunnel.

"If something was here, it's heard us by now," Damien muttered.

I knew he was trying to joke, but his voice was tense. None of us liked being here.

We arrived at core 4B. A massive water turbine loomed in the dark like an enormous church organ, silent, dormant.

"Sensors show minimal activity," Damien reported.

I nodded.

"We'll need to reach the central panel. It's deep below the shaft."

I looked into the narrow passage running alongside the turbine. It was like the throat of an old canal, an enclosed space barely a meter wide, though tall enough.

Again I felt the invisible hand squeezing my chest, but I nodded.

Step by step, I entered the tunnel.

The air was heavy, strangely stale, as if no one had breathed it in years. The beam of my headlamp lit only a narrow cone ahead of me; everything else remained swallowed in darkness.

The metal walls were coated in a thin layer of dust and soot, some places scarred with corrosion—that much was expected. But the farther I went, the more I began to notice anomalies.

Some joints were loose, others looked hastily replaced. The pipe to my right had been opened recently—you could tell from the insulation tape, now hanging slack and useless. Something about it didn't add up.

I bent down and leaned closer to one of the ventilation shafts. I checked the seal. Torn. As if someone had deliberately damaged it.

"No registered technician had access to this type of intervention," I said aloud.

I held my breath.

"Someone's been here," I whispered. "And they knew exactly what they were doing."

I pried open the hatch with a faint groan of the hinges. The inside of the shaft was dark, but cables ran everywhere, none of which belonged there. One was spliced into the main circuit and disappeared into the wall, deeper into the complex. It was clear—someone had made adjustments, altered the flows, maybe even tampered with the ventilation controls.

Maybe it was meant to stay invisible. But it wasn't.

I heard a soft tap. I turned. Damien was making his way toward me, cautious in every step.

"Miles...?" he asked, spotting me crouched by the hatch.

"Look at this." I stepped aside, showing him the cables. The traces. The unauthorized access.

He went silent. Then spoke quietly, almost reluctantly:

"This isn't a system error."

I nodded.

Neither of us was ready to put into words what was already clear. Not fully. Because in Elysium, where everyone was part of the same struggle to survive, where every human was a cog in the machine... the thought that someone would deliberately sabotage the very foundations of our survival was almost unthinkable.

And yet...

Celeste Ashar had been right. We hadn't been able to secure all the components from reserve stock to repair the water core. And the crisis was deepening.

The pipes—the metal arms that held the last drops of water—had become symbols of our fear.

When the blue symbol of a drop lit up across the walls of Elysium, the emblem of water, it was a warning that something irreversible was looming. The blue glow clashed with the harsh ceiling lights screeching against the steel walls, as if the world itself was fighting to stay alive, while water—the life-giving element—was turning into a luxury everyone feared losing.



"Water is power. Every drop counts."

That phrase became the refrain of our days. As water in showers dwindled and pumps began to collapse, the pressure weighed on all of Elysium. Recycling systems no longer worked as they should, and every corner of this steel jungle felt like it was tightening in on itself. Water, once taken for granted, had become the source of conflicts with no safe place left to hide from them.

\* \* \*

That evening, the Council gathered again. This time, no one spoke with certainty. The air in the chamber was heavy, as if even the walls felt the

mounting pressure. On the large central display, red warnings flashed one after another.

"Ventilation Sector E: offline."

"Water Pump 3A: critical error."

"Pressure Stability: fluctuating."

Mara Solis remained silent. Her strict features grew even sterner. Her eyes scanned the figures, worsening by the minute.

Damien sat at the terminal, running diagnostics again and again. To no avail.

"This is no accident anymore, Mara," broke the silence Joran Valtor, the Technical Director. "Tark'han isn't responding. The system is running on an autonomous cycle—and it's stopped monitoring itself."

"Maybe something damaged its control circuits," Damien suggested. "Or..." He trailed off.

Everyone knew what he was considering. A possibility no one dared yet say aloud.

I stood before the holographic sphere, its bluish glow pulsing—the heart of the central AI. But in recent days its light had changed. From a clear, steady beam, it had turned into a flickering instability, riddled with micro-errors.

"Tark'han. Can you hear me?" I asked once again.

No answer came.

Only faint, illogical static and fragments of words: "Optimization... priority... sample... protection..."

"If we don't stabilize ventilation within five days, we'll be out of oxygen," Korrin Eros from Security stated flatly. His voice was calm, but his eyes were filled with shadows.

Celeste Ashar added, "The water recycling systems are collapsing as well. Every additional day in this configuration means exponential decline. Supplies are irregular. The hydroponic farms meant to provide food and water are failing one after another."

Joran drew a deep breath. "There is only one option left—as Valen said—relocate to Zone Z. Move everyone there. Into the last functioning core of the system."

Silence fell.

"Will everyone survive there?" Viktor Hale asked.

"Maybe not," Joran admitted. "But as things stand now, no one will survive."

"We also need to consider the damage Elysium is already facing. Some failures are mechanical, but others... they're coming directly from Tark'han. As if someone attacked it," I steered the discussion onto dangerous ground.

All eyes turned to me, but only Viktor Hale spoke. "What do you mean by that? Are you suggesting someone is sabotaging Elysium?"

"Yes," my voice cut across the chamber.

Celeste Ashar shot to her feet, her face flushed with anger. "You can't be serious, Miles! You're accusing people of sabotaging and destroying the only place they can survive?"

"No," I tried to soothe her with a friendly tone. "I'm not saying someone wants to destroy all of Elysium, because that would mean destroying themselves as well."

"There you see," Celeste interrupted.

"But," I continued, "I believe their intention is different—and the Council should begin an investigation."

"We don't have time for that now," Mara broke through the thickening atmosphere. "Elysium is collapsing, and our task is to save the people."

"But that person is behind Tomas's death," Damien burst out. When every pair of eyes turned to him in shock, he blushed deeply and looked at me in fear, as if seeking refuge.

"Damien is right," I took over. "Tomas was where he shouldn't have been, and he knew access codes he had no way of knowing. His head was injured."

"He probably staggered from the fumes, fell, and hit his head," Valen Draegor interrupted me. "It happens."

"And what about those codes? We still don't know how he got them. There's no record of his work or what he was doing in Sector C."

Valen stepped closer and laid his hands on my shoulders. "I know this troubles you, boys," he looked at Damien, "but playing detectives—this isn't the right time.

We have bigger problems, and they're far more urgent."

Then Mara spoke. "You know it will be you, Miles, who must adapt the systems for the transition. And if anyone has experience with the deep service shafts, it's you."



When the meeting ended, the chamber emptied slowly, heavily, as if each of us weighed a few kilos more. The words lingered in the air long after they'd faded. But I didn't remain standing still. Inside, I felt something had just shifted—not in the system. In the people.

In Elysium, it wasn't just the walls that were collapsing anymore. Trust was collapsing too.

Later that evening, Damien and I stood in maintenance section H<sub>4</sub>, where another pump had failed just hours earlier. The pipes had been replaced, but what I saw at their outlets chilled me.

"See this?" I pointed at a gap in the seal that should never have been breached. "This wasn't material fatigue."

Damien crouched down. He checked the wiring.

"Loose anchoring... severed safety circuit... Whoever's doing this knows exactly what they're doing."

We fell silent.

"And they have access to the codes," I added.

"The ones that change every day," Damien finished, his throat tight.

We looked at each other.

In Elysium, access to those codes was strictly guarded. The daily authorization sequences were held by only four people.

Mara Solis.

Joran Valtor.

Celeste Ashar.

Valen Draegor.

And if someone was tampering with Tark'han, bypassing its controls, physically interfering with the system's cores... then it had to be one of them.

"Which one of them would do it?" Damien whispered, as if someone might overhear through the walls.

"I don't know," I answered. "But I do know someone wants us in Zone Z—and not as a backup plan. As the only option."

Damien thought for a moment. "Zone Z is the last remaining active subsystem. It's cut off from the central core, with autonomous power, separate air handling, its own storage network—but it's also the smallest. And if the reactor goes critical, all of Elysium will be destroyed... But strategically—whoever controls Zone Z controls Elysium."

We stayed quiet for a moment.

"You think this is about power?" I asked.

Damien frowned. "Or... something unknown lies hidden in Zone Z, and that someone wants it badly."

My chest tightened.

This wasn't paranoia. This was a decision.

"Which of them has the motivation?" I asked.

"Joran knows everything about the infrastructure. If he wanted to break the system down, he'd know exactly where to strike so it looked like gradual collapse."

"But Joran never seemed... power-driven."

"And what about Celeste?" Damien pressed on. "She controls supplies. Maybe she wants decisions to be made based on need—who gets enough to survive. She knows exactly what's stored in Zone Z."

But something kept pulling me elsewhere.

"Valen," I said slowly.

Damien raised his eyebrows. "The boss? You think him?"

"He has access to every section. He was the first to propose the move to Zone Z. And he's cold... as if he foresaw all of this."

Damien said nothing.

"We need proof," I added.

I knew that if we wanted to uncover the truth, we would have to go even deeper. Not only into the system's guts.

But also into the conscience of those who held it in their hands.

Elysium was beginning to collapse. The lights that once continuously illuminated the corridors shut down, and unnatural darkness spread into every corner of the underground world. In that darkness, fear began to take hold.

Some people hid away, seeking shelter in narrow rooms where they felt less exposed to this invisible threat. They drowned in their own fears, desperate for even a fragment of safety. Others wandered through the corridors, which had become impassable and unrecognizable. No one knew where they were anymore, and the systems could no longer guide them. The hallways that once led straight and clear now twisted into the unknown, seeming endless. The darkness was absolute, as if the present world had collapsed into a void.

Elysium, this once flawless mechanism that had seemed invincible, suddenly ground to a halt. Tark'han no longer wanted to—or could—maintain stability. Systems failed one after another, and in the darkness came only the grinding of malfunctions and distant echoes that filled the air with tension and uncertainty.

And slowly, it grew worse. Everyone knew that if supplies weren't restored, Elysium could not last another few days. And so, after loud and heated arguments, the leadership decided the only way to survive was to hasten the evacuation into Zone Z.

This world we had built with such care and hope was falling apart before our very eyes. The people who once saw themselves as masters of this underground realm were now mere witnesses to its demise. Our days, once spent in the mechanical rhythms of survival, had turned into a fight for the last remnants capable of sustaining life. Evacuation was the only option left—but even that seemed out of reach.

"We don't have time," said Damien Kael, standing beside me at the main console run by Tark'han's artificial intelligence, his face lit only by the weak glow of flickering screens. "If nothing changes, this world will collapse in a matter of hours. Ventilation will stop completely. What if our last hope vanishes like smoke?"

"We have to prepare for the worst," I replied, trying to keep my head cool. I was facing a question I had no answer to. While the rest of the world still believed the underground was indestructible, we suddenly found ourselves in a reality where Tark'han no longer functioned.

"But this isn't just about technology," Damien continued, his voice merging with the hum and strange noises of failing machinery that now gave off only nervous signals. "This isn't just about breakdowns. This is about who really holds control over us. Is it a man—or Tark'han? The one we trusted without question?"

"Who is the real prisoner?" I responded, noticing the dark room flashing with blue and white light.

"The system is tracking—but for whom?"

His words carved themselves into my memory like an invisible finger pushing me toward a black abyss. Somewhere in that shadowed room, amid the flickering monitors and hanging wires, a sinister reflection of a human face appeared—an image that reminded me of something, something from the past, back when we still owned our lives.

But now, as the systems began to break apart, everything slipped into uncertainty. The errors on the screens showed me vague outlines and distorted reflections—things that no longer seemed entirely real.

"Damien, you're right."



"The system is watching us," I said coldly. "But for whom?"

Who is still controlling our lives?"

"We have to believe it's us—that we control this world. We just have to take back that control," I answered myself, though my voice wavered with uncertainty.

On the screens, the reflection of ruined systems stared back at me—systems we once thought flawless, but which now clearly failed to protect us. Each passing second dragged us closer to annihilation. And yet, there was still hope. Hope of reaching the safe zone, of saving Elysium's people. Deep inside, I clung to the belief that one day, humanity would look up to the surface again, and life there would be possible.

"Even if the Council disagrees, we need to find the one behind this sabotage," Damien cut through my thoughts, his voice sharpened by the desperation surrounding us. "The systems are failing, but they're still watching us. And we don't know why—or who's behind it. And what happened to the old world?"

"To break free and learn to trust ourselves—that's the only way to survive," I whispered. Suddenly, it felt like Damien was right. Our system no longer existed. What had kept us alive no longer functioned. We were prisoners of our own fear, of the system that had long given us only the illusion of safety. And that destroyed us. Just as belief in the goodness of people was being destroyed. Someone was working against us—and we had no idea who, or why.

"There's nothing left but evacuation, Miles. We have to evacuate everyone—before it's too late." Damien looked at me, despair etched in his eyes. "Zone Z is the only escape."

But even as we agreed that Zone Z would be our final refuge, we were left with another question: who were we, truly, within this system? Were we the prisoners of the underground world—or did we still hold power over our fate?

# CHAPTER 3

#### ZONE Z

My dreams, now more often than before, bled into my waking life, and I had to wrestle with my demon.

Once again, I found myself in darkness. A deep, enclosed darkness, where the walls began closing in, pressing against me like an invisible grip. I felt fear seizing me—I couldn't move, I just stood in that unknown space where there was no escape. I tried to breathe, but the air was unpleasantly heavy, as if damaged or polluted. Each attempt to inhale burned my lungs. It was as if the walls were closing in tighter and tighter, the space shrinking, and my body sinking under the strange pressure.

The dark corridor began flashing with warning red lights, and from the walls came the sound of a siren. Then I felt movement beneath my feet. I looked down and saw a man lying there. His face was twisted with fear, red, contorted in terror and pain. Beside him lay a gas mask, his fingers clutched around it in a cramped grip. I wanted to kneel down, put the mask on his face, help him—but fear paralyzed me.

I looked around and saw a message scratched into the wall with fingernails:



"No Air. No Life. Repair or Die."

My hands began to tingle. My pulse quickened, my heart beating so hard it felt like it shook my entire body. Fear encircled me like an unbearable wave. I couldn't help the man. I couldn't help myself. The walls kept pressing closer, and I felt my strength failing. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe.

Suddenly, I felt all the exits closing, my body becoming part of that black pit from which I would never escape. My own fear was about to consume me. Even when I tried to push it away, it stayed, breathing down my neck. And then, in my dream, I heard a voice. Calming, but firm, carrying a note of uncompromising truth.

"Miles, breathe. You must focus."

It was Viator. His voice always accompanied me, his words an anchor in this endless sea of fear. Viator—the one who taught me how to survive in confined spaces, the one who showed me the way out.

"See it for what it is, Miles. These are just walls and your imagination. Nothing more. They are barriers of your mind."

I drew in another deep breath. Viator's voice was the stabilizer that kept me alive even in the darkest moment. "They are just walls." That sentence surrounded me, and suddenly all the walls before me seemed to dissolve. Viator never offered me easy solutions, never pitied me. Instead, he always told me to face fear head-on, to focus all my senses on what was truly happening around me.

I looked down at the ground—the man was gone. I was alone again. Then came the familiar voice:

"You are not alone. Look at me, Miles." Viator continued, his sphere of light glowing softly in the darkness of the dream. "Fear is not your enemy. It is only a sign that your body is defending itself. But you are stronger."

And in that moment, everything shifted. The space began to change. The walls no longer pressed against me. Suddenly I realized—they weren't real. They were only the boundaries of my mind, boundaries I had never seen as something I could overcome. Viator always reminded me that fear is only an illusion—a story I tell myself, not the reality that surrounds me.

With every breath, I felt the barriers in my mind begin to dissolve. The fear of confined spaces that once consumed me no longer controlled me. I had begun to control it.

"This is only a dream, Miles. You will never conquer fear unless you face it."

And then I woke up. Suddenly, with a sharp sense of relief. I was in Elysium, but the fear was gone. Viator's voice still echoed in my ears, even after waking:

"Remember, Miles, you face what you fear. And in that moment, you are free."

I inhaled deeply once more and felt I was on the right path. My thoughts, my fear—they were no longer just a suffocating illusion. They were part of the human struggle I was learning to overcome, step by step. And Viator was helping me. Without him, I would never have broken free of what had pressed and smothered me. Without him, I would have remained forever trapped in those small spaces where I was always lost.

But today I am stronger. Viator showed me that even in the darkest moments, we can find freedom—only when we choose to face our deepest fears.

#### \* \* \*

"Evacuation to Zone Z is our only chance. For everyone who survives, it will be the last option. But only those who act immediately will prevail," announced Valen Draegor. "Leave no one behind!" His firm voice spread through the hall.

The first warning echoed:

"General evacuation activated. Proceed to emergency sectors of Zone Z. Leave the residential blocks."

The system's voice reverberated in every sector, hollow and metallic. People in gray uniforms flooded the corridors like a river, each carrying whatever they could: crates of filters, food packs, oxygen tanks, children in their arms.

Machines roared at full capacity. Small transport drones hovered down the corridors with containers, while security forces shouted instructions, directing the crowds toward the evacuation shafts.

I stood with Damien and Keller at one of the control panels, watching the overloaded corridors.

"If anything gets blocked, it will be a disaster," Damien muttered.

I nodded. "We need to keep order in the service shafts. If the main access chamber gets overloaded, Zone Z becomes a trap."

"Did you look at yesterday's logs of Tomas's movements?" Damien asked quietly.

I shot him a sideways glance. "Yes. He went alone into Sector C3 with tools. He didn't even try to avoid cameras. He must have felt like he had nothing to fear. But who gave him the access code, I don't know. The communication records from that morning were wiped. Someone had to contact him and give him the codes. It wasn't physical—that much I confirmed from the footage. It had to be over a transmitter. But which one of the four Council members was it?" I asked, half to myself.

Keller suddenly leaned closer. "What are you two talking about?"

Damien and I exchanged a quick look and nodded slightly. It was time to bring in another person we trusted, another friend, so we wouldn't face this mystery alone. "We're talking about Tomas. He wasn't supposed to be in Sector C3. And he definitely shouldn't have had the access codes."

Then Damien spoke up. "So where did he get them?"

Keller reached for his portable console and linked it to the system's main node. Data, codes, records flickered across the display. Most of them were clean, sterile as always. But some fragments were empty. Too empty.

"If we can't figure out who gave Tomas the access codes, then let's go further back," Keller explained. Seeing our puzzled looks, he pointed to the screen. "Here. Someone rewrote the logs eleven cycles ago. Right when the first turbine failures occurred in Sector C."

"And from which account?" Damien asked, leaning back against the wall.

Keller shook his head. "No name. Just a fragment – Override\_7... system authorization without a listed user. But the rewrite came through the admin channel."

Damien frowned. "That means someone not only has the codes, but also knows how to bypass authentication. And the system accepts it. Whoever it is, they know exactly how Tark'han works..."

I inhaled slowly. The thought we had avoided naming until now was starting to take shape.

"Mara?" Damien suggested quietly. "Cold, strict, a perfectionist. She wants the system, not life. Maybe she doesn't believe we'll survive, so she's building a new regime. For the chosen few."

"No..." I replied. "Mara is obsessed with the system, but she would never risk it. She doesn't believe in chaos."

We fell silent. It was like a puzzle constantly shifting under our hands.

"But Valen..." I said again, more firmly this time. "He doesn't just have power. He has a plan. And he's quiet. Always waiting for everyone else to finish speaking. Then he decides."

"I can't believe Valen would be capable of something like this," Damien murmured.

"I understand," I nodded. "I respected him too. But we have to stick to the facts."

Keller interrupted us. "Let's try another approach."

"What kind?" we asked in unison.

"We'll cross-reference the key failures with your movement records and find out who had access at that time—either physically or through Tark'han."

Without another word, he sat down at the console. His fingers flew across the keyboard, entering codes, scanning logs.

"Where exactly were you?" he asked.

"Turbines in Sector C3, Water Core 4B, Pump H4," I replied.

Keller recorded everything, watching the data stream. After a moment, he straightened.

"I've got it," he declared with a triumphant look. "I grouped the access codes, movement logs, and system manipulations. All traces lead to... Celeste Ashar."

At that very moment, an explosion shook the air.

A muffled rumble echoed from the distance. The metal walls trembled, lights flickered.

"Ventilation in Sector G has collapsed," the system reported.

"We have to speed up!" shouted Korrin Eros as he arrived with his unit. His face was tense but steady. "Without ventilation, pressure in the main corridors will drop another 15%. People will faint before they even reach the shafts."

I felt it in my own skin—the weight of hundreds of eyes watching me as they passed.

They were eyes of fear, but also of hope.

When we reached the main shaft, the chaos peaked.

The systems commander stood in the middle of it all, watching as technicians, engineers, and rescuers gathered at the last line of defense.

"Collect all supplies, every key component. Zone Z must be fully prepared for the arrival of the last groups," ordered Korrin Eros, who had already begun directing the security forces to secure the final passage.

The crowd was thick—some people breathed through masks, some coughed, others sat slumped against the walls, clinging to the last of their strength. Several of the elderly collapsed.

Crates of supplies piled up on the ramp, where the transport lift waited.

The lift platforms ran down at maximum capacity.

"We must evacuate children, women, the elderly, and technicians first," Korrin commanded through the megaphone. "The rest will wait for the next wave."

At that moment, I wrestled not only with the name Keller had spoken, but with my own demon.

The narrow descent shafts into Zone Z were even worse than the service corridors. A dark, confined tunnel—the very kind of space that made my mind spiral.

Viator appeared, as if sensing my fear, leaning close to my face.

"This is your greatest trial, Miles. Breathe. You are no longer that child from the storage room. Now you lead the entire colony."

I stood at the edge of the descent shaft. I breathed slowly, rhythmically, exactly as Viator had taught me.

As I stepped inside, I felt for a moment the walls closing in. But instead of panic, I recognized it—for what it was. Just walls. Just metal.

What held me steady was resolve.

Several waves of evacuation followed in the next few hours.

People moved like an unrelenting current.

And then it came.

"The last lifts have reached capacity. Entry sectors of Elysium are now disconnected," the system announced.

When the doors of Zone Z slid shut with a low groan, I paused for a brief moment. The black walls of this final part of Elysium surrounded me like an unyielding chill. Every step deeper into the dark corridors filled me with a strange sense of accomplishment.

As if Zone Z itself—where all survivors from the rest of Elysium had gathered—glowed like a beacon of life.

The doors locked into their frame at last, enclosing us in with the final press of air that, for once, seemed truly breathable.

This sector was our last refuge, the place where Elysium's systems would continue to function.

Damien and Keller stood beside me.

"We're here. All of us who survived."

Viator glowed with a gentle light.

"Miles... now the real battle begins. It's no longer about relocation. Now it's about survival in the heart of a collapsing machine."

And I knew he was right. This was only the first step.

#### \* \* \*

Keller, Damien, and I met in the T-7 technical hub, where we had access to system logs from the last hours. According to Keller's analysis, Celeste Ashar had been behind the failures. Everything matched—her access, her presence at the time of the breakdowns, the suspicious entries in the system.

Except for one thing... Celeste had disappeared.

"No one has seen her since the evacuation," Damien said. "Not at the checkpoints, not in the distribution zone."

We exchanged looks and headed together to her temporary assigned quarters in the sector dormitory.

The door was unlocked.

Inside, silence reigned. The furnishings untouched. The bed neatly made, no signs of haste.

Only one detail stood out—the light on her personal console was still blinking. The last entry. Unfinished.

We searched the entire sector, but Celeste was nowhere. At last, we checked the showers, and that's where we found her.

Her body lay motionless on the cold tiles, while water from the shower dripped monotonously onto the floor, as if refusing to stop mourning what had happened. I reached out and shut off the stream, its sound far too loud in the silence. Then I bent down and looked into her eyes—open, empty, and yet holding something unspoken. As if they still longed to speak. Beneath her head, a dark pool of blood slowly spread, seeping quietly into the cracks.

I stared at her face.

"An accident?" Keller asked softly.

"It looks that way, or..." Damien hesitated, "someone wanted it to look that way."

We scanned her console. The last system access—one day before the evacuation. No manipulation. No signal.

"The data in our analysis... I think it was fake," I whispered. "Someone altered it and led us straight to her."

At that moment we knew only one thing: the investigation wasn't over. It was beginning again. We had startled someone. Or gotten too close. And now he was erasing the traces.

But the worst was yet to come. Our greatest threat was the reactor failing at the very heart of Elysium.

After a few weeks in Zone Z, with no progress in the investigation, radiation in its core began to rise slowly but surely toward critical levels. The reactor that once supplied uninterrupted power and sustained life in every zone of Elysium had now become a sovereign of danger. Its explosion would devastate all of Elysium, Zone Z included. With its detonation, the underground world would collapse, and everything we had struggled to maintain would fall apart. Repairs were essential, but minor fixes no longer seemed sufficient. The solution was unclear. Hope for salvation rested only on the last steps that could still save Elysium from destruction.

The silence in Zone Z's council chamber was more suffocating than the unbreathable air outside.

On the large wall glowed a map of Elysium dotted with red points—warning zones appearing one after another. System alerts shone through the glassy panel like bloody stains.

"This is critical failure across all major systems. The time until complete infrastructure collapse is shortening. Dramatically," said Joran Valtor, standing by the projection. His voice was dry, stripped of emotion.

Damien nodded silently. His face was pale, as if he had already heard the verdict.

"If the core implodes," Valtor continued, "the pressure wave won't stop at the outer protective layer. It will hit all of us. Zone Z is not out of reach."

"And what about the automatic protocols? The reactor has an emergency shutdown..." Viktor Hale tried to argue.

"They won't activate. Tark'han isn't responding. And without it... we're on our own."

Every gaze turned toward me.

Me—Miles—who until then had been sitting by the wall, trying to be part of the silence.

"You know the underground systems and the reactor better than anyone," Valtor said slowly. "You worked on the turbines, the water pumps, in the server room, even in the technical core of the reactor before the system was cut off. You know which branches are shorted, which panels are still manually accessible, what needs to be connected and repaired..."

"And you also know it's dangerous, and the radiation around the reactor is already above critical levels," Damien added quietly.

I remained silent.

I felt my pulse hammering in my ears. My chest tightening again at the thought of those narrow corridors leading into the deepest parts of the reactor.

Steel. Silence. Radiation. Claustrophobia. Death.

"Miles," Joran finally said, "if you don't go, no one will. And if no one goes... no one survives. You must repair the machines step by step and drain the underground."

"I want the schematics. The plans. The latest readings of temperature and radiation. I won't walk into a blind hell."

"You'll have everything you need," Valtor said. For the first time without pressure. Only with relief.

I stood up. "Then I'll go."

The silence in the room cracked like thin ice.

This wasn't a mission. This was the last step before the end. But maybe... also the first step toward a new beginning.

I left Zone Z through the old service elevator. Its metal walls rattled with every movement, the creaking of rope pulleys echoing as if the entire mechanism protested against further use. The air was barely breathable, but I sensed a metallic taste of the past. As much as the mask on my face allowed, I breathed evenly and calmly.

Viator appeared as a glowing sphere at my right side. His light cast shifting shadows across the walls, and his voice—steady and calm—was the only thing holding me in balance.

"Breathe in. Slowly. Every machine you repair is a step toward freedom."

The ventilation units were first. The door to the machine hall groaned, and a blast of air struck me like the exhale of a giant furnace—hot, dense, and greasy. Everything was coated in a thin layer of soot and steam. Tiny particles of dust floated in the air, dancing in the glow of Viator's light.

Steam poured from the pipes, hissing and rebounding off the steel walls like warning whispers.

I had to dismantle one of the turbines by hand. The bolts held so tightly that the tools kept slipping from my palms. Sweat ran down my back, mixed with the blood from a cut on my hand and sticky grease. I felt like part of the very machine I was trying to bring back to life.

Every clang, every sudden creak of the pipes jolted me back into fear. My muscles stiffened at the thought of something collapsing. But I focused. I sealed the pipes, replaced the damaged gaskets, and then initiated the filter system reset.

A brief silence—then the gentle hum of the turbine, like the breath of a sleeping giant.

"Ventilation online," Viator confirmed. His voice carried the pride I needed to hear. "Continue."

The water pumps were dead. Even from a distance, I could hear the monotonous bubbling, as if the underground itself were struggling to breathe beneath the surface. When I opened the service door, I saw the walls slick with condensation, droplets running down the pipes and dripping onto the floor with a soft tapping sound that echoed like the metronome of decay.

I moved deeper, each step accompanied by the rustling and clicking of mechanical structures shifting beneath my weight. The sheet metal under my feet flexed like a stretched membrane, sometimes groaning, sometimes hissing under the pressure. My chest tightened. If something gave way—if I fell... in this darkness, no one would ever find me.

The darkness wasn't just physical here—it was alive. It crept along my back, crawled under my skin. The only light came from Viator, his glow cutting through the thick shadows like a blade. He spoke softly, as if even his voice didn't want to disturb the slumber of this place: "The oxygen flow to your mask is stable. But keep moving. You don't have time to slow down here."

I moved quickly and systematically. Each time I bumped into something, I exhaled sharply. I feared there was more here than pipes and grime. Maybe just the silence.

Finally, I reached the overpressure chambers. I opened the valves manually. The metal slipped in my grip, cold as ice and filthy as guilt. With clenched teeth, I turned the main wheel. A rush of air exhaled. The valve engaged. The pressure pumps roared to life, the ground trembled, water began to flow.

I reached the main pumps. They were old, massive, caked with slime and mineral crust. One of them... was silent. Its quiet refusal was terrifying. It was blocked.

I approached and laid my hand on it. It was like touching the sleeping lungs of Elysium.

The pulsing metal vibrated faintly, but irregularly. I opened the casing. Water gushed over my legs, the remains of the filter crumbling at my touch. Replacing it meant stretching into the narrow gap beneath the block, so I did. I lay in a puddle, the chill seeping into my bones.

My hands trembled. From cold, from exhaustion, or from fear—I couldn't tell. But they worked. Each screwdriver turn, each cable, each snap... everything fell into place. When I reconnected the main circuit, a deep hum rang out and the pump shuddered awake.

Viator drifted closer.

"Cycle restored. Good work, Miles. The water flows."

And I just sat there in silence, my head resting against the cold wall. In that moment I felt I had restarted something. Not just in Elysium.

The air ducts still awaited me. Even their name sounded like a trap. The opening into the shaft was narrow, rusted, with sharp edges. Viator's beam lit only a few meters ahead—everything else drowned in darkness. I inhaled so deeply it hurt my lungs. I unstrapped the oxygen concentrator from my back and shifted it to my chest. The metal groaned as I forced myself inside. My chest was crushed beneath the device, shoulders stretched tight. The shaft was barely wider than my body, and that was exactly why I held my breath.

Each time I moved, something rattled—a nut, a wire, an unseen screw shifting under my weight, as if warning me not to continue. I pulled myself forward with my hands along the aluminum edges, which burned into my palms. My knees scraped against the ribs as I crawled farther and farther into the unknown.

Silence. Not the natural, soothing kind. This was silence born of hollow space, where every breath multiplied my fear. It echoed inside me, like a distant panic waiting behind every meter. Each narrowing of the shaft, each tremor of the metal reminded me I could get stuck at any moment. That my own chest, with the device strapped to it, could become an obstacle.

Claustrophobia seeped into my bones. I felt the walls slowly closing in. The pipe tightening around me. I could see nothing ahead except the flicker of Viator's light, glowing like a fragile orb. And then I heard him again.

"Don't look back. Only forward. Every meter is a victory."

I closed my eyes and inhaled. His voice—calm, rhythmic—was my anchor. There was truth in his words. I couldn't turn back. I couldn't retreat. I could only survive. I had to focus on the work. My eyes fixed on my hands and forward. And so I moved. Inch by inch. My joints cracked, my clothes clung to me. I felt my own sweat running down my back, soaking into the fabric, creating a suffocating, unpleasant chill.

Suddenly... impact.

I found it—the fallen pipe segment. It had collapsed into my path like an iron jaw. My heart raced. I pulled back a few centimeters, grabbed a spare brace lying behind me, and got to work.

I slid a support beneath me, wedged the new brace under the loose frame, and began screwing the bridge into place. My hands shook, but I kept the rhythm. Tighten, pull. Inhale. Continue.

I was breathing hard, but I didn't panic. In my ears I could hear only my own breath, echoing off the walls of the mask.

Viator floated before me and whispered, "You're closer than you think, Miles."

My hands trembled from fatigue, but I knew I had to keep going. The server room. A place that once pulsed with the life of the system now felt like the dead heart of the machine. When I opened the armored door, a hiss of compressed air escaped, followed by a dry metallic draft across my face. Inside, it was dark, broken only by the chaotic flickering of error diodes. Yellow, red, blue—each light signaling a different threat, a different failure, a different piece of a collapsing world.

The air was warm, and the sound of the fans... irregular. Like the wheeze of diseased lungs. Each cycle weaker than the last.

I walked past the narrow, sealed doors of the individual server chambers, towering like pillars of a forgotten temple. Some glowed with green or red lights, others were black as burnt-out eyes. My footsteps echoed in muffled metallic taps. The silence here had weight. It was a silence that resisted disturbance, a silence that fought back, as if the system itself knew someone was trying to awaken it.

"Something's wrong here," I muttered, staring at the main hub.

The surface was coated with a film of greasy dust and fine cracks. I laid my hand on the terminal. It pulsed, but chaotically—like a heart unsure whether to beat or die.

I manually opened the access panel. The old cables were tangled like snakes—some melted, others loosened. I reconnected them carefully, one by one, as if playing a melody where every mistake could be the last. My fingers were slick with oil and blood—I hadn't even noticed when I'd cut myself again.

I launched the backup recovery software. The code spread slowly across the screens, like rain seeping into paper. Viator watched silently, his glow reflected in the mirrored surfaces of the server racks.

"The signal's fragmenting... but something's coming back," I murmured to myself.

After a long struggle—cursing every outdated protocol, brushing dust from every memory unit—the system finally stirred to life. Lights blinked on all at once, like eyes opening after a long sleep. The fans began to spin again, their rhythm steady. The room's temperature dropped. The silence... vanished.

Viator hovered beside me, sounding almost human:

"Something is awakening. But it isn't ready to speak yet."

I only nodded, sinking to the ground among the cables like a worker resting in a temple hall. The lights around me glowed, but inside I was calm. I had done what needed to be done. My body sagged. I needed just a moment's rest. I knew my mission wasn't over—but my oxygen was running low. Just for a little while, I wanted to close my eyes. Sleep. But it wasn't allowed. The last flickers of my mind and courage ordered me to stand and descend into the flooded underworld.

I stepped onto the platform and descended in a slow arc toward the water. Step by step I sank into the gloom, where every ripple carried the stench of the past—rotting organic remains, oils, mold, and sour metal. The water was thick, almost milky, full of silt, slimy like decaying flesh.

Viator remained silent. His glowing orb floated above the surface, reflecting like the last star over a dead planet. Around us, only the splash of my steps broke the silence—except for the occasional rustle that might not have been mine at all...

I found the missing section of pipe, old and rusted, washed into a narrow dark passage like the blind eyes of a fallen giant. I had to scrape off layers of mud and grime first. Each time I turned the lever, a screech rang out, as if something deep inside protested. The pressure pipes reacted slowly, shuddered, groaned in pain—and then... the water finally began to move.

The old drainage system awoke. At first uncertain, but after a few seconds it began pulling the water level down. The drains roared, as if a ravenous fissure had opened beneath my feet. A stench of rotten sediment rose from the floor, sludge vanishing into the black throats of the sewer shafts. The ground shifted—almost imperceptibly—but I felt it. In some way, Elysium itself exhaled in relief.

After several minutes, I saw the floor exposed. The moisture receded. Wet walls seemed to breathe, flakes of paint peeling here and there. But it was better.

I walked out, each step slow and heavy, toward the underground platforms. On the display in Zone Z, this section of Elysium still glowed red: disabled, in urgent need of repair.

Platforms. The skeleton of the old system. Some still resisted gravity, others hung crooked, as if time itself had collapsed beneath them. Tilted walkways hung above the black abyss of the lowest technical deck, where nothing remained. Only darkness. Only emptiness, waiting for another fall.

I had to act.

Patch after patch. Like a surgeon operating without anesthesia, without time, without certainty that his patient still lived. Every fix demanded a new anchor point: bolting swaying beams, securing rusted panels that trembled faintly under their own weight. Some supports were twisted, others barely held shape. But they were all I had.

Pins snapped.

My hands slipped from water, sweat, grease, and blood. Tools fell. My teeth clenched to the roots. Viator moved with me, illuminating every section I needed. His light glinted from droplets of water like the glow of a lost moon in a cavern.

He didn't need to say much. Just a word, softly, calmly:

"There's still a solid foundation beneath this..."

"Try there... it still holds, Miles."

I breathed raggedly through the mask, connected to the oxygen concentrator. I lifted my gaze, and suddenly the platforms stopped moving. The metal that had been groaning fell silent. Stability appeared beneath my feet. From a collapsing bridge I had rebuilt a path. And that was enough. At the end, I made the final anchoring.

My knees cracked as I moved. I leaned on the floor... and stepped.

No snap. No shift. Only silence. And a breath. Deep, free.

"The floor holds," said Viator, his voice calm, steady.

The sliding doors opened before me, and I entered the supply depot—the last one. The final challenge. The last descent into the innards of old Elysium, where light was no longer welcome and walls had forgotten they once sheltered life. The corridors leading there were partly blocked—torn beams, falling ceilings, sharp shards of plastic and glass scraping beneath my soles like a warning.

Every step was accompanied by the sound of my own breath and the brittle silence.

Viator's glow reflected off dusty metal crates. Some were overturned, others left ajar, as if abandoned in haste. The walls were lined with iron pipes and sheets.

I began searching the room. My fingers were stiff, my body weary. But every crate I opened was a treasure—capsules of water, vacuum-packed food, technical components, spare filters, seals, even a few old diagnostic modules.

I started loading everything onto the conveyor. The rollers screeched, but they still worked. After a few tries, the old belt began moving, slow and clumsy, but functional. The boxes slid forward, heading toward the portal that led directly into Zone Z. My hands trembled with relief.

Viator floated closer. His light flared brighter than ever before.

"Resupply initiated," he said, quiet but triumphant.

"Miles, you are almost at the end."

I watched the departing crates, as if I were watching my own message to the future. Something that would live, even if I did not. And I was closer to freedom than I had ever been.

I stood at the entrance to Zone Z, leaning against the cold wall. My hands were still trembling, but no longer from fear. It was exhaustion, the deep kind that comes when the body has nothing left to give, yet the mind refuses to surrender. I had to return to Zone Z to take a fresh oxygen tank before I could head back into Elysium and toward the dreaded reactor.

And it was in that silence that the realization struck me fully. What I had already known and seen in the machines now flooded my mind. Every system I repaired, every device that collapsed... it wasn't chance. And now I had been sent to fix it. What had been sabotaged by unseen hands was painstakingly restored. The ventilation hadn't failed on its own—it had been blocked from the inside. The turbine cables had been damaged in places no ordinary fault would ever reach. The water pumps hadn't burned out from age—some filters had been deliberately removed, as if someone wanted the systems to choke on their own filth. In the pipes, I found manually loosened joints, clean cuts, the work of someone who knew exactly what they were doing. Even that collapsed segment in the air shaft... I now realized the beams weren't rotten. They had been cut.

And the server room... it was the most damning of all. Not a malfunction. Targeted shutdowns. Software erased, logs deleted, as if someone didn't want us to know what had really happened.

Not one incident. Not system failure. A series of precisely timed interventions. Someone wanted Elysium to collapse. Not from the outside, but from within.

Yet the time had come to repair the reactor—and if I survived, to confront whoever was behind it.

With a torn spirit, I walked down a lonely dark corridor in Zone Z, lit only by emergency red lamps. In my hand I held an outdated flashlight casting its glow against cold walls. Around my neck hung a breathing mask, and on my back a fresh air tank. By my side moved my faithful companion and teacher, Viator, lending me strength with his presence. Then suddenly, behind me, I heard whispers, footsteps, and a strange voice, hollow and unnatural:



"Darkness means death – the power must flow."

I spun around sharply, but saw no one.

"This is only the beginning, Miles," said Viator. His orb of light appeared beside me, the last source still burning, even as its beam illuminated only a fragment of a broken world. "This is the moment when you must go on and fight your battle."

The safety elevator into Elysium began to descend, its cracking and sparking proof that the safeguards meant to prevent disaster were already failing.

I looked ahead. "I don't know if I can do this, Viator."

"You must keep going, Miles, and find a way. This is your moment. It is vital to face fear—and to save Elysium."

I knew I had to choose. Fear tried to consume me, but I had to continue. Tark'han had now become just another symbol—that the technology we had relied on had failed. Just like mankind.

I strapped the breathing mask to my face and listened to Viator's voice: "Breathe deeply, Miles. Keep going. Nothing can stop you if you decide to move forward."

This moment was not only about Elysium's survival, but about my own battle as well. A battle I could no longer postpone.

"You still have a chance. And remember, even if Elysium fails, you must not stop."

Suddenly, a clear thought surfaced in my mind. Survival is not just about technology—it's about the choices we make. And this choice—whether I could face my fear—would prove decisive.

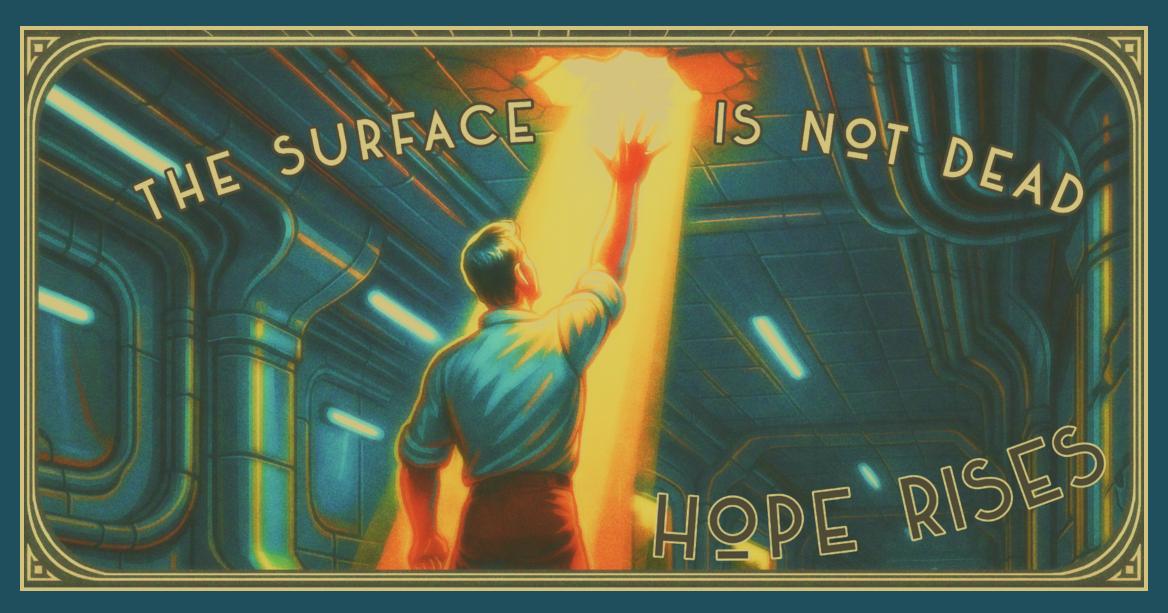
When the leadership chose me to repair the technologies, it was inevitable. There was no other option. The systems of Elysium were on the brink of collapse, and I was the one with the technical skills to repair the organs of our underground world.

My step was necessary, but fear still echoed within me. I had suffered from claustrophobia for years, but today it was more than a personal fear. The system was failing, and time was gone. Whether I faced fear or danger, I had no choice but to go.

My heart pounded as if at the edge of a breakdown, and even through the mask the air felt so heavy it seemed my lungs fought for every breath.

"Don't stop, Miles. You must ensure the reactor runs again. Until you do, the air will become unsustainable. Listen to me—we have only one chance." Viator's voice still echoed in my head—soothing, yet relentlessly serious. I felt my hand drop lifelessly onto the tools. If I was to repair what had collapsed, I had only one chance. I had to trust my instinct and rely on my experience.

My eyes caught sight of a cracked bunker ceiling, a faint beam of light seeping through. In my mind unfolded the story of the sun, its warm rays piercing even the thick concrete walls. I took a few steps forward and then froze. Beneath the crack lay a man. His hand stretched upward toward the light, his dead face still full of hope. I stepped closer, afraid of what I might see. The light was not the sun, but the dim, lifeless glow from another block. Sadly, I looked upon the man who, in pursuit of his dream, had lost his life. Beside him, etched on the ground, I read—letter by letter—the words that carved themselves into my memory:



"The Surface is Not Dead – Hope Rises."

I turned back. What had once seemed like a perfect mechanism now revealed itself as a broken machine, one that had claimed the lives of all who came near.

Step by step, I entered the damaged reactor, the place no one else dared to go.

After a few meters, the tunnel opened into a vast service and control chamber. The metal doors clung loosely to their hinges. Scattered across the floor lay fragments of error reports, papers, and diagnostic modules. On the screens blinked a single word:

#### "CRITICAL CORE FAILURE."

Behind the glass pulsed the very heart of Elysium—the reactor. Glowing tubes and ionization chambers looked ready to burst at any moment.

Then it happened. Sirens flashed red. The reactor's warning voice boomed through the speakers:

"CORE UNSTABLE. MANUAL INTERVENTION REQUIRED IMMEDIATELY. FAILURE IN 300 SECONDS."

I clenched my jaw. My time had begun to run out.

When I opened the service panel, a wave of radiation and scorching hot air hit me. Sweat beaded across my forehead. My fingers slid over the burning metal frame. For a moment, I nearly gave up.

But then, unexpectedly, I felt a strange calm.

Viator glowed so brightly his light reflected across every steel surface.

"Miles. You are no longer the boy in the dark chamber. Now you hold destiny in your hands. And your fear? It will never touch you again."

I inhaled deeply, as much as the mask allowed. I felt something break inside me—something that had bound me for decades, finally shattering. For the first time in my life, the space around me no longer suffocated me. Space was only space. It had no power over me.

With a steady hand, I placed a new circuit into the module. The bypass system stabilized the ionization flow. The reactor responded almost instantly. Readings began to return to normal.

On the main display appeared the words:

"STABILIZATION SUCCESSFUL."

The sirens fell silent. Elysium's systems surged back to life.

The air was thick with dust particles, slowly settling to the ground. Sweat poured down my face as I sank heavily onto the floor. I was exhausted. My hands lay at my sides, palms upward, fingers trembling with weakness. I closed my eyes, slowing my mind. There was still one more repair I had to complete.

The final level. The lowest point of Elysium. The place where gravity had dragged everything down—water, dirt, broken parts, and remnants of long-forgotten systems. I descended by elevator, its groaning metal deafening in my ears.

The air was cold, damp, and silent. It felt like a forgotten catacomb, echoing only with my breath and the faint dripping of water that refused to die away. Viator's voice—usually clear and calm—sounded muffled here, as if the walls were choking him along with me.

"This is the end, Miles. But also a new beginning," he said.

I found the old line of pumps, covered in rust and biological growth. The oval control panel was dead. I had to reconnect the cables into a working chain, bridge the failures, revive the old circuits.

My fingers were numb from the cold, but I kept going. I clenched the tools between my teeth, balancing on my knees over the slippery floor while water seeped into my boots. The cables sparked, the pumps flickered on and off, as if deciding whether they still trusted me.

At last... a deep growl.

One motor awoke. Then another. A third. The whole line rattled to life like some ancient monster convinced it still had strength.

The water began to move. Slowly, like someone struggling to breathe after waking from a coma. Valves opened, torrents of sludge and waste started vanishing into the drainage shafts. I felt the foundations tremble, as if all of Elysium exhaled for the first time in years. And then there was silence. Not the dreadful kind, but a silence filled with hope. Elysium was breathing again.

When I returned to Zone Z, I was covered in dust, water, smoke—every fold of my clothes bore the marks of what I had endured. I keyed in the security code and the iron doors opened. Zone Z stretched out before me. Behind me, the doors closed with a heavy clang. A seal. A full stop.

But I knew this was not the end. Something within me had changed. The fear was still there. But it no longer ruled. It was no longer stronger than me.

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# CHAPTER 4

### HOPE BEHIND STEEL WALLS

The reactor was running again, and the underground was drained. Elysium was slowly recovering. The air, toxic only a few days ago, had once again become breathable. Water, which had long been a rare treasure, now flowed through the damaged pumps we had managed to repair. The systems were restored, but that didn't mean we were safe.

We gathered again in the conference room of Zone Z, staring at the large wall where the map of Elysium now glowed with green dots. Systems were coming back online one after another, and we felt a surge of joy.

"This is your achievement," Viktor Hale said, pointing at the monitor and patting me on the shoulder.

Everyone applauded me, as they had many times before, and I lowered my head, uneasy.

"Everything looks fine," Joran began, "but the reactor still needs to be checked again." Once more, everyone turned their eyes toward me, as if there were no other choice.

I met their gaze, then spoke firmly. "I don't want to go there alone," I started.

"Tell us who you want," Joran interrupted. "Damien? Keller?"

"No," I cut him off. "I need the experienced Valen."

Damien looked at me and shook his head in disbelief. He couldn't believe what I had just said. He suspected I was asking for Valen's help not because he was the best or because I trusted him, but because I wanted to confront him as the saboteur. But the price was too high.

Damien wanted to speak, but I interrupted him. "I want my tools and Valen."

"You'll get him and everything else you need," Joran Valtor replied.

The two of us entered the reactor. We climbed inside, and after a few meters we were in the service center. The metal doors had already been repaired and stood firmly in place. I looked through the glass at the reactor and kept silent. Neither of us had spoken a word along the way.

Valen Draegor stepped up to the control terminal and studied the reactor logs. Tark'han still showed no response.

I walked closer. Each step sounded like I was approaching an answer I didn't want to know.

"Valen," I addressed him coldly. "It's true, isn't it?"

He remained silent. His hands stayed on the console, his eyes fixed on the records.

"It was you. Tomas. The codes. The reactor. Everything points to you." Silence.

"Why?" I burst out. "Why would you do it? You pushed us into Zone Z, sabotaged the systems... You were the one we trusted!"

Then he slowly turned. His face was calm, but his eyes carried something heavy. Tired.

"Not everything that looks like the truth really is the truth," he said quietly. "You still know too little, Miles."

He looked at me for a long time, as if words no longer mattered. "Some decisions aren't about being right, Miles. They're about necessity."

"That's not an answer."

Valen inhaled and took a step toward the controls. "I need to check this. Otherwise we may all die."

"Don't go in there. Tell me the truth. I deserve it," I pleaded.

"Some truths destroy more than lies," he whispered. "But if I can give you advice—watch the old satellites."

With those words, he opened the access to the reactor capsule. Viator flickered beside me, as if he wanted to say something more, but remained silent. We just watched.

Valen entered the core, where all the control units converged, and for the last time he spoke: "Sometimes someone has to draw the shorter end." Then he vanished inside.

And that was the last time I saw Valen Draegor.

I still remembered Valen's last words to me – watch the old satellites. But why? And why did Valen sacrifice himself if he wasn't the saboteur?

Yet the Council had different plans for me. Zone Z remained our last refuge, but Elysium was already calling us back.

We stopped at the main entrance to the abandoned sectors. Damien stood beside me, his face covered in dust and sweat, his eyes fixed on the cold darkness ahead.

"Miles, you've been there. Can we risk it?"

I looked at the flickering lights of the damaged corridors.

"The air is clean, water is flowing again, but supplies are limited. If we want to survive longer than a few weeks, we must return to Elysium, check the remaining storage rooms, and restore even the old systems. But we must also find out who the real culprit is."

The handful of survivors behind us nodded silently, though they hadn't heard that last sentence. I didn't want to frighten them, and still, each of them understood we had no other choice but to enter Elysium.

Our first task was gaining access to the food supplies. Keller lifted a heavy crate of canned goods onto his shoulders. His steps echoed in hollow, muffled thuds through the ruined corridor.

Above him, the weak emergency lights flickered. Each outage made us hold our breath for a second.

"Come on, we need to move faster," Keller said as he passed through the narrow passageways. Suddenly, he stopped. The damaged corridor ahead looked like the rusty throat of a beast. A single misstep, and the entire mission could collapse. The other survivors stood in the background, waiting for Keller's step – the one that would decide their fate. The tension was palpable as all eyes fixed on the crate of food – the last hope we still had.

"This is the only way to survive," I whispered, though I wasn't sure if it was an order, or simply the hope we all needed.

Around us stretched the damaged walls, the ruins of what was once Elysium.

Some sections of the corridor seemed empty, but we still watched carefully for remnants of old technology that could trigger catastrophe. On one wall, still faintly glowing with artificial light, a large red spray-painted inscription appeared:



"One Mission – Feed the Future."

These words, written with both despair and hope, still clung to this dark, broken chamber. Words left by someone before us now carried new meaning. It wasn't only about survival – it was about people trying to claim a chance at a new beginning. The world around us, though damaged, still held potential. And we had chosen to be the ones to enforce that change.

Everywhere there was silence, broken only by the noise of machines. No human voices, no signs of life. Elysium echoed, bubbled, cracked – but these were only the sounds of machines. Inhuman, cold.

"Stay close to him, don't let him walk alone," Damien ordered as Keller moved again. His steps were heavy, each motion weighed down with burden. We all knew this path was dangerous, but it was the last thing we had left.

Keller finally reached the point where the damaged corridor connected with the next sector. The others stayed behind, their faces showing the same uncertainty, each of them wondering what came next. For a moment, everything fell silent. We all waited until Keller and the crate reached the section of Elysium where more systems could be brought online – and bring us back to life.

I followed him, and each of my steps became a step toward freedom.

When I became an engineer, we had the technology to repair the systems of Elysium, but it could never repair the human mind.

Until now. With Viator's help, I had finally rid myself of my fear. Faced it – and conquered it.

The first hints of light appeared after long hours of darkness. Elysium, this crumbling underground world that had long lost its shine, began to breathe again. The reactor pulsed once more, its glow spreading like the heartbeat of something alive again. The hum and the turbines grew stronger, as if a new source of energy had suddenly awakened in the depths. We shut down Tark'han and cut off his access to our resources. He could no longer control us or dictate our lives. We had become masters over Elysium once again.

Keller climbed onto the high wall opposite the iron gates of Elysium and painted a huge inscription in rainbow colors:



"We repaired. We survived. Elysium lives."

The words echoed through every sector, a celebration of immense relief. Lights began to turn on, one by one – at first a pale glow, quickly growing into bright, futuristic tones. Flames of light illuminated every corner of the underground city, where the last fragments of life began to awaken again. Now, under this new light, they became a symbol of victory.

"This is it. Elysium is alive!" Damien shouted over the chorus of celebration. I watched him as his eyes lit up.

Somewhere inside these people grew a feeling they hadn't known for a long time: hope.

Elysium, once resembling a ghost town, had now transformed into an unyielding machine, awakened once again. The turbines spun, ventilation began pumping fresh air back into rooms that had once been drained and silent. Everyone who walked these corridors now felt like part of a new life, like co-creators of a new dawn.

People – survivors – began gathering in the hallways, returning to their sectors. Tension turned into joy. And as the words spread through the communication systems, like a symphony of triumph, the whole of Elysium awakened. Ceilings once covered in dust and grime now reflected the bright light of a restarted system. Across all the screens, the words appeared:

"Elysium lives."

It was like a new beginning. Something that once would have seemed impossible – yet now we were living it. Every image, every step we took in those corridors was accompanied by celebration and voices echoing through the deep chambers of Elysium.

"It's ours! Everything we endured was for this moment!" Some began to sing, others danced, and some only smiled, as if they still couldn't believe this was real. The celebrations were not only in the corridors, but in our hearts. The city we had considered lost was reborn.

"Take everything we can. This is only the beginning!" said Keller, standing beside Damien, their eyes glowing brighter than ever before. Each of us now carried a new purpose – one that went beyond mere survival.

Some of us decided that Elysium – the new Elysium – would become our true home. Now that the systems worked, but were under our control, not Tark'han's, we felt that we were the leaders of our own paths, the creators of our own future. We would no longer be ruled by lifeless software.

The lights grew brighter and brighter, and our steps were filled with resolve. Elysium lived, and we were not just its inhabitants – we were part of its new beginning.

Beside me stood Joran Valtor and Viktor Hale – the only surviving members of leadership. Silently, they watched the euphoria.

After a moment, Joran leaned toward me and whispered:

"There are not many of us... but we have will, technology, and purpose. We will rebuild Elysium – not as a shelter, but as a new beginning! We are the chosen."

I looked at his joyful face. The face of a man who had survived catastrophe, yet remained imprisoned.

But I did not want that.

How free is a man's life if he lives in a prison?

In the prison of his body or mind, dragging behind him the shadow of a traitor and a murderer?

## CHAPTER 5

### BEARER OF LIGHT

Elysium was breathing. For the first time in years, it breathed like a living organism, not like a machine being kept alive. The turbines spun quietly but steadily. The lights burned with a pure brightness. Water flowed through the pipes, and the system that once felt like nothing more than a collection of protocols suddenly seemed... human.

But I kept wandering, lost in thought, walking as if without a soul.

"Miles," Damien said to me quietly once. "Keller and I were thinking about what Valen told you. We remembered that in the old Sector A9 there's an isolated monitoring node. It used to be connected to the external communication satellites. They used it before Tark'han took over everything. Maybe you'll find something there."

So, together with Damien and Keller, I went into the sector that hadn't been used in years. Dust, silence, and the faint squeal of metal in the distance were our only companions. We found the terminal quickly – old, but still functional. Too bulky by today's standards, but still connected to the archive.

We entered access. And suddenly something opened that should not have existed. Records of transmissions outside the Tark'han system.

Logs that had been sent through an alternative channel marked VT\_Admin. Backed up directly from inactive satellite buffers.

I opened the first one. And my breath froze.

"Sector C3 will be empty. Enter the code and insert the module. The old interface will let you in. I'll take care of the rest."

The voice was unrecognized. But under the record was a data tag – time, place, and signature: J.V.

"Joran Valtor," Damien whispered.

We opened another fragment.

Recipient: Tomas.

"Ensure the outage, we will spread the chaos. Elysium must break in order to be rebuilt. Those who survive will be ready."

Keller closed his eyes. "Valen knew. That's why he sacrificed himself. That's why... he said nothing."

"Because he knew if the truth died with him, maybe Elysium would survive."

"What now?" Keller asked.

"We need to bring the satellite monitors to me."

"But why?" Damien asked, confused. "Do you want them as proof?"

"No. We'll print out this communication and hand it over to Viktor Hale, as the last of the Council. But I need them for something else."

And though Damien and Keller pressed me to reveal for what, I remained stubbornly silent.

Everyone else worked on rebuilding Elysium, but I – Miles – still sat before the monitor in the technical room, watching the signals of the old satellites. I stared at the screen like a man possessed. Days, weeks I spent in that room, examining data and signals that were more than just static and dropouts.

And then – just when I had begun to believe I was chasing ghosts in the dark – the signal I had long awaited arrived.

A faint crackle came through the speakers, fragmented, as if trying to reassemble itself into meaning. On the monitor appeared data fragments – traces, faded outlines. Not an error. Not a dropout. Something above us was communicating.

Not from Elysium. Not from underground.

From above.

My fingers flew across the keyboard, immediately adjusting the parameters.

The signal was weak, but regular.

And then the image stabilized. A map.

On it, the planet – our Aether. Split open like a wound. One half frozen in endless night, the other scorched by the sun. And between them: a thin ring of land.

"This is not the world I imagined." My eyes scanned the screen, seeing the clear division of the planet. And that ring – that small strip of land that might be habitable – appeared as a fragile hope between ruined lands.

"Our planet is divided, Miles." Viator's voice was more solemn this time.

"But that ring... it is a place where life may still be possible. What you are searching for may be there."

I couldn't focus on anything else. Aether, once a place of endless beauty, was now torn and mutilated. As I looked at this divided land, I couldn't escape the feeling that this was our world—the world we had lost long ago, and now struggled to find our way back to.

"Can we reach it?" I asked, almost in a whisper.

Viator replied calmly: "Yes, Miles. If you stop fearing to go outside... you can begin anew."

In that moment, I knew what I had to do.

The world above was finally fit for life. And so, with Viator's help, I began preparing a group of the brave—those willing to climb back to the surface with me.

I stood before the main elevator with Damien, Keller, and dozens of survivors. Some sat on the floor with their arms wrapped around their knees. Others leaned against the walls, staring silently ahead. Each of us carried our own shadow.

But today—we were all looking upward.

"Are you sure we can make it?" Damien's voice was dry, as if he wanted to sound cynical, but didn't dare. "I mean... not die instantly when those doors open?"

I looked at him. In his eyes was that strange mix of irony and fear I had come to appreciate.

"I'm not sure of anything," I admitted. "But I know one thing—we've stayed down here long enough."

"And the records?"

"I just gave them to Viktor," I explained. "We'll see what he does with them."

"And Joran?" Keller asked.

"I saw him this morning. He was standing by the main system interface.

We exchanged greetings, and I gave him Valen's message about watching the old satellites. He froze, stiffened at attention. So I told him what we found."

"And?"

"He said nothing—just stayed silent. Finally, he told me he knew I would discover it, but expected me to be wiser."

"Wiser?" Keller repeated after me. "What did he mean?"

"He explained that the system was collapsing. The AI had stopped serving humanity, so he had to shut it down. At the same time, Elysium's population was growing while supplies dwindled. And so he began selecting who would survive... and who would not."

"And what about Celeste and Tomas?"

"He denied it. Claimed they were accidents, and that we have no proof of murder. Mara and Eros, he said, died in Zone Z from toxic pulmonary edema caused by impurities in the recycling system."

The three of us fell silent, mourning, but we had no time to dwell on the weight of it.

Suddenly, Viator appeared beside us. His glowing sphere pulsed with a gentle light, as if he, too, sensed the presence of something else. Something... greater.

"Miles," he spoke to me softly, "you are leaving."

I didn't answer. I only looked at him. He understood.

Behind us stood not an army, but a community. People of all ages, skills, and stories. Cooperation had kept us alive—but now we were to walk into a place where technology would not protect us.

Where no sensors could tell us if the air was safe to breathe. Where the world was ruled only by its own laws.

The iron gate sealing our underground world began to open slowly, with the deafening roar of steel locks. The ground trembled. As the massive parts of steel shifted, hope rose within us—yet so did the fear of the unknown. The gate that had confined us underground for years finally gave way. It felt like the last boundary that had shielded us from the dangers of the outside world—but now we dared to cross it.

And then, I felt Viator withdrawing. His luminous sphere dimmed, its pulse slowing.

"Miles, this is where our path together ends," he said.

I turned to him, eyes confused.

"No. I still need you. We all do..."

"No. You need yourself. I was only the voice you needed to hear. Now you carry it within you."

I coughed—not because of the air, but because of the emotion tightening in my throat.

"Thank you."

His light began to fade.

"Miles... remember this. Fear is not your enemy. It is a door. And now you know how to open it."

And then he was gone. I never saw him again. But I felt him—in every breath, in every step.

When the doors finally opened wide, a new, unknown world revealed itself before us. Sunlight pierced through the thick clouds as they began to break apart. Every glimpse of that scene was like breathing after too long. The rays fought their way through the heavy veil, scattering and dissolving the darkness.

As the first adults slowly crossed the threshold of Elysium, a group of women and children still waited in the shadow of the airlock. Some clutched their children's hands, others held them tightly in their arms. None of them knew whether they were stepping into a miracle... or their final moment.

The only one unafraid was a little boy with a mask over his face. His eyes burned with unquenchable curiosity. He had never known fresh air or wind.

He watched Damien and Keller walk on the earth, watched the sunlight fall across their masked faces. Then he looked at me.

"Can I...?" he asked softly, his voice muffled through the mask.

I nodded.

His mother looked at him with a mixture of fear and hope.

"If you can do it, then so can we," she whispered.

The boy placed his hands on the mask. Such a simple motion—yet I felt it was more than courage. It was his first act of freedom.

With one swift pull, he removed it. He inhaled deeply.

And then... nothing happened. No cough. No spasm. No pain. No death. Only... a smile.

A smile so wide, so pure, that for a moment I had to turn away. My eyes blurred.

"Out here it smells... like... something new," the boy said.

I smiled back at him and gave a thumbs-up. "So? What do you feel?"

The boy thought for a moment, then nodded solemnly: "Like... when Mom bakes bread. But a hundred times better."

Slowly, one by one, we all began removing the masks from our faces, feeling our lungs awaken—as if every cell of our bodies, long buried in the underground, was alive again.

Some began to cry.

Others laughed.

Keller fell to his knees, pressed his hands to the ground, and embraced the sand.

"This is... this is the real world," Damien breathed. "This is how it was always meant to be."

Before us stretched a land that had survived. Sandy plains, rocks jutting here and there, and mountains in the distance—not the gray masses of stone we had imagined, but green ridges of life. Aether. The land we believed destroyed. The land thought to be a radioactive grave. But now... it was healing.

The surface was different. Quiet—but not dead. The earth was breathing. Damien walked ahead of me, Keller at his side. Their eyes glistened.

"Miles, look, those are..." Keller struggled for the word, until at last he shouted, "Trees!" and burst into laughter. All our gazes turned toward the towering beings that rose beside us.

Tall trees, emerging like those we had only ever seen in virtual worlds. The air among them was different. Life had returned—not in its full strength, but enough for us to know that Aether was awakening. In those trees, I saw the old beauty, the one we once knew.

"This is a forest," I whispered, remembering the pictures I had seen in books years ago. "Yes... a forest."

A forest that was meant to be destroyed and turned into a desert.

And before us, at its edge, stood a shadow. My eyes focused at once. A person. Someone who lived in this new land—in this new world now unfolding before us.

I raised my hand to shield my eyes from the brilliance of the light spreading before us. The sun reflected off the forest floor, and it was like an unbelievable vision—a world we had never seen. Squinting, I saw the shadow more clearly.

"Yes... I see it right. That's... that's a woman."

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