

Chapter One

It's been five minutes since class started, and still, Tutor Arelle's pacing at the front of the classroom. With a sharp nod, she stops behind her desk, leaning forward to plant her hands on it.

"In the year 3218, the Event shattered Vathaylian society, killing billions. Who can tell me what that Event was?" she asks.

Around me, my classmates release a collective groan, and almost, I join them. It's bad enough that Arelle has decided we're revisiting topics from year one today, but she also wants us to participate in her lecture? Tuning her out is so much easier when we're not required to do that.

Unfortunately, I can't afford to show my exasperation like my classmates. Instead, I raise my hand, to many an eyeroll.

Straightening, Arelle smiles.

"Yes, Lillibeth?" she asks.

As I answer, I let my hand fall back into my lap.

"No one knows what the Event was, but we've all seen its effects," I say. "The Event stripped our world of its atmosphere, leaving it open to the unforgiving environment of space. Only those wise enough to follow Dr. Jeanie Carlson's instructions survived the cataclysm, and in the centuries since, we, the descendants of those brave few, continue to survive."

"Very good, Lillibeth!" Arelle says. "It's nice to see one among this crop of year six's can appreciate a return to the basics."

Her praise makes me duck my head. It's bad enough that I answered her question. Tutor Arelle doesn't have to make my life more difficult by praising me for that, but she always does it anyway. I briefly wonder if she does it on purpose but quickly dismiss that idea. Arelle isn't manipulative, like some of the other women.

"Thank you, Tutor," I say.

With an acknowledging nod, Arelle turns toward the whiteboard, letting me shrink behind my desk. I hope doing that will let me disappear among my classmates, but as if to disappoint me, something flicks the back of my head *hard*, and I swallow a groan.

That has to have been Zrinah, and given that, I know she won't quit irritating me until class is dismissed. It's frustrating enough that I think about trying to stop her, but I don't want to draw the Tutor's attention. Instead, I deal with her like I have throughout the rest of my life.

Across from me, Kasra shoots a sympathetic look my way, and meeting her gaze, I shrug. My friend knows why I put up with Zarinah's teasing, and while she's never encouraged how meek I make myself seem, she understands why I always try to disappear into the background.

Soon enough, we'll be free of class, free to complain about the subject Arelle chose for today and all our class's bullies in the safety in our pod. Until then, I ignore the girl behind me, focusing as Arelle switches her focus to an introduction to the subject of calculus.

"Zarinah is *such* a bitch!" Kasra shouts into the confines of our pod.

I flinch at her volume.

"Kas! Careful what you say!" I snap. "You know the women don't like that word."

"Well, if any of them heard me, they can walk out an airlock," Kasra snaps right back.

Where her first exclamation only made me flinch, the second makes the other girls in our pod freeze. In her corner, Yve pauses halfway through a pull-up. Saevi lowers her book to her stomach, and Ilana leaves her hairbrush hovering at the side of her head. At our wide-eyed stares, Kasra makes a face.

"Too much, huh?"

"What do you think?" Saevi says.

Done with her soft reprimand, she returns to her reading while activity resumes in our pod, but I'm stuck staring at my friend. Year six is so close to graduating, becoming women as a result, but at the same time, so few of us are still alive. I can't take another sudden disappearance of a comrade. It would rip something vital from me, and Kasra lives to fuel that anxiety.

She's *so brash*. The fact that she, out of all of those who've vanished, is sitting with us now will forever baffle me.

Catching my eye, she says, "Stop it, Lil. You're creeping me out."

Crossing my eyes, I stick my tongue out at her, which makes her snort. Kasra knows I don't like the nickname she picked for me, since it reminds me of one of my lesser failings, but she's always insisted I need to be reminded of it, that if she doesn't do that, I might forget I'm flawed.

"So," Yve says, puffing through another pull-up, "what's the plan tonight?"

Ilana slams her hairbrush on our single vanity, startling me and Saevi.

"Can't we just relax in the pod tonight?" she asks. "I've got mining rotation tomorrow."

That makes all of us wince, even Yve.

She still asks, "Is anyone else on that rotation?"

Saevi shakes her head before whispering.

"Maintenance."

"Nursery," Kasra and I say together.

The other girls groan when they see our shared grin.

"What about you, Yve?" I ask over their noise.

That girl freezes before dropping off of the pull-up bar. She dusts her hands off, swallowing hard.

"Exam," she breathes.

It's interesting how a single word can throw an entire room into oppressive silence. Staring at our pod mate, we run our eyes over her spindly frame and the disproportion between her limbs and torso.

After a moment, Ilana forces out, "I guess we're going out, whether I like it or not. So, I vote for the cantina to beg for snacks."

All thanks to Jeanie for that girl. If the quiet had stretched for much longer, Yve might have left the pod without us, and no one should be alone on the night before an exam rotation.

"I vote library," Saevi says.

Groaning, everyone starts throwing pillows at her, and she dodges them, all while keeping her eyes on her book.

"You always vote library!" I say.

Snorting, Kasra nudges me.

"What about you, Lil? What's your vote?"

Biting the inside of my cheek, I plunge my folded hands into my lap. Usually, my pod mates make decisions like this before asking me what I think, which is how I like it. I prefer to fade into the background when among the girls of my year. With the women, I have to stand out but with my fellow potentials...

Let's just say I like to limit my chances of exposure.

"I think Yve should choose," I say. "She's the one who started this. Let her pick."

The other girls murmur agreement, and when we glance her way, Yve rolls her eyes.

“Fine,” she says. “Simulation room.”

I wonder if anyone else notices Saevi tense when Yve says that.

“Sounds good to me!” Kasra says. “Let’s go before it gets too late.”

Everyone hops to their feet to gather their things before racing from our pod. I hang back, watching the others chatter and skip ahead of me. Will this be the last time we get to spend an evening together?

With my breath catching, I lift my eyes to the ceiling. Five pendant lights have passed before I trust myself to lower my gaze. My pod mates... my friends have pulled away from me, and I hurry to catch up.

The cantina’s clamor starts filling the hall, but we pass it by, taking the next turn instead. On one side of the hallway, virtual windows fill the wall. Empty black above barren rock fills each of them, and looking at that view, I shiver. Sure, it’s not an image of the real thing, but even still, I don’t like seeing it. We don’t need reminders like that about the death that lies beyond our walls.

At the edge of the corner ahead, my friends stop as if they’ve hit a wall. I’m about to ask what’s wrong when someone sails around the corner, and on seeing her, I stop too.

A woman? What’s she doing here, on the potential’s side of our home?

As she strides past me with her hair fluttering behind her, I hold perfectly still, resisting the urge to plaster my body against the wall. At the end of the hall, she turns toward the cantina, and I feel like I can breathe again.

The sound of pounding feet draws my gaze back toward my friends, and on instinct, I reach out. I catch Kasra’s arm before she can sprint past me, jerking her to a halt.

“It’s not worth it, Kas,” I hiss. “Leave it.”

Rounding on me, she bares her teeth.

“They never come here!” she says. “You know what one breaking the routine like that means.”

“I do,” I whisper. “It’s still not worth it. Will you be doing a nursery rotation with me tomorrow? Or will I be all on my own?”

She sucks in a breath before hissing it back through her teeth, and as it goes, the wildness in her eyes recedes. She nods, and we hurry to catch up with the others.

As she passes Yve, Kasra tersely says, “Looks like your chances at passing exam tomorrow just went up.”

That quip, which we'd normally tease or reprimand her about, was said with such bleakness that none of us make a comment. We finish our trip to the simulation room without a word.

When we arrive, Zarinah and her friends are stalking out of the room with their laughter loud in my ears. I shrink behind Ilana, hoping her larger frame will hide me, but it seems bad luck has fixated on me tonight.

When Zarinah notices me, she raises a hand to cover an expression of mock shock.

"Look, ladies! It's Miss Goody Two Shoes," she says before falling into an exaggerated and distinctly *wrong* impression of me. "Uh... no one knows how the Event happened. Please, Tutor Arelle, tell me how smart I am!"

As if on cue, her entourage bursts into laughter. I dig my fingernails into my palms while taking a deep breath. I can't scratch her eyes out, no matter how much I might want to. I have to control myself.

In front of me, Ilana says, "Careful, Zarinah. We saw a woman headed for the cantina just now. I wonder how she'd feel about a potential calling herself a lady."

Zarinah goes pale.

With a forced giggle, she says, "You're lying. Woman don't come here unless--"

She goes quiet.

"Duh. We know why they visit us, idiot," Saevi says, lifting her eyes from her book. "If you don't believe Ilana, go to the cantina and see for yourself. Or are you too afraid?"

Flushing, Zarinah snaps, "Let's go."

When she turns on her heels, her minions faithfully follow.

"Thanks," I whisper into the resulting silence.

Yve hugs me from the side while Kasra play-punches my arm.

"When are you going to learn to stand up for yourself?" she asks.

When I graduate and no longer have to fear the women, is what I want to say.

Instead, I shrug.

"Looks like we have good timing," I say. "We won't have to wait our turn."

With many a whoop, my friends hurry to file into the simulation room, seemingly accepting my distraction. Once we're inside the room, I lock the door behind us.

The others have already spread across the empty room, so I head for the controls.

“Where are we headed today?” I ask, almost rhetorically.

After all, I’m pretty sure I know how they’ll answer.

“They beach!” they shout in unison.

Smiling, I input the desired scenario and push the button to start it. Our empty room, painted white on every surface, transforms. The concrete beneath my feet loosens, becoming difficult to walk upon, and the ceiling seems to disappear with endless blue replacing it. People spring into being around us, graduated women all. Some of them are reclining on towels beneath umbrellas while others stroll along the water or play games together. On one side, a city flanks us, towers scraping the sky, and on the other lies the ocean.

I collapse into the sand, looking out over that gorgeous expanse. Leaning back on my hands, I breathe in the salty air.

This is perfection.

I close my eyes, letting the sound of the crashing waves wash over me.

I know it’s not real. I’m perfectly aware that I’m sitting in an enclosed room, but it feels real, or as real as I can get with my friends, and that’ll have to be enough.

Because this? We Vathaylians will never get it back.

When someone collapses beside me, I crack an eye, grinning when I see Kasra digging her toes into the sand.

“I thought for sure Saevi would fall back into her book once the simulation started,” she says.

Saevi’s done the impossible, putting a book down? I have to see that. Straightening, I search the room until I find her.

Well... them. On the far side of the simulation, Saevi’s tangled around Yve.

With my eyebrows raised, I say, “I didn’t know they were an item.”

Which is absolutely a lie. A part of me has known about that since they first joined our pod. I’ve just refused to acknowledge it over the years because...

“Isn’t that dangerous?” I ask.

Kasra laughs while behind me, Ilana ruffles my hair before flopping behind me. She pulls me back into her arms.

“Of course it’s dangerous,” Kasra says. “Will you report them? Seems kind of pointless, considering... tomorrow.”

I look down my nose at my friend.

“I might be a goody two shoes, but I’d never report any of you. You know that,” I say.

With a soft chuckle, Kasra falls to her back.

“I know,” she whispers.

I’ve almost fallen asleep in Ilana’s arms, she waves my lullaby, when her voice vibrates through her chest and into my back.

“I hope Yve’s with us tomorrow night.”

Glancing toward my other two friends, I take in their antics, its franticness, and their desperation, and something in me tightens.

“Me too,” I breathe. “Me too.”

The three of us lounge in silence while the scenario’s timer counts down.

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