

## Chapter One

It's bitter hot inside my hidey-hole. Hot, stinky and dusty. My stolen filter can't keep up, and my chest is tight from struggling to breathe. My eyes are red and sore. Squinting, I look into my small mirror to check over my appearance one more time.

I blink as I take in my reflection. Today I have to be invisible. Just a runner delivering a message to a ship. Nothing like what I *am* going to be. A stowaway.

Making my face go soft, I widen my eyes. The tiny shifts of muscle change me completely. I've had the knack since I was a kid. I used to follow the local trash sorters and mimic their slumped shoulders and dragging feet. People thought that was odd. They think I'm weird. One of the many reasons I don't have a crew or even a friend...if you don't count the mice.

I glance at the corner where I scattered some crumbs of food. The last scraps of my last protein bar. I licked the wrapper clean, but I always save something for my little furry friends. Right now they're nowhere in sight. I haven't seen them since the dust storm two days ago. I hope they won't miss me too much. I hope they don't get caught and thrown into a soup pot without me.

Pulling my attention back to the mirror reassures me I've got the right look. I'm nonbinary, not a boy or a girl, but I can do a good impression of either.

If I have the right clothes and time to style myself, no one ever notices.

Today I've made myself more like a boy. My thick black hair is greasy and messy. My face is soft and innocent. My plump cheeks make me look younger, which will help today. The real me is almost invisible. But my mom's round brown eyes look back at me, just like always. Reminding me who I am. Telling me there's more waiting for me in the universe than this shit heap called Earth.

I'm getting off this barren planet. I didn't plan to do it today, but the arrest warrant with my name on it is forcing me to run. I've thought about leaving often enough that I at least have a plan. If I'm brave enough to pull it off. I shiver, trying not to think of the great, pressing silence of space. At least once a week, I wake up gasping from nightmares about dying inside that black vacuum.

I pull my mask over my mouth and nose, then

flip my collar up. Now I'm just fringe, eyes and a black mask. Satisfied my disguise is perfect, I slip out the back window. The soft rags on my feet don't give good grip, but I'm used to it.

I scramble up the crumbled concrete until I'm standing on what's left of the roof. From here I can see quite a bit of the ruined city. The roads look like someone kicked over an anthill. There are black-clad soldiers crawling everywhere. The Boots, who protect the interests of the rich who've already left this forsaken planet. Who keep taking the last scraps of resources we have on Earth, leaving nothing behind but broken backs and hearts.

Barely visible through the thick red smog that always fills the air, the sun hangs. A promise that there's more out there than this.

My hideout is at the top of an old apartment building that most people are too scared to climb. I don't have neighbors, but enough people know I'm up here that someone will sell me out. If there's

a chance at food or fresh, clean water? Most people would sell their own mother for a protein bar. No, I can't hide away. I have to run. Now.

I take a deep breath, my mask pressing tight against my mouth. It's wet with my spit and sweat already.

"You! Stop!" The loud yell draws my attention back down. One street over, a soldier drags a woman out into the street. They're holding her by the hair. While I watch, another soldier pulls a teenager and presses their hand to a tablet to check their identity. I know that teen isn't who they're after.

They're after me.

I woke up this morning to a red alert with my handprint attached. The thick scar slicing across all four of my fingers is a pretty obvious clue. Five years ago a knife would have taken my eye if I hadn't gotten my hand in the way. I thought it was a small price to pay, but now they have enough to find me.

I know exactly how they got my handprint. Five days ago I was helping myself to some supplies that had been left in a "secure" building. I got a little too greedy and tried to take too much. As I left, weighed down by full bags, I tripped! I dropped to one knee and caught myself on my hand. I should have wiped the handprint away. But I didn't think they would check the floor tiles. I got cocky and now I'm paying for it. I have no choice but to get off the planet.

I'd assumed I'd have at least twenty-four hours after the alert, before they figured out where in town to start looking for me. Instead I'll have to get around this violent search party.

The soldiers release the woman and teen and move to the next shack. I shiver and roll across the roof, staying low. Once I'm on the other side, I grab my go bag and run for my escape route. It's a carefully planned climb down the side of the building. A series of almost invisible handholds and toe grips. I'm small and light but also wiry

and strong. The tiny muscles on the backs of my brown hands flex as I shift my weight. Careful and fast, I stay in the shadow of the most broken wall all the way to the ground.

Not even stopping to shake out my sore fingers, I slip around a corner onto the biggest street that passes through the town. The local bookie is running a fight in the open, on the broken asphalt of the road. It's a good spot for it, which is one of the reasons I live around here. With the small market in the mornings and the fights in the afternoons, there's usually a crowd. It's easy to get lost in a crowd. There's a good one right now. A horde of people, pushing and shoving a little. In front of them, two women are beating each other to a pulp.

Sprinting past, I yell, "Scatter!"

## Chapter Two

Everyone reacts immediately, and I'm caught up in the crowd as I'd hoped.

The best way to stay out of sight is to blend in. A woman with two toddlers is fighting to keep hold of them. A hundred people are trying to get out of the main street. The buildings are all emptying out as the panic catches. No one wants to be caught and sent to the mines or beaten to death.

I grab one of the toddlers and swing the kid up in one arm. Then I wrap my other arm around the woman's waist. She clings on, and I work us out of the crowd.

Soldiers are closing in on the scene, but their eyes pass over me. I'm struggling to carry the toddler and hold on to "my mom." I probably look about twelve. Good. I play it up, eyes wide and tears pumping. Body language screaming young and scared. Much too young to be breaking and entering. Definitely not brave or old enough to be the person they're after.

We break away from the group and turn onto a side street, breathing hard. The Boots will be here any minute. I plopped the kid down on a rock.

"Thanks!" I yell as I begin to run. To avoid the Boots, I make a huge loop around the edge of the town. It takes over three hours of walking and jogging. But I finally reach the towering electric fence that surrounds the spaceport.

The port is where spaceships blast off and set down. They deliver criminals here to serve out sentences in the dust. Then they leave again, taking away what's left of Earth's guts. Across the fence I can see mountains of shipping containers, piled high enough to block out the sun. Full of metals and parts for electronics and machines. All harvested from the dying body of our home planet. I pull a disgusted face at the world.

There's a secret entrance through an abandoned house near the back of the spaceport facilities. I creep along the fence, then move into deeper shadow. It's a huge relief.

I lean against a wall for a moment, dripping with sweat. My whole body is tight from nerves and exhaustion. My head is pounding. It feels like there are thorns digging into my temples, winding tighter and tighter. My mouth is sticky and gummy. I can feel bits of dry skin peeling off my lips against

my mask. I'm so thirsty, but the small bottle of water in my bag might be all I have.

I fumble for the zipper. I can barely think, so I have to drink. Before I can open my backpack, my neck prickles. I freeze. What's different? I cast my eyes around the shadowy alley.

In the darkness a large shape moves. My heart jumps into my throat as I prepare to run. But before my brain has sent the message to my feet, the shape comes closer. It becomes the large form of Amar. Local enforcer, bouncer and all-around tough. He towers over me, and I shrink away.

My nerves are shot, and I don't know what to expect. I watch him, scared, still catching my breath. "Amar," I say. My voice shakes a bit. I wish I hadn't said anything. I sound like a scared wimp.

"Brick." He says my name like he's dropping a rock. Then he hands over a bottle of cloudy water. I take it gratefully, draining the whole thing in