

Chapter 1

A soft, mechanical popping from the intercom pulled her back into herself. Her body grew tight with tension as her brain struggled to grasp onto her identity and to remember where she was. She had vague recollections of receiving the injection, but after that, everything was blank.

As she pushed her way through the drug-induced haze, bits began to return, like where she was, who she was, and as she remembered, she was thankful for the drugs. *I am Anya Stryder. I am 15. I am aboard the Odysseus.*

A voice buzzed in her room. "Please prepare for landing."

Anya sighed with relief. They were here. The twenty-eight week journey had seemed like nothing more than a dream, and, in fact, that's all it had been.

Anya tried to sit up and instantly regretted her decision. She felt sick and her arm hurt with every move, pinching her unbearably. An IV.

As if on cue, the soft swish of her cabin door sliding open called Anya's attention to the door. Anya was surprised but relieved to discover that it was not the white-clothed nurse she had expected, but rather a more familiar face.

"Hi, Anya Bear. How'd you sleep?"

"Hi, Father. Perfectly. You were right. The journey felt like nothing."

"I wish I could have slept through it too. But, unfortunately, some of us have to work. We can't all get a free trip."

Anya knew he was teasing her, but she also knew she was privileged to be a part of the Expedition. Few people would ever have this opportunity. Much as she hated to admit it, she knew that, despite all of her hard work, had her father not been the Commander

Scientist, only one level in importance below the Founder, she may never have seen the inside of this ship, and she certainly wouldn't have seen it in a Drug Coma. Drug Comas were only administered to high ranking officials or people in the sick bay. Or people that needed to be completely refreshed at the beginning of a mission. Anya should not have qualified, but her father did. And through him, she had benefitted.

After removing her IV, Anya's father held out his hand. "Ready to prepare for landing? Best to take it slow. You might be a bit dizzy."

"You can say that again."

Anya rose slowly, looking around the room that had been her home for so long, but of which she had no memories. The stark white walls had no personality. Everything felt barren. She had lived here for so long yet the room held no trace of her. Not even the storage cupboard had benefitted from her belongings. She felt a moment of sadness at the thought.

Once she was on her feet, Anya's father hurried her along, pulling her through the door and down the long, cold hallway, made to feel even colder by the sterile, bright lights reflecting out of tiny pin holes along the walls and ceiling and floor. The abundant use of lights left no room for shadows.

No one else was around. It was just Anya and her father. The hallway felt imposing and their footsteps echoed off of every surface.

"Are we late? It looks abandoned."

"There aren't many people on this level. Landing rooms are determined by rank. Only a handful of people rank high enough for our room."

"Then how'd I get a spot?"

“Don’t worry about that. You’re my guest.”

But Anya was worried. Pangia was a land that placed great value on rank. You earned what you got. There were no short cuts and no special circumstances. Anya knew that some people thought the only reason she was on the expedition was because of her father, but she had worked hard to snag the coveted spot. And even after being awarded her place, she had continued to work, studying aerodynamics and geology and history, even sociology and archaeology. Anything she might encounter, she had spent countless hours researching. But all of the research should not have added up to a spot in the top ranking landing room.

Anya was able to justify the drugs. She was non-essential. No sense having her get in the way when there was important work to be done. But this, this was too much.

“Anya Bear, you’re worrying, aren’t you? There’s no sense getting upset. Sometimes connections play as much of a role in your lot in life as anything else. And why shouldn’t they? It’s not like you haven’t worked hard to keep yourself in my good favor, and I’ve worked damn hard to keep these top officials in mine. Why can’t I pass off some of that? And don’t forget, you are here on an internship. You are supposed to be meeting people above your rank. How else will you learn? Now come on. We don’t want to be late.”

Her father’s words ran around in her head. They just didn’t sit right with her. They were counter to everything she’d been taught. She could agree with the last bit, about her internship requiring her to speak to people outside of her rank, but if her father really thought those other things, about entitlement, well that was practically treason. Thoughts like that were not only discouraged, but illegal. Thoughts like that disrupted the peace.

And their meager existence was so unstable, they couldn't have instability from the inside as well. The Colony always came first, above the needs of the individual. That man Marx had gotten it right all those years ago. Of course, even Marxist thought wouldn't have saved Earth. Nothing could have saved it.

When they entered the landing room, Anya was surprised by how empty it was. And just how influential the other people were. She'd never in her wildest dreams imagined being in a room with these people. Somedays she even found it hard to be in a room with her father when she remembered who he was outside of the home.

But despite her low rank, no one openly snubbed her. A few nodded their heads. One waved to her father. But otherwise, the private conversations continued, unperturbed by the interruption.

"Come on, our seats are over here. This one is yours." He pointed to a large, welcoming seat that looked ready to encase Anya. "And there I am." Her father's was two seats from hers. The one between their seats was empty.

"Can't one of us take this empty one?"

"The seats are assigned. Specially constructed to protect each individual. If you tried to sit in a chair that was not custom made for you, the landing would be quite unpleasant. Do you remember your training? How to harness yourself in?"

"Yes."

"Good. We still have a couple of minutes. Do you want to see Earth?"

Anya could barely believe her ears. *See* Earth? Of course she wanted to *see* Earth. She'd only been dreaming of Earth since she'd first heard of their lost planet, the homeland they would never return to. They were destined to be a wandering people with

no true place. Sure, they'd made Pangia their own the best they could, but it would never harbor them the way Earth had. They were Earthings, after all, not Pangians.

So overcome by the grandeur of the room and its occupants, Anya had missed the large, round window off to the side of the room. In fact, now that she saw it, she wondered how she could have overlooked it. As she approached the porthole, she felt her steps growing shaky. This was it. Her first view of her homeland. Very few people would ever get to see this. Anya would have to remember everything about it. She was expected to report back on every experience from the journey. Every sensation. Every thought. Every impression. Literally everything. And this was the beginning.

At first she couldn't see much except her own, slightly warped reflection. Her dark curls, a rarity on Pangia, took off in every direction. They were much longer than they had been at the start of the journey. Her nose was magnified beyond its already largish size. But when she got closer, when she pushed her nose up to the cool glass, she was speechless. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. It was like stepping into a fantasy. The most beautiful fantasy full of every good thing you could ever hope for.

Before her was a planet said to be on the brink of extinction, but it looked far more alive than the planet she had left. Pangia looked like a black shell speckled with stars, almost like the rest of space, but Earth was different. It was vibrant. The colors seemed to move with an energy all of their own. Her vision became blurry as her eyes filled with tears. This was the home that had let its people down. And now it was on its last breath.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Anya turned to look at her father. "It's amazing, Father. I couldn't have imagined anything more spectacular. I thought it would be burnt, from the solar flares."

“That was a long time ago. Parts have healed, at least from all outward appearances. But it could never sustain us again. The ozone layer all but crumbled. And see all of that brown? That’s wasteland. But come on, we should take our seats.”

It took effort, but Anya dragged her eyes away from the melancholy sight. When they returned to their seats, the empty seat between them was no longer empty. And the new occupant sent almost all thoughts of the dying planet from her mind.

“Ah, Liam. How good to see you. You’ve been keeping busy?”

“Yes, Commander Scientist. I have. And thank you for having me placed in this landing room. I am humbled by the opportunity.”

Anya could feel his eyes lingering on her.

“Yes, well, as my assistant, you should be near me. Oh, you remember my daughter, Anya? She is doing an internship. She’s showed promising results in her science classes and there is some hope that she might follow in my footsteps.”

“It’s good to see you again, Anya. I didn’t realize you would be here. I thought only senior students had been invited to join the Expedition. Well done.”

Anya lowered her eyes and felt a blush rise to her cheeks. She had known Liam would be on the mission. Everyone knew. It was the reason all the girls in her class had been so jealous when she had won the internship. What she had not know, though, was that Liam would already be rubbing elbows with the top ranking officials, including her father.

Anya had grown up next door to Liam. Although he was four years older, the girls in Anya’s year all had a crush on him. But Anya had never had a crush on him. To her, he was just the neighbors’ kid. The boy who had tugged her hair and thrown compost pies at

her, the boy who had, at one point, been her closest friend. The boy who, as soon as he was given his work assignment, had decided he was too stellar and had stopped talking to Anya, had treated her like she had never existed.

While the other girls in her year were jealous that Anya was on an expedition with Liam, Anya would have liked nothing better than for him to have stayed on Pangia. She had even considered resigning her position when she learned he would be there. But she had reasoned that she would barely see him.

And now here he was, her father's assistant of all things, sitting right beside her as they made their descent towards a world that had been abandoned for hundreds of years. As the engine pitch changed to signal their final approach, Anya glanced over at Liam and saw him staring unabashedly back at her.