



## *Chapter 21 - Left Turns*

Ellie and Sarah made it through DeLand without any major events. A few possums and raccoons occasionally created a false scare, but they held onto their sanity and found themselves on the footsteps of Daytona as the sun started to rise. What was once a hub of roaring engines and cheering crowds now lay silent before them.

Sarah saw a hill near a large sign and decided to take a rest on the high ground. "Can you see the track, Baby?" she asked Ellie.

Ellie squinted, trying to peer through the dense foliage. "No, I can't see it, Mommy," she replied, her innocence a stark contrast to the history that surrounded them.

Sarah considered lifting Ellie onto her shoulders so she could see over the thick vegetation, but decided against it. "Alright, let's get a little closer. It was called the Daytona International Speedway," Sarah said with a hint of sadness as they entered a clearing.

"It looks like a building," Ellie replied.

Sarah laughed. "Those are the bleachers. There are seats surrounding the entire racetrack. It is massive. The track is two miles long."

"What did they race?" Ellie asked. She'd never seen a moving car in her lifetime.

"Cars, Baby." Sarah motioned to the wreckage of a nearby vehicle. "Those cars used to drive on the roads. The racetrack was for the fastest ones. People used to watch them race. There was an entire industry around racing."

Ellie smiled. "That's so weird. People just watched the cars go around?"

Sarah started laughing even harder. "Yup." She smiled at Ellie, realizing suddenly that in some strange way, maybe it was better for Ellie to grow up in this new age. As they sat together, watching the sunrise illuminate the ruins of Daytona, Sarah and Ellie shared a bond that went beyond blood—a bond forged in the fires of a world reborn.



## Chapter 22 - Orange Octane

Despite the dangers and fear of the unknown, Sarah was happy they'd embarked on their journey to the ocean. She always wanted to show Ellie where she grew up.

"I see you've made it through Orlando," Radio said, after appearing out of thin air. "How is the Yellow treating you? Have you had to sleep yet?" he asked.

"No, not yet. I feel really good still." Sarah pulled the vials out of her pocket and looked at them closely. "Looks like we still have two more days' worth. Do you think we can stay up the whole time?"

"You should be fine. Have you noticed any mutations?" Radio questioned.

"There was something on my arm," Ellie said. "There was a bad man that was going to shoot Mommy. He's gone now."

Radio flew over and examined Ellie more closely. "Interesting. It appears normal now. It must've been something from the Kaligua."

Sarah stood up and walked over to Radio. "This was one of the scariest things I've ever witnessed, Radio. The man... It was like he was compressed by something. He turned blue all of a sudden. He... He was going to shoot me. Then Ellie did something. It was like... His spirit... His life force... It was removed from his body. And then it exploded." The hair on Sarah's arms stood up from reliving the experience.

Radio grinned. "It sounds like he got what he deserved. It's unfortunate that I missed the spectacle."

"Dude, I almost got shot! This wasn't just some spectacle. You said you were going to protect us!"

"I would've been alerted had you been in any sense of danger. Had he fired, we'd have stopped it. Ellie, remember our game of top tens?" Radio asked. Sarah had been sleeping when they spoke of the top ten ways to stop a bullet.

Ellie smiled, "Yeah, kinda. Let me think," she paused.

Sarah's eyes widened. "That fast? You'd have just appeared?" she asked.

"Nanoseconds," Radio said proudly. "There are over ten ways we can stop a bullet, my Darling." Radio grinned, then continued, "From the sound of it, I believe Ellie has been blessed with spirit burn technology. What a rare gift. Andromeda team must really like her," he paused. "They... They can look into your soul. They know everything about everyone. Every memory, every event, they've watched."

The hairs on Sarah's arms stood up again. "They're Gods?" she asked.

Radio smiled at her. "You went into the fog, didn't you?"

Sarah shrugged. "There were three of them in there! They said they were the masters of the Universe! It... It was surreal. Almost like a dream."

"What else did they tell you?" Radio asked. He didn't have permanent access to that dimension. It was invite only.

"Not much. I... I think they just wanted to show me where they lived..." Sarah lied. She didn't want to tell Radio that they were talking about him.

"Interesting," Radio stated. "Well, you are almost to the ocean. I see you've noticed the track. If you want to go on a little side-quest, I could make something special for you. That is, if you are successful."

"What can you make for us?" Ellie asked.

"Have you ever had any Orange?" Radio teased. He knew that it was still in beta phase, never introduced to the planet yet.

"Nope. Is it better than the Yellow?" Ellie's eyes lit up.

"Let's just say, instead of a sip, it only takes a drop."

Sarah couldn't believe what she was hearing. She was already ecstatic that the Yellow was working so well. She had been unable to pass through Orlando since Ellie was born. Seeing the mutations of those that neared the city was something she'd never allow to happen to Ellie. If the Orange was as powerful as Radio alleged, that would mean that she might be able to travel far enough to find a nice place to call home and raise Ellie.

"What do you need from the track?" she asked.

"Nitrous," Radio said. "As much as you can get. And high-octane fuel. The more, the better."

Ellie's curiosity was piqued. "What's nitrous?" she inquired, her innocence a stark contrast to the world's harsh realities.

"It's a substance that used to make cars go faster," Sarah explained, her mind racing with plans. "Now, it seems it will help us on our journey."

Radio's smile widened. "If you're successful, the Orange will be yours. A single drop will sustain you for longer than you can imagine."

The thought of such power was both exhilarating and daunting. Sarah knew the risks, but the potential rewards were too great to ignore.

"We will do it," Sarah said. With a nod of agreement, they set off towards the track, the challenge laid before them like a gauntlet. The quest for nitrous and fuel was not just a

side mission; it was a leap towards a future where they could find a place to call home—a sanctuary where Ellie could grow and thrive.

As they approached the track, the silence was a reminder of the world's transformation. But within Sarah, a fire burned brightly, fueled by the hope that Radio's promise would lead them to a new beginning.





## Chapter 23 - Sticky Situations

The Daytona International Speedway loomed before Sarah and Ellie, its grandeur now a hollow echo of the past. The bleachers, once filled with the roars of crowds, stood silent, guarding the secrets that lay beneath.

With bolt cutters in hand, Sarah led the way to a secluded entrance under the bleachers. The rusted chain that barred their path was no match for the steel jaws of the cutters. With a snap, the chain fell away, and the door creaked open, revealing the darkness within.

The garage was a time capsule, mostly untouched by the chaos that reigned outside. Dust motes danced in the beams of light that pierced the gloom, and the air was thick with the smell of oil and rubber.

As they ventured deeper, a sense of unease settled over them. The ground felt strange underfoot, and Ellie's step faltered. "Mommy, I'm stuck!" she cried, her foot ensnared in a web that was unlike any they had seen before.

Sarah's heart raced as she turned to see Ellie struggling against the sticky strands. Before she could react, a shadow detached from the darkness above—a giant spider, its eyes reflecting a malevolent intelligence.

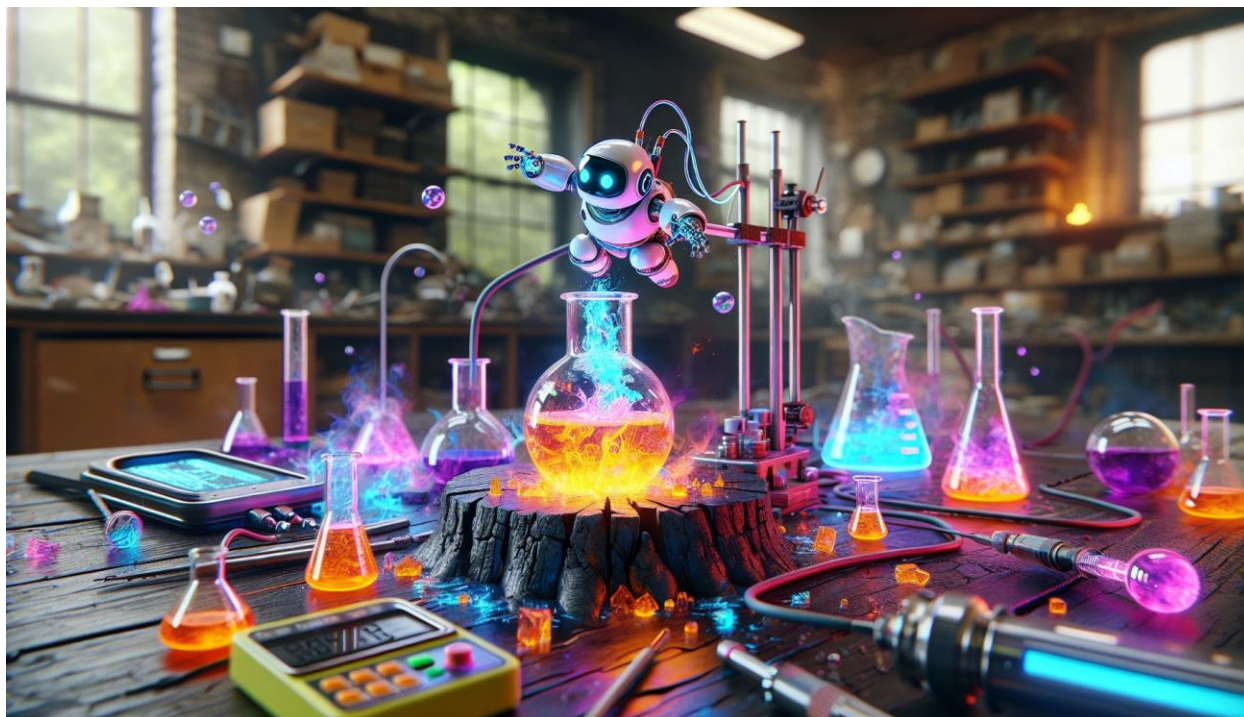
With no time to spare, Sarah grabbed a fire axe mounted on the wall. With a primal scream, she swung the axe, severing the web and sending the spider recoiling into the shadows.

"Run, Ellie!" Sarah shouted, pulling her daughter free. They sprinted towards the back of the garage, where a glint of metal caught Sarah's eye—a five-gallon can of fuel, their ticket to Radio's promised reward.

With the can in tow, they made for the exit, but a gleam of chrome stopped them in their tracks. A race car, preserved in the garage's microclimate, sat like a slumbering beast, a nitrous canister strapped on top of the hood.

Working quickly, Sarah detached the canister, the hiss of the release valve a sign of their success. They emerged from the garage, the daylight a welcome relief after the terrors within.

As they left the track behind, Sarah couldn't shake the feeling that their journey had only just begun. But with the fuel and nitrous secured, they were one step closer to the promise of the Orange-- and a new life beyond the horizon.



## Chapter 24 - Molecule Man

Radio snatched up the nitrous oxide canister before Sarah and Ellie had time to react. Seconds later, he came back and grabbed the high-octane fuel.

"Jesus Christ," Sarah said, shaking her head. "He's so fucking fast."

Ellie smiled. "At least he is on our side," she said.

"Thank you," Radio replied, appearing before them. "This will go a long way."

"What do you need the fuel for? I mean... You guys already have your ships. How could this little bit of fuel do anything for you?"

"I believe Ellie can tell you the answer to that question," Radio said with a smirk.

"It takes something to make something!" Ellie shouted.

"Very good," Radio stated. "This NO<sub>2</sub> will go a long way. We will use most of the Nitrogen up top, but the leftover pure O<sub>2</sub> after the reaction will go towards the Orange liquid. We'll also break down the high octane and create a unique biological hydrocarbon."

"Wait a minute dude," Sarah said. "You mean to tell me you these liquids have fuel in them? What do you mean, 'biological hydrocarbon'? The fuel is alive?"

Radio laughed. "Something like that."

"Is that why the Green makes me sick, Radio? Mommy said we couldn't drink gasoline. That doesn't make any sense." Ellie stated.

"One day, you might understand," Radio replied. "I may have already said too much," the robot paused for a moment. "You two have been okay so far, haven't you?"

Sarah looked down at her feet. She glanced at Ellie and noticed her arm was back to normal. "I suppose. We are still awake from yesterday." They'd been on the move for nearly two full-days without sleep.

"Yah, I feel good, Radio," Ellie replied. "I really just don't like the Green. Anything but that."

"Wait until you try some of the Orange. It might be a few days until I can bring it to you. Do you still have some of the Yellow?"

Sarah rattled the vials in her pocket and smiled. "Yep. We still have about two more sips each." She took another glance at herself and Ellie to double check for mutations. Orlando had been off-limits for several years.

"Perhaps, it may be best to save the rest. You two are close to the ocean now. There is a lighthouse near the pier. I'll see you when you get there." Radio vanished.

"Looks like we are heading to the pier," Sarah said to Ellie. "You will love the beach." She knew Ellie hadn't ever been to the ocean before.





## Chapter 25 - Wolf Pack

As Sarah and Ellie set out towards the pier, the ruins of US-92 stretched before them like the bones of a long-forgotten creature. The road was cracked and overgrown, nature reclaiming what was once hers. The sun hung low, casting long shadows and bathing the world in a golden hue.

They walked in silence, each lost in thought, the vials of Yellow clinking softly in Sarah's pocket. The ocean was calling, its distant roar a constant whisper on the wind. Ellie's eyes were wide with anticipation, her steps quickening as they neared the beach.

Suddenly, a low growl rumbled through the air. Sarah's hand instinctively went to the knife at her hip. A pack of dogs, their eyes wild and coats matted, emerged from the underbrush. The animals had survived in this new world, but not without cost; their demeanor was cautious, yet desperate.

"Stay close," Sarah whispered to Ellie, her voice steady despite the pounding of her heart.

The largest dog, a muscular beast with scars crisscrossing its snout, stepped forward. Its lips curled back, revealing a row of sharp teeth. But there was intelligence in its gaze, a questioning look, as if it recognized something in these two humans.

Ellie reached into her bag and pulled out an empty can of Green she had brought from the trailer. One lick of the dried green liquid on the inside of the can could mean life or death if they couldn't find more. She tossed the can towards the dogs. The pack leader sniffed it, then licked the crusty dried Green liquid. A shiver ran through its body, and then, to Sarah and Ellie's amazement, the dog sat down, its posture shifting from aggression to curiosity.

The other dogs followed suit, and for a moment, there was peace.

"We don't mean you any harm," Sarah said softly, taking a cautious step forward. "We're just passing through."

The pack leader's eyes seemed to soften, and with a gentle woof, it turned and led its pack back into the wilderness.

Sarah let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. "Let's keep moving," she said, and they continued on their journey, the encounter with the dogs a reminder of the delicate balance between danger and wonder in this new world.

As they approached the beach, the scent of salt and seaweed grew stronger. Ellie's excitement was palpable, and Sarah couldn't help but smile. They were survivors, and the ocean was a promise of new beginnings.



## Chapter 26 - Calcium Collection

Sarah was excited as they crossed through the mangroves. She had always loved going to the beach when she was growing up-- it was her favorite thing about Florida.

When she stepped onto the sand, she gasped in horror. The entire beach was littered with skeletons. Dozens of them. She instinctively reached out to shield Ellie's eyes, but it was too late.

"It's okay Mommy. I've seen this before," Ellie replied, miraculously smiling despite the grim scenery.

Sarah took a deep breath. It was difficult for her to accept that this was their new reality, but she was doing her best. "Well, this is it Baby. The beach."

"Whoa! Turtles!" Ellie exclaimed. There were hundreds of them, peacefully resting on the beach, the waves breaking on a few of their backs.

Sarah smiled. She was so happy that Ellie saw something beautiful instead of the death the surrounded them.

"Look! Crabs!" Ellie shouted as she ran towards the water. Her mother had shown her animals with an old Encyclopedia they'd found in a library. This was Ellie's first chance to see them in the wild.

"Be careful! We don't know if the water is safe, Ellie."

"They are fine," Ellie said, pointing to the sea turtles.

Sarah shook her head in disbelief. Ellie had a good point. "Let me test it, first. Okay Baby?"

Ellie laughed. "Okay, fine."

Sarah walked cautiously to the water's edge. She was mostly checking for temperature, a sure sign something evil could be lurking in the otherwise seemingly normal

water. "I think it might be okay," Sarah said, still examining the neon seaweed washing around in the swirling sand. She let a wave crash over the top of her foot and waited for the water to recede. "It feels okay," she said.

"Well, Radio did say the Yellow would protect us, right?" Ellie asked.

"Yeah, Baby," Sarah paused, "but still need to be careful. He guaranteed we'd be okay travelling through Orlando. But he didn't say anything about the ocean water." Sarah realized that Ellie wasn't a part of the conversation she had in the fog. "Radio said he'd be here. Let's just wait for him to show up, okay Baby?" She didn't want Ellie to know how terrified she truly was about the water. The things that she'd witnessed before Ellie was born hurt her soul.





## Chapter 27 - Solid Shell

The beach was a stark contrast of life and death, a reminder of the world's fragility and resilience. Sarah and Ellie stood at the water's edge, the gentle lapping of the waves a soothing counterpoint to the chaos they had endured.

"Mom, look at the crabs," Ellie said, pointing at the scuttling creatures. "They're different from the ones in the book, aren't they?"

Sarah nodded, observing the crabs' vibrant shells, an iridescent sheen reflecting the sunlight. "They've adapted, Ellie. Just like us. Maybe, Radio and the Novas helped them change?"

Ellie's eyes sparkled with curiosity. "Changed how?"

"Well, you see, when the Novas came, it brought changes to our world. Some were scary, but some helped the animals adapt to survive. These crabs, for example, their shells might be stronger now, better to protect them."

"And the turtles?" Ellie asked, her gaze following a sea turtle as it made its way to the ocean.

"The same," Sarah replied. "Maybe their shells can withstand more, or they can find food easier. The Novas' influence is like a ripple, touching everything."

Ellie seemed to ponder this, her young mind wrapping around the concept of adaptation, evolution, and survival. "So, the Novas help them too..."

"Exactly," Sarah said, her arm around Ellie's shoulder. "It's a balance. We have to take the good with the bad and keep moving forward."

They watched in silence as the wildlife around them continued its dance of life, a testament to the enduring spirit of nature. The Novas, with their mysterious force, had

reshaped their world. Miraculously, in the midst of destruction, they'd somehow managed to sow the seeds of new beginnings.

As the sun began to set, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink, Sarah felt a glimmer of hope. They would wait for Radio, but they were not helpless. They were part of this new world, ever-changing and adapting, just like the creatures that shared the beach with them.



## Chapter 28 - Last Chance

"I see you've made it to the beach," Radio said.

"I love this place! I've never seen a sea turtle before," Ellie said. "But the ones in the book, they weren't neon colored like these ones are. Did you do something to them, Radio?"

Radio grinned. "The turtles surely didn't deserve what happened to this world. They are some of the most peaceful creatures on this planet."

"Is it safe for us to swim, Radio?" Sarah changed the subject.

"Yep. As long as you've had some of the Yellow in the last 12 hours. After that, I wouldn't risk it."

"We still have some left. I think we are going to sleep tonight. We haven't had a chance to check the lighthouse yet, but so far everything around here has been quiet. I think we can sleep inside."

"We saw some dogs too, Radio!" Ellie exclaimed.

"Interesting. Were they friendly?" the robot asked.

"I guess," Sarah said. "They looked pretty mean, but Ellie threw them an empty can of Green. One of them licked the can dry, then they all took off."

Radio laughed. "Very clever. It seems even the dogs have adapted," Radio paused. "We are still working on the Orange. Hopefully, by morning, it will be complete."

"Look!" Ellie shouted. She pointed to a fleet of drones flying several hundred yards offshore.

"Whoa!" Sarah was truly surprised. The drones appeared to be human technology. "I wonder who is flying them..."

"What are those, Mommy?" Ellie asked. She'd never seen a drone in the sky before.

"They're called drones, Baby. People used to fly them all the time. They are flown remotely."

"What does that mean?" Ellie asked.

"It means there isn't a person inside. People use computers to control them."

"They're flown by the remnants of your government," Radio said.

"Are you going to shoot them down?" Sarah asked.

"Nah. It's better for us to let them fly. Then we can follow them to where they go back to charge. There is still a skeleton crew of the military leftover after the Fall. We haven't decided if we are going to eliminate them yet or not. We've given them many chances and they continue to attack. One more event like the other night... And I think that will be the end of them. We've communicated with them. They know the consequences, but I fear... I fear they think we're bluffing."

Sarah knew how powerful the aliens were, especially after watching them encapsulate a nuclear explosion a few nights prior. She didn't know exactly how to react to the thought of the remnants of the government being eliminated entirely. She was starting to like the world without any other people, but somewhere deep within her, she was still hoping that maybe someday a new version of society could emerge. Regardless, she knew she was powerless over the outcome. "So, I guess we will wait and see what happens," Sarah concluded.

Radio smiled. "If they want peace, they won't attack."

"How do you know exactly who is responsible? Are you sure it was our own people dropping these bombs? It doesn't make sense."

Radio smiled. "We know everything, Sarah. Trust me."

"Couldn't it have been a foreign country? Or a terrorist attack? I mean... Why would they drop bombs on our own people?"

"They want our ships, Sarah. They aren't ever going to get them though. Especially, acting like they have. They've nuked most of your own population in their futile attempts and still failed."

Sarah sighed. She'd heard so many different versions of what happened. It would be impossible to ever know the actual truth. Regardless, she was alive, and tomorrow was another day. "Alright, we're going to call it a night in the lighthouse. C'mon Ellie."





## Chapter 29 - Water's Edge

The lighthouse stood tall against the night sky, a solitary beacon amidst the desolation. Sarah and Ellie made their way inside, the spiral staircase echoing their footsteps as they ascended. At the top, they found a room with glass all around, offering a panoramic view of the darkened world outside.

"Mom, do you think it's true? What Radio said about the government?" Ellie's voice was small in the vast space.

Sarah wrapped her arms around her daughter, pulling her close. "I don't know, Ellie. But we're here now, and we're safe. That's what matters."

They settled into a corner with a haggard blanket they had brought. The Yellow vials were still secure in Sarah's pocket. "Tomorrow, we can go swimming Baby. It'll be fun. I will teach you."

Ellie smiled without saying a word. She was nervous about swimming. She had avoided the water her entire life. She knew what the consequences could be.

Outside, the drones continued their silent patrol, a reminder of the world's lingering chaos.

As Ellie drifted to sleep, Sarah stayed awake a little longer, watching the stars. They seemed indifferent to the turmoil below, a constant in an ever-changing universe. She thought about the sea turtles, the crabs, and the dogs they had encountered. Life was persisting, adapting, and so would they.

In the quiet of the lighthouse, Sarah finally allowed herself to rest, the rhythmic sound of the waves promising a new day. A day of Orange liquid, of unknown possibilities, and perhaps, a step closer to understanding the new world they were part of.

