

Prologue

Early 2110

Brooke Army Medical Center

San Antonio, Texas

Earth, Sol System

Dr. Kristy Neil stood near the observation window and looked in. The bodies of fifteen men and women were lying in repair tanks, surrounded by a grayish semitranslucent nanogel. It had been a fight to get them to survive this long, but now they were stable.

Or stable enough, Dr. Neil thought to herself, practically grunting out loud.

Colonel Jair Bolsonaro walked in, interrupting her thoughts.

“How are they?” he inquired.

“Alive, so far,” Dr. Neil replied.

“It’s a modern miracle what you were able to do,” Colonel Bolsonaro remarked.

“Well, given their condition when they arrived, it’s a wonder that they made it at all,” Dr. Neil replied, still astonished by the capabilities of the Gallentine medical technology.

“Agreed, but that’s what made them candidates for the program in the first place,” Bolsonaro replied.

“Jair, has it ever occurred to you that just because you *can* save someone, it doesn’t always mean you should?” Dr. Neil probed. “This new medical tech is great—it’s beyond anything we’ve ever seen before, and it’s allowing us to save people who never could have been saved before. But something about saving people like *this*...just seems unnatural.”

Dr. Neil knew her colleague disagreed, and she prepared for another lecture—the same one he always gave her when she questioned the ethical nature of the program.

“Come on, Kristy. We’ve been over this many times. The Director has overruled your objection, as has every advisor on the program. It’s time to move on. If that’s not something you can do, then perhaps it’s time *you* move on.”

Yeah, right, thought Dr. Neil bitterly. *If I move on, God only knows what you guys will do with these soldiers next.* At least staying in the program meant she could help them as they recovered.

“No need to get dramatic, Jair. I’m still the leading doctor in this field, and I have no intention of leaving it or my patients behind.”

“Good. Then let’s move on,” replied Bolsonaro. “Are you fairly certain that these fifteen will survive?”

“Their bodies seem to be sufficiently stable, but we won’t know for sure whether or not their brains have been repaired enough until we wake them up,” Dr. Neil explained. She paused. “I suppose it’s time to bring in Dr. Mudo.”

Bolsonaro shifted uncomfortably at the mention of Dr. Mudo’s name. “I’ll make sure he knows,” he answered, backing up slowly to head for the exit.

Dr. Neil managed to turn away to hide a smirk. *Yeah, Dr. Mudo gives me the creeps too,* she realized.

Dr. Arief Mudo was a cold and calculating man. It would have made him a terrible family practice physician, but he was aptly skilled for a job that required life-and-death decisions to be made without too much consideration for the emotional ramifications.

He studied the readouts of each candidate’s medical condition carefully. Most of the vitals and lab results were within normal parameters, surprisingly enough considering the severity of the injuries they’d had when they’d been brought in. However, there were a few that gave him pause.

“Kristy, take a look at this,” he ordered. He liked to use Dr. Neil’s first name in place of her title as doctor in order to emphasize the fact that she was subordinate to him.

“Coming,” she replied.

“See here?” Dr. Mudo pointed to a display. “Despite the amount of time that they’ve all been suspended in the nanogel, Candidate Two still shows abnormalities in his EKG readings. You need to cut him loose.”

“But, Dr. Mudo, if we give it enough time, I’m sure that we can get his heart to heal completely,” she pleaded.

“You aren’t thinking of the big picture, Kristy,” Dr. Mudo shot back. “They aren’t *all* going to make it. That extra time that you’re leaving Candidate Two in there in the hopes that *maybe* he’ll recover fully is time in which you could have saved someone else who definitely *will* survive.”

We only have a limited number of these vats. They must be used on those who are most likely to survive.”

Dr. Neil shook her head but then responded, “Yes, sir,” in a quiet voice. She typed her codes into her terminal, and the backlight in the second tank went out. With it, the life of Candidate Two was snuffed out.

She was certainly competent enough, but Dr. Mudo was constantly irritated by Dr. Neil’s excessive level of empathy. This was not a touchy-feely mission of compassion—they weren’t saving these soldiers’ lives out of a sense of altruism. There was an endgame and they had to meet the objectives.

“That brings me to Candidates Six, Eight, Twelve, and Thirteen,” Dr. Mudo continued. “I’ve examined their brain scans carefully, and their waves are not within normal limits. There are limitations to how far this Gallentine technology can take us, especially when it comes to the brain. We need candidates who can survive both the neural implants and the physical augmentations.”

There was a pause until Dr. Neil acknowledged his statement with a slow nod. She might not have agreed with him on everything, but he could rely on her to do the right thing eventually.

More lights were permanently turned off.

“Now that we aren’t using our resources on candidates that have no chance of being viable, it’s time to start our security checks on these individuals before we begin the enhancement procedures,” Dr. Mudo explained. “If we’re going to make anonymous supersoldiers out of this lot, they can’t have extensive ties to Earth, New Eden or somewhere else. These people are officially dead, so we can’t have them going rogue just to get back and see their child or their fiancé. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Get your people on it. Start with him, Candidate One, Corporal David Roberts, and just move through them. Some of these interviews may take a while.”

Dr. Neil sighed quietly and nodded. Then she turned around to get to work.

Dr. Mudo looked back at the repair tanks. *There’s ten of you left—how many will make it into Viceroy Hunt’s Kite Program?*

He suddenly felt very impatient. He knew how badly they needed this to work. The Kite Program was meant to operate outside of all conventional authorities. After this, they wouldn’t be a part of the Army or Republic Intelligence—they’d be able to carry out all sorts of missions the

Viceroy needed done but couldn't send anyone else to do. And if they ever did get caught, their new biometrics wouldn't match those of anyone alive, and they would be cut loose like a kite—plausible deniability.

It was a brilliant plan. Dr. Mudo wished he had thought of it himself. His boss's cunning nature never ceased to surprise him. A crooked smile curled up the left side of his lips.

Several Weeks Later

Dr. Kristy Neil mentally prepared herself for the meeting she was about to have with Dr. Arief Mudo. Now that the security interviews had been completed, she knew he would recommend more cuts from the program. She struggled with the ethics of what they were doing.

We went to all that trouble to save these people, and now they're going to die anyway just because Mudo says they aren't useful enough, she mourned.

The cognitive dissonance of her situation was causing her tremendous stress. She was even starting to have acne breakouts, which was rather embarrassing for a grown woman of her age.

Dr. Neil had fully believed in the Hippocratic oath she'd taken when she had become a doctor; the idealistic "do no harm" motto had just seemed like the only right thing to do back then. However, that world of black and white had faded into a haze of different shades of gray, and now she had to tolerate things she despised.

None of these people would have survived without this program, she told herself. *The ones that don't make it through the selection process—they just died in battle.*

Those that had been conducting the security interviews had done so under the guise of finding recipients for a charitable organization that helped support family members of fallen soldiers. Only the funds were real. It did make Dr. Neil feel a bit better knowing that those who left this earthly plane today would have helped their loved ones.

Dr. Mudo walked in and Dr. Neil's stomach instantly tightened.

"Hello, Kristy, do you have everything you need?" he asked.

"Everything is ready to go," she replied.

"Good. Well, let's get this over with, then, shall we?"

Dr. Neil nodded. She wanted this morning meeting to be over with as soon as humanly possible.

“All right, sir. Candidate One, Corporal David Roberts, really seems to be a good fit for this program,” she began. “He had a steady girlfriend, but she died in combat. He had a mom and sister in Atascadero, California, but they were unfortunately killed in one of the terrorist bombings.”

“What about this report of him punching another service member?” asked Dr. Mudo skeptically.

“All eyewitness accounts state that the guy had it coming. He performed admirably on Alfheim after that incident, with no further issues, and his leadership saw fit to promote him, so I’d say this was a nonissue.”

“Hmm, OK. I guess I’ll defer to his direct leadership on this one. He can stay. Let’s move on. What about Candidate Three, Jordan Paulsen?”

Dr. Neil sighed. “She has a daughter, age five, and a husband.”

Dr. Mudo bluntly stated, “Well, then, you know what you must do.”

A huge knot formed in her stomach, but she managed to reply, “Yes, sir.”

The backlight on repair tank three was extinguished. Dr. Neil wanted to cry, but she held herself together. *At least that little girl’s college will be paid for, and her father won’t struggle to provide for her.*

One by one, they went through the candidates, eliminating fifty percent of them due to their having ties that were too liable to pull them away from their new life in the Kite Program. Five remained: three men and two women.

Candidate Four was Jessica Lyons. She had grown up in the foster system, never being adopted by anyone before growing into adulthood; she’d never really formed any strong relationships with anyone until joining the service.

Lucky number seven was Somchai Suwan, although his life had been anything but lucky before he’d joined the military. He’d been struck by one tragedy after another, losing both parents to cancer while in college and his siblings in a terrible car accident less than six months later. His family hadn’t had the kind of money required to get treatment with medical nanites. He had quit his studies at university and floundered in life for a while until a friend had convinced him to join the service—with a renewed sense of purpose, he had excelled.

Candidate Eleven was Amir Saleh. Due to religious differences, he had apparently been estranged from his family for some time. He had been in a serious relationship with a woman, but she had split up with him after having to endure such long periods of separation and gone on to marry another man, so that door was definitely closed.

The final candidate was Catalina Alonso, an only child of older parents. Her father had passed away from a heart attack several years ago, and while her mother was living, she had been relegated to an assisted living facility due to a rare form of dementia for which there was still no known cure.

Frankly, as stringent as Dr. Mudo was, Dr. Neil was grateful to have anyone left, but these five did stand the best chance of dealing with the psychological strain of having to renounce all former contacts.

“Well, now that we have our field appropriately narrowed down, Kristy, we can begin with the surgical enhancements and altering of their biometrics,” Dr. Mudo reminded her. “I’ll have my people begin crafting legends for them once we have the new fingerprints and facial recognition points.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied.

It was going to be a busy day. She had five neural implants to insert, and then she had to essentially turn these men and women into Delta operators. *They didn’t sign up for this—I just hope that we’ve made the right selections.*

“Looking good,” David heard a woman say. “He’s out of the coma. He should be ready now.”

“Brain activity looks good,” someone else said.

Whoa, what’s going on? David wondered. Is this some sort of dream? Am I dead? Is this purgatory, heaven? It can’t be hell...I don’t feel any fire. Oh, God...fire—my body’s on fire!

“Excellent, keep monitoring his vitals,” the woman said. “We’re going to give him the stimulants.”

No, I’m not dead. Those are definitely human voices.

“Giving him ten cc’s now.”

Who’s talking right now? Am I in some sort of hospital?

“This looks good. His brain activity is beginning to peak. His vitals are stabilizing. Let’s see if he responds to stimuli next.”

Ouch, what just poked me? David asked himself. *Wait, I can feel something...that means I’m not dreaming. If I’m not dead, then I’m alive.*

“Response to stimuli good. Let’s go ahead and wake him up.”

David found himself jerking into a sitting position and gasping for air. He was naked and sitting in some sort of gray goo. Suddenly, he felt very cold.

A female doctor approached, holding out a couple of towels. “Welcome back to the land of the living, Corporal Roberts,” she said with a warm smile.

“Where am I?” he asked. “What happened?” He eagerly grabbed for one of the towels and began drying off his torso. He started to move his legs to get out of the tank, but the doctor stopped him.

“Hold up there,” she said, raising a hand. “You were clinically dead and then in a comatose state for several weeks now, and we just pumped you full of stimulants. You’re going to need to sit here and acclimate for a few minutes before you move around too much.”

It was only then that David actually looked down at his own body and realized that some major surgeries had been performed on him. When he saw the other men and women lying in the tanks, though, it was all too much for him. He threw up.

“That’s all right, David,” said the doctor soothingly as she helped him to clean up. *We expected many of you to have strong reactions to all of these changes.* David suddenly realized that she hadn’t actually spoken that last part. He’d heard it in his head as if she were speaking via telepathy.

“What...what *happened* to me?” he pressed.

“Well, David, as I stated previously, you were technically dead. However, due to some incredible Gallentine technology, we were able to bring you back. You’re a modern miracle. More will be explained once we’ve woken the others, but for now, just take a moment to enjoy this second lease on life, OK?”

David and four others were now fully clothed, and they had each been given a tray of food to eat. Although he couldn’t help but feel suspicious of the shorter male doctor that had joined the

room, his ravenous hunger overrode any hesitation he might have felt in that moment. He devoured his meal like he'd been stuck on a deserted island for two months.

You might want to slow it down there, Tiger, joked the female soldier next to him over the neurolink. *It would be a shame for them to bring you back from the dead just for you to die choking on your dinner.*

Suddenly, David realized that he knew her name was Catalina. In fact, he knew the names of everyone in the room, including the doctors. He'd known about neurolinks because of all the stories he'd heard about the Deltas, but actually having one—that would certainly take some getting used to.

Hey, what do you think Shorty's story is? David asked.

Honestly, I don't know, but he doesn't seem like the kind of guy it would be fun to go have a beer with, replied Catalina.

David smirked. He liked this one.

A colonel walked into the room. Out of habit, everyone immediately put their trays down and jumped to attention.

“At ease. My name is Colonel Jair Bolsonaro, and I will be your main point of contact for the Kite Program,” he announced.

“Kite Program?” Amir asked.

“Normally, I'd chew your head off for interrupting me while I speak, but given that you all were just plucked from the dead like Lazarus, I'm going to give you one for free,” Bolsonaro said. “Why don't you all sit back down and finish your food while I explain a few things to you.”

The group obliged.

“You all are the guinea pigs for some Gallentine medical technology that is, frankly, amazing. Drs. Neil and Mudo here could tell you a lot more about how it all works, but the end run is you were clinically dead, you shouldn't be here, and yet you are.”

He paused and paced a moment. “This situation you find yourselves in presents us with a unique opportunity. You see, as far as the Republic is concerned, you are still dead. You were awarded posthumous medals for bravery in battle, and your life insurance policies paid out to whatever beneficiaries you had named. That means you no longer exist, or at least there's no record of it.

“Look down at your hands,” he instructed. David stared at his palms quizzically. “We’ve even gone to the trouble of altering your biometrics. Your fingerprints aren’t the same, and your faces have been altered enough that you would no longer match a facial recognition scan for your former self. In short, the you that you were before no longer exists. Your first names will remain the same, but we’ve created legends for each of you that you will need to thoroughly memorize.”

David felt himself panic slightly. He touched his face involuntarily, wondering what he now looked like.

“Now before you all go off the rails, let me get back to the opportunity I referenced before,” Bolsonaro continued. “Since you are now anonymous by your very nature, you can work outside of the scope of what the Army or Republic Intelligence can accomplish, at least officially. And we just upgraded your bodies with all the enhancements that the Deltas get, so you can run faster, jump higher, breathe deeper, and react faster than you could before—not to mention the neurolinks I’m sure you’ve discovered, which have a whole host of capabilities on their own. So you put all that together, and you five have what it takes to become one of the most powerful forces for good in the known universe.”

Yeah, but we’re the “Kite Program,” so if we get caught, they can cut us loose, Amir commented via neurolink.

“I think I may know something about what you’re thinking,” Bolsonaro remarked. ““Won’t they just forget that we exist if we get captured?”” He stood back and crossed his arms. “Well, first of all, we are going to train you to use these new bodies of yours. You will be given the type of training that the Special Forces receive and learn how to move in such a way as to be undetectable. You will be the elite of the elite.

“Not only will you be the tip of the spear, kicking ass and taking names, but the Kite Program comes with some really killer benefits. You will be making *way* more money than you could have ever made in the Army. And we’re going to give you some time off to use it. Every two years, you’ll get a six-week sabbatical—you can take a luxury space cruise, live it up in the Bahamas, or go surfing on New Eden—whatever you want, within reason.

“The *only* thing you definitely won’t be allowed to do is contact any of your former family members or associates. The Republic has invested a lot of money into turning you into someone new and keeping this program clandestine—and it will stay that way, even if we have to kill you or whoever you tried to contact to keep it that way.”

The information sat there in the room for a moment. David reasoned that there really was no choice other than to say yes. It would be cool to get to do some James Bond kind of crap that no one else would ever get to do. And what was he going to do—say no? It sounded like that would spell his end—a real end this time.

“So, now that I’ve explained the facts of the situation to you, do any of you have any questions?” asked Bolsonaro.

“Just one,” said Jessica. “Let’s say we do all this. Is there ever a point where we can walk away?”

“The Republic has put a great deal of investment in you,” Bolsonaro responded, “so they would like to get some of that back. But you give us thirty years, and you can ride off into the sunset.”

“So where is the paperwork?” asked Somchai.

Colonel Bolsonaro grinned. “Now that’s what I like to hear.”