

Prologue

Pathogen Detected

I opened my arms and stretched my fingertips, feeling leaves and branches unfurling along my limbs. Looking up, my neck elongated, becoming thick, strong, and pulsing with life. My toes dug into the rich soil and sank down, down, until they drank deeply from underground rivers.

Leaves around me shifted in the breeze like a gown. Flowers erupted in the grassy carpet all around me. A thick limb brushed my shoulder and I looked down and smiled at my brothers and sisters who locked arms with me.

We swayed together in storms, springs, and ice, growing resilient, growing...aware. Spreading our seeds on the wind, we populated the planet, and then others across the cosmos. Branches split off, creating new life forms but we guided the simple-minded fauna, yoking them to our will. We blew our breath into the night sky and tasted the mineral freshness of space.

Then, many of our younglings went dark.

It was an omen. A portent.

A sign of danger.

Then, we sensed it.

Something was coming. A ship.

Bringing a plague.

Another bringing salvation.

The first one drew close.

I was the leader.

They were my offspring. My responsibility. I couldn't let my loved ones suffer and die.

Stretching further than I ever had before, I lifted the thinnest of my branches, whipping my canopy fiercely until it penetrated the atmosphere.

Then I took hold of that scourge -filled ship and crushed it between my limbs, hurtling it into the second sun, the red one that gave me strength.

But I was too late.

Chapter 1

Just Breathe

My body jerked. *Where was I?* A glass dome covered my body. I shifted my arms but they barely moved. Trying again, one arm thumped the sides of my metal coffin. *Breathe.* My mouth opened but my lungs wouldn't move. It was my most common nightmare and my worst reality.

Little spots danced across my vision. I blinked through the fog and saw the red light in the corner of the glass and the message that was scrolling across the screen.

Stasis Pod Warning

Hyperbaric chamber oxygen systems compromised

Backup system failure

Atmospheric pressure destabilizing

Venting outside air

Triggering neuromuscular electrical stimulation

The thick vapor filling the chamber dissipated as it washed over me. It had enrobed me, saturated my skin during hypersleep, giving my body what it needed to survive in transit. But something had gone wrong. Maybe a breach in the containment system.

I heard a series of clicks and a whirring, then precious bursts of vacillating oxygen were pulled in through the vents. Now I was fully alert. The system had done its job in resuscitating me, but I still couldn't move, couldn't breathe. The problem with my respiration wasn't the pod's fault. It was mine. The facts were evident. My own body was failing me and if I couldn't kickstart my own system, I was going to die.

Alone.

In space.

A tiny shock, the first in a series to reinvigorate my muscles, started my heart pounding faster, making my need to take in air even more desperate. Little pinpricks ran down my spine, warming my limbs enough for me to move my arms. Finally able to move, I pounded on my chest, once, twice, a third time, and then a rush of gas inflated my lungs. My chest muscles relaxed and I exhaled a green fog before taking in a breath of sweet tasting, recycled air.

Vision clearing and moving less clumsily now that my muscles were waking up, I touched the glass above me, scrolling through the message again, then pressed my palm against the dome.

“Crewmember Astra Meador-Stasis Pod 0041-Confirm.” My voice sounded husky and I coughed.

You are confirmed, crewmember Meador.

The computer spoke in a pleasant female voice that sounded a bit too much like my mother who’d been left behind on Earth.

“How many other pods have failed?” I asked, my voice growing stronger.

Your pod is the only one compromised at this time.

The glass flashed red again.

Pathogen detected

Warning...

Pathog...

The alert flashed again, flickered, and then went out. I tapped a few buttons and the glass moved aside with a pneumatic hiss. My mother had warned me before we even boarded that my serum might register with the stasis pod as a pathogen, but the green gas quickly dissipated, settling on my skin, drawn to it as if by a magnet.

My mother’s theory was that my body reabsorbed the medicine. The cells of my skin capturing it and feeding on it like a leaf does with sunshine. Her hypothesis wasn’t backed by any evidence other than the fact that my exposed skin seemed revitalized after every dose. The skin scrapings she’d done showed no similarity to plants whatsoever. I never expected otherwise. But my mom was the best biophysicist in all the worlds, and if she compared everything to plants, that was just par for the course.

I always rolled my eyes when she made plant comparisons to everything, but then laughed when my dad teased her. He'd say her egghead was showing, but he liked the way she combed her hair over it.

The alarm cut off. Even if it hadn't, my mom, prepared as she was for every contingency, had taught me how to bypass the computer system. After all, she'd been the one to create the lists of pathogens the computer regularly searched for anyway. Still, waking as I did, my lungs immobile, hadn't been something we'd prepared for or a possibility we'd discussed.

Luckily for me, my chamber, pod 0041, had been specially modified. It functioned differently than the others, using a special hyperbaric lining, because I *was* different from everybody else. Ironically, my mother's modifications, which were secretly completed before we left Earth, must have triggered a technological breakdown. In essence, we'd somehow blown a fuse.

I swung my legs off the bed and rolled my feet at the ankles before gingerly setting them down on the deck of the ship. Once I felt secure enough, I stood, careful to keep a solid grip on the pod. Nausea swept through me. Clicking a button on the medical cabinet by the exit, I said, "Give me something for a queasy stomach." The light on the cabinet turned blue and a slot opened, pushing out a thin wrapper.

Pinching it between my fingers, I pulled it out, peeled off the paper, and slapped the medicine square on my neck. The chemical did its work quickly and my stomach settled. Heading over to a work station, in the data center of that deck, I lowered myself slowly into a chair and tried to figure out what had gone wrong, and, more importantly, how far along we were into our journey to *Crillian IV*.

The glass rose from the desk, triggered by my presence, and I touched my palm to the table.

"Request computer access-Crewman Astra Meador."

Access granted, Crewman Meador.

A series of blue rings slipped over my thumb and first two fingers and I lifted my hand twitching my fingers to swipe through data until I found the map detailing our course. We were less than a month away from landing. I let out a long breath, berating myself for holding it in the

first place, almost hearing my mother's warning voice reminding me not to. As I sucked in shallow, quick breaths, allowing my sensitive lungs to recover, I wondered what happened.

Now that I wasn't worried about being awake for six months to a year by myself, my thoughts turned to my mother. A quick scan confirmed she'd never boarded the ship and I had no idea why she'd been taken. The terraforming conglomerate security officers pulled her away just as we were preparing to enter hypersleep.

I checked for messages from her on our secret channel and found nothing. Scanning through news files from the last year, I desperately tried to search for anything to indicate what had happened to her. *Was she still being investigated? Living alone in our house? Sick? Back to work? At a conference?* What could possibly be so important that they'd pull the top biophysics expert in the world off a terraforming assignment? Especially one where her family members were all passengers.

That they'd waited until my father and brother had entered hypersleep was telling. They didn't want trouble. If my father had still been awake, none of us would have come, and the terraforming team specialists couldn't have that, could they? *Every person was essential.* That was the slogan they drummed into us during testing over and over again to make sure we did our best.

It took me the better part of three hours and I had to break in to the classified reports to find it, but there it was. My mother had been incarcerated for the duration of our flight with no immediate release in sight. I scanned through the brief report again to make certain I wasn't missing anything.

Ainsley Meador

Biophysicist

Detained at Amazonia Prison

Charges: Smuggling contraband flora

Sabotaging the successful terraforming of *Crillian IV*

Removed from the ship *The Venture*

The blood drained from my face. My mother was in prison. And it was my fault. My fault. My fault.