

CHAPTER 1

“I can't breathe,” I say through clenched teeth. Panic cascades down my spine like waves of a crushing tide. Panic so familiar yet so alien. My constant companion for the past fourteen years, since I was five.

My skin burns hot-and-cold-and-hot-again. Black spots bleed into my vision until it narrows into a pinpoint. I can no longer see the control compartment of our beat-up space vessel.

My seat swallows me up. I buck against its constraints, tearing against the tight harness. “I have to get out of here!”

I can't slow my breathing. The icy air burns against my throat with each inhalation. I am drowning without being in water.

“Lilla, listen to my voice,” Arrov, the pilot of our ship, says. “I am here. You're not alone.”

He brushes my hands to the side. Off the stubborn harness buckles. With a *click* the restraints cutting into me disappear.

I spring to my feet. The urge to flee! to run! pumps my blood, drowning out the hum of the ship.

A gentle hand touches mine.

Still blind to my surroundings, I grasp it before it can retreat. My lifeline out of the madness.

“You're fine. You'll be all right now.”

Arrov's voice conjures his image—his almost seven-foot height, his athletic build, his angular face with pale-blue skin framed by short dark-blue hair, his straight nose and always

smiling lips. I've heard him called "stunningly handsome" behind his back, followed by heaving sighs. I must admit they're right. Of course I would never say that out loud in his presence!

His thumb rubs a circle in my palm, a mesmerizing motion. I focus on his touch. For the first time since setting foot on this godsforsaken ship, I can take a deep breath.

Inhale through the nose, exhale through the mouth.

Again.

Minutes, or hours, drag by before the hot-and-cold-and-hot-again vanishes. I look up, right into blue eyes that are so dark they're almost black.

"Better?"

I nod.

Arrov flashes white, even teeth. His smile makes him appear younger than I am, though he is in his mid-twenties.

I look at our hands, embarrassed that he had to witness one of my "episodes," and I pull my hand away. Arrov is the only person in the rebellion who doesn't judge me. Or hold who I am against me. Will that change from now on? I shudder.

"Here, this should help." Arrov takes off his jacket and drapes it over my shoulders.

"I was getting hot anyway," he says, cutting off any argument. "I don't think the temp controls work on this junk."

"Thank you." I burrow into his warm jacket.

A dark blue blush appears on Arrov's cheeks. He is the perfect image of his home planet, A'ice. One of the richer worlds in the nineteen-planet-strong Pax Septum Coalition, where winter rules three quarters of the year.

My gaze flickers to the control panel, outdated with its manual levers. "We should check

for incoming messages . . .” my voice trails off when I notice a fast blinking light, signaling incoming messages. How long has it been blinking like that?

Arrov sees it too, and a flash of concern crosses his expression.

My stomach drops. We had three tasks: wait for the message from the rebellion’s patron; respond with the code to receive coordinates; and meet with their caravan to load supplies.

Simple.

Arrov runs his fingers over the controls to retrieve the message. “We missed our chance. They sent the message more than ten minutes ago.”

Ten minutes! By making the caravan wait, we indicated “mission compromised.”

“But I’ll send our code anyway.” Arrov taps a few controls. “Maybe they waited for us.”

And maybe I’d turn into a believer of the Archgoddess of the Eternal Light and Order and start praying for Her help. As if.

We stare at the light, waiting for it to blink again. Without getting the coordinates we have no hope of completing our mission.

“Anything?” I sit back before I start pacing. I buckle my harness, but this time I don’t make it as tight. Better not to trigger the panic that hovers at the edge of my consciousness, waiting to pounce. Never fully gone.

Arrov glances at me. “Nothing.”

“Xor will be furious!” I blew the mission. My first mission. One that I volunteered for, and only got because Arrov offered to pilot the craft. It seems bad luck is contagious.

“Don’t beat yourself up, Lilla. There will be other chances.”

I am not so sure about that. I proved Xor’s right-hand man, Belthair, right. I failed the mission as he predicted.

Something appears on our viewscreen.

Arrov, oblivious, says, “Listen, I know how you must feel—”

“But—” I point toward the view screen.

Arrov grabs my flailing hand in both of his. “I know there is a lot of pressure on you right now.”

“You don’t understand—”

“You’re right.” He pats my hand. “I can’t understand, but I can imagine how you must worry. But you cannot overreact—”

“Stop,” I shout.

“No need to be so harsh, I was just trying to—”

“Asteroids!”

CHAPTER 2

“There shouldn’t be asteroids here,” Arrov curses, but it gets lost in the blaring tocsins.

Debris clang, bouncing off the hull of our vessel. The flickering overhead light shuts off, only to come back flashing red and yellow.

My vision fills with a porous light-gray asteroid, the size of a small mountain, tumbling toward us, in the midst of other giant orbs.

“Get us out of here!” Where did they come from? A second ago this quadrant was empty except for the blinking stars.

“I’m trying!” Arrov shouts. “If only this stupid junk would work!”

Is this ancient spacecraft with its faded green paint and rusting metal going to be our tomb?

Dents appear everywhere, and the craft jars and jerks. The screeching noise shrieks louder than the alarms.

The sensory overload is too much. My brain can’t process so much danger.

“We have to evacuate!” Arrov shouts.

“Evacuate? Where?”

Before Arrov can respond, the whole stern of the ship tears clean off. Wires and jagged metal hang. Billowing smoke obscures our view.

Time ceases to exist.

Then space rushes in.