

Chapter 1

“Isla, I swear *to God* that if you ask me one more time, I’ll stop talking to you forever.” I don’t know why I even let her into my room in the first place. Talk about timing—she always catches me at the worst moment.

“Oh, shut it. You’re so possessive, so isolated. How do you even function?”

“I work at your family’s shop. How does that make me isolated?”

“Don’t give me that. You know what I mean. You’re keep everything to yourself. I’m just asking to *use* the VR, Ridley. I really need to dedicate some time in there... I have this important project due. It’s not like I can spend a whole afternoon in the other VRs—there’s always a line. Just tell me where it is.”

“Is it for a ‘biology’ project?” I ask. She can’t fool me. I know what teens do in there.

Isla doesn’t fake laugh; she doesn’t even crack a smile. Instead, her hazel eyes lock onto mine, scanning my face like the Protective Pillar Patrol-Bots. She must be serious.

“What is your project on anyway? Why use a VR? I thought the school preferred to use their own equipment.” I ask while I pick at some grease lodged under my fingernail. At this, she breaks eye contact and fans her arms out in a wide half-circle like she’s revealing a giant, invisible sign.

“The Technology Wars.”

“There’s nothing left to analyze. Believe me, I already tried.”

“I’ve heard the basics from Mom and Dad, but school really wants us to pick a specific topic and focus on it for our graduation thesis. My critical focus is the tech behind our renewable resource energy. I just don’t get where our pee goes... That or—”

My eyes wander to the clock. 8:50 a.m.

“I’m going to be late for work! Toss me my goggles from the hook next to my bed.” I interject. How is it that that I can never find my badge when I’m late for work? “If I’m late one more time, Max is going to withhold my credits, which means I’ll take your allowance as retribution!”

“That does sound like something Dad would do.” She opens my door, and I shove her out before the Auto-Lock Smart Sensor kicks in. The elevators are a five-minute walk from here, so if I sprint, I should be able to make it in no time. As I round the corner from my room, I am surprised to hear her footsteps match mine.

“I mean, just thinking about renewable technology, that just brings up a whole new can of worms! You know...I was thinking—”

“You should just drop it, Isla.”

Isla’s habitual, yet intellectual, word-vomit almost drowns out the reverberating echoes of my feet hitting metal as I jump over cardboard boxes littering the hallways. It’s hard to tune her out because her voice is so loud, and the concrete walls do not help. The buzz of neon advertising gets added to the noise as we leave the residential area.

COMMUNAL BATHROOM - NEXT LEFT

“And don’t even get me started on how they grow food. I wonder if they use solar technology. Is there even a sun anymore do you think?” Her voice is getting closer.

VISIT VIEWING ROOMS ONCE A DAY

“You know, my mom once said that—”

PROTECTIVE PILLAR PATROL-BOTS = SAFTEY

Up ahead is my exit for the elevators, off the curved hallway that circles the entire Pillar. I like taking this spoke to the central hub because it leads me right past some of my favorite places to eat. I’ll have stick to the smell of warm bread for now.

“...and I just can’t believe she’d say that, am I right?” Isla’s voice trails off right as I get to the lift.

“Ok, Isla, *fine*. I’ll let you use the VR. Are you happy?” I turn towards her—she is beaming. “And just another thing, how do you *not* know that they use synthetic water, compressed using radiation? It only becomes drinkable after it is exposed to air. This makes it essentially unlimited.” The hum of the elevator grows louder.

“...If you are so smart, why’d you drop out of school with one year left to go, huh? Why’d you suddenly want to be a mechanic?” Her words needle their way into my mind and sting my chest. I know she is serious. I can hear it in the tone of her voice—low and inquisitive, just like she always is.

“You know I don’t like to talk about it.”

“There you go again. Isolated. Why won’t you just tell me the truth?”

My breath gets caught in my chest, stuck behind the truth I never told her. The truth that I, myself, don’t fully accept.

“Let’s just say I graduated early, Isla. Plus, the Pillar doesn’t like it when you ask too many questions.” The elevator door opens. I know she won’t follow me now. I step over the barrier and turn back to meet her eyes.

“Meet me at my room at curfew, wear a hoodie, and don’t let anyone see you.”