

CHAPTER 1

BODY, RELAX. MIND, BE STILL. I FEAR WHAT I ONLY IMAGINE.

Meris Cariole sprinted up an empty passway and shifted her internal focus to a more powerful Collegium litany. She must not dwell on the danger. *Mind, you are calm. Body, you are strong.*

A falsely tranquil, androgynous voice drifted down from the bulkhead: “Passengers, report to shelter area. Please walk. Do not endanger yourself or others by running. Passengers, report . . .”

She careened around a corner and was absorbed by a crowd plodding along in soft shipboard slippers. A green light flashed up ahead. Someone shouted. Heads turned right and vanished through a hatch. Breathing hard, Meris let the flow carry her through the doorway.

The secure cabin was barely adequate for thirty passengers, as she’d learned in yesterday’s shelter drill. Grey metal containers lined the bulkheads. Ventilation fans hummed softly, but it smelled close anyway. Blue striplights high overhead cast an eerie light on stressed faces. Since nearly everyone on board the *Daystar* could speak mind to mind, it seemed weirdly quiet. She’d gotten used to people around her acting strangely, cocking their heads or staring as if listening to voices she couldn’t hear. In this moment, it felt freshly ominous.

She paused just inside the door, heart thumping. Where was Annalah? “Meris!”

She spun around. Several people knelt around something down on the deck, including her college room-partner Annalah Caldwell. Annalah straightened and waved. “Meris!”

Meris guided on Annalah's coppery hair and caught a glimpse of something redder—blood?—as she shouldered between two older people. “Med student. Let me through.” Was Annalah hurt? They might all die of radiation, but maybe not—and here was an immediate crisis.

A youngster lay on the textured black deck, a boy of maybe ten or eleven, his face shocky, blood spurting from his thigh. Jagged bone poked through his pant leg. Meris swallowed, her throat suddenly thick. Fractures weren't her school specialty, nor Annalah's. Still, that bleeding had to be stopped, and there was no medspec on this shuttle's passenger manifest. She shoved aside her fear of radiation as she reached the group. Swiftly twisting her hair into a rope, she knotted it at the nape of her neck. “Tell me what to do. Is there a stypix kit?”

“I just sent for . . . Here it comes!” Annalah's river of red hair was already tied back. “Simple fracture, thank the Holy One.” Annalah scooted aside, and a man wearing a midnight blue uniform tunic wedged himself into the kneeling circle and sank down. He pushed a red metal container at Annalah. Annalah plunged both hands into the box and tossed Meris a sterile wipe. Then she went back to digging.

The injured youngster whimpered. A black-haired woman knelt beside him, gripping his hand and trying to turn his head away. She plainly didn't want him to look at the ugly injury. Since he wasn't screaming, she probably was doing something mental against his pain too.

Lucky child.

Or maybe not. Meris scrubbed her hands with the wipe, wondering how in the starry Whorl a child could have broken a femur in this small space. High above this deck, the stacked containers looked climbable. Had he been playing up there?

If he hadn't been lying there bleeding, she might have envied his freedom. She focused on the moment's need instead, eyeing her room-partner's progress. Step one always was to treat for shock. Someone had covered him with a grey blanket. Next, stop bleeding—would they need a tourniquet? No, Annalah had a stypix kit. Third, reduce the fracture. That would be next.

Actually, it was good to think about something other than having her chromosomes cooked. Femoral fractures required major traction. It looked like they would have plenty of strong help.

Still, that looked like a lot of blood. Meris addressed the black-haired

woman holding the boy's hand. She couldn't be many years out of school herself. These Sentinels married so young! "Can you do anything special to slow down that bleeding too? It looks like the bone nicked an artery."

"Wait!" Annalah donned pale blue exam gloves. "This should do it." She tucked a hand into the wound, spread its edges, tucked some tiny objects inside, and sprinkled white powder. Welling blood crusted rapidly.

Absorbable sponges, styptix powder—just like in school at Elysia Central.

Except this time, they were light-years from Elysia and about to be bathed in hard radiation—

Don't think about that! Meris commanded herself. *Mind, you are calm. Body, you are strong.*

Annalah hadn't stopped talking. "They can't put him in t-sleep until the fracture's reduced. He might need to be transfused too." She dug deeper into the red box. "Marta, Kason, one of you might need to donate."

"Of course." A man kneeling beside the black-haired woman nodded, his face almost as pale as the child's.

"All right." Annalah straightened. "We'll try the reduction. I want our biggest and strongest holder on his shoulders. Kason, you don't weigh enough. Take the uninjured leg. Marta, keep cutting his pain." She looked around the circle.

Meris did too. "Come on. Move. Somebody heavy, take the shoulders. One hand under each arm."

The others rearranged themselves. Meris scooted into a position opposite Annalah, careful not to jostle the patient. The black-haired woman sprang up and made room for a burly man wearing snug grey shipboards. Really, it was impressive how these people rallied together.

She mustn't envy them either.

"Okay." Annalah glanced left, then right. "Count of three. One." The burly man leaned forward. "Two." The father and another man tightened their hands around the boy's ankles. "Three. Pull!"

Meris closed both hands around the leg just below the break. She must angle the broken end toward his pelvis . . . Someone cried out, close by . . . Annalah would push and manipulate the upper stub . . . Once the injured leg muscles were pulled taut, releasing pressure from the femur, those bone ends ought to move easily . . . She felt disoriented, trying to aim one jagged end toward the other . . .

There! A distinct relaxing of muscle tension. Annalah had rejoined the ends. “Don’t stop pulling,” Meris ordered the traction team. “I’ll anchor. Annalah, how’s the artery?”

“Bleeding’s stopped. Getting ready to fuse and brace it.” Annalah reached into the kit again. “You’re doing great, Rex. Just another minute.”

Meris relaxed slightly. With standard shipboard med gear, they should be able to immobilize the break. Then, these people could . . . they could make sure he rested.

She shied away from that thought and kept both hands firm on the crusted wound, one above and one below the break. The child’s face had relaxed, showing no sign of pain. They hadn’t used a drop of anesthetic, and his nerves ought to be screaming. The black-haired woman’s mind powers were obviously strong. Shortly, his father would put him into . . . into tardema-sleep. After all, there were no stasis crypts on board.

A sweat droplet trickled down Meris’s temple. As if traveling in tandem, a tear dribbled along her nose. How ironic that these strange and unpopular people had such caring families.

Annalah leaned in again, brandishing an osteo fusion light like a weapon. She trained it over the wound for half a minute. Meris kept her hands steady. Annalah slid the metal bands of a Ramsey brace around the injured boy’s leg. “Hold on,” she muttered, closing the brace’s first latch. “Almost done.”

Meris’s shoulders ached. Still, she’d seen worse fractures at Elysia General. The boy would be fine, provided they all didn’t die here in deep space, cooked by radiation or smeared across space like so many bloodstains, if the slip-shields failed—

Body, relax. Mind, be still.

“Okay.” Annalah gave the Ramsey brace a last click of pressure, and she reached into the red box once more to pull out a palm-size scanner. “Blood pressure’s low, but he’s within normal range. All right for t-sleep, Kason.”

Meris backed away hastily.

The young father leaned across his son’s body. “Rex. Eyes here.”

The boy looked up. He inhaled a long breath and coughed once. Then he lay utterly still.

Tardema-sleep. In memory, Meris heard her physiology professor: “Tardema-sleep is a unique variety of deep hibernation, almost as quiescent as

cold stasis. The procedure is never recommended for normal individuals, except in situations where death is otherwise inevitable and imminent. Non-Sentinels have been known to die in *tardema*-sleep. Conventional cold stasis is nearly always available.”

Cold stasis was Meris’s medical specialty. It wasn’t available here, though. She got to her feet and backed away, trying to keep her crusted hands from touching anyone and hoping the Sentinels hadn’t sensed how badly *tardema*-sleep unnerved her. This time, she guessed, they were listening to their own fears. Not hers.

Annalah flung her a wiping cloth.

“Thanks.” Motion mid-cabin caught Meris’s eye. A small, grey-haired woman sidled toward her, carefully stepping over and around passengers who’d sat down on the deck. Meris hadn’t given any of them a moment’s thought. Annalah’s grandmother, the High Commander’s wife, looked like an aged little bird under the strip-lights. Maybe it was the blue light’s reflection in her bright eyes, or the way it shimmered in her hair as she cocked her head to one side. She had admitted that “Lady Fi,” as these people called her, was a shortened form of “Firebird.”

She was one of exactly three people in this secure room with no Sentinel powers, which had made her an instant friend. Meris had already enjoyed talking Federate politics and culture with her.

Lady Fi reached Meris. “Anything I can do?” She shot a glance toward Annalah. “Looks like you two controlled the crisis very competently.”

Meris stretched her aching shoulders. “Thanks. His dad just put him into . . . t-sleep.” She avoided saying *tardema*. The very word repelled her. Thank goodness Lady Fi wouldn’t be able to read her mind or emotions.

The Lady’s loose grey shipboards blended with her hair. Here and there, a faint streak of its former reddish brown shade shone through the silver. These people didn’t use anti-aging implants, so their elders looked *old*. “I think your parents would have been proud, if they could have watched that.”

“Oh.” Meris gave her hands a final hard wipe and tossed the cloth to Annalah, who tucked it into a debris bag. “No.” She took a deep breath. “No, they still wouldn’t approve. Inferior minds can set bones, they’d say.”

Lady Fi cocked an eyebrow. “Even your mother? She’s a—”

“She’s a researcher, not a practicing medspec.”

“Hmm.” Something clattered near the main door. Frowning, Lady Fi

turned around. Nothing else happened over there, and she faced Meris again. "I know how badly that hurts, Meris. Move on. Your future lies along a different path. Someday, they'll understand you."

Meris doubted that Lady Fi grasped the depth of her private pain. Surely, no one else in the history of the Whorl had ever been so thoroughly betrayed. By her own parents, no less!

Lady Fi looked straight into her eyes. "We all admire you for wanting to help people, Meris."

Meris glanced away. "Wasn't it supposed to be safe, crossing this region of space?" No world near Sabba Six-alpha was settled, but commercial shuttles traveled it regularly.

"Of course." There was more noise near the door, and this time the uniformed door guard beckoned toward Lady Fi.

Lady Fi nodded. "Excuse me. Please tell Annalah we're proud of you both." She turned carefully and stepped back in the direction she'd come from.

Meris flicked a wisp of hair out of her face. Lady Fi's husband was up on the bridge, taking the worst of the radiation storm. For Lady Fi, waiting to learn his fate would be awful.

Someone moved on Meris's other side. She turned in place, careful not to step on outstretched hands or legs. Other people were mopping the deck and tossing cloths into the debris bag. The boy and his parents had retreated into a corner. Meris spotted Annalah springing up to take a seat on a large, grey metal container. It looked as if people had made enough room for them both up there.

Very well, then. Meris shuffled forward. Was she imagining things, or did she feel slightly strange, as if radiation were washing through her? Or was that simply the normal buzz of slip-shields, turning everything onboard sideways to real space?

She made it to the inner row of containers and sprang up to sit beside her room-partner. "Your grandmother says to tell you she's proud of us."

"Thanks." Annalah smiled for an instant. Her long, waving red hair still was tied back, and the prominent widow's peak over her forehead, her delicate cheekbones, and her fine chin made her face look oddly heart-shaped. "Has she had any updates?"

"Not yet. She could be getting one right now." Over by the door, Lady Fi conferred with the door guard. The cabin still seemed unnaturally

quiet. Meris wouldn't have wanted to travel with these people, except that Annalah had offered passage—gratis!—to Tallis for their practicum year. It had seemed like a stellar solution to her sudden financial squeeze.

And her father, the senator, had liked the political implications well enough to answer her query. He'd written back, "You never know what you might learn from them, before they die out."

But he had not sent love. He hadn't wished her a safe trip or shown any other sign of affection. To him, she was already dead. Her chest ached, as if someone had stepped on it. Fear and grief were getting the upper hand again. Polluting her thoughts. *Mind, you are calm . . .*

Abruptly Annalah rocked forward off the container. "We should be praying." She raised an arm and started to sing.

Meris didn't recognize the language or the weird, vaguely minor key. The woman sitting next to joined in. So did the parents of the injured boy. He now lay perfectly still in the nearby corner.

Meris frowned and scooted back on the container, resting her shoulders against the hard metal behind her. She had no prejudices. She was liberal-minded enough to know that these people really weren't the abominations that some people called them. Still, that music had all the comforting quality of a sob. If they all didn't die in the next few minutes, she'd teach them some Collegium litanies. She had dozens of them filed on her handheld.

Stars swam in front of her eyes. Hyperventilation. *Body, relax—*
The overhead light faded to orange and winked out.

Meris gasped. The big engines' thrum sounded loud in her ears.
Had they lost shields? Was this the end?
Body, relax. Mind, be still. Body, relax—

The fans started again. Striplights came back on, dimmer than before, giving upturned faces a darker blue cast. The left wall seemed to have sunk. The ship must have been turning hard this whole time.

Near the doorway, the man in the uniform tunic still leaned toward the wall panel. What was he hearing?

He turned toward the cabin's center. "Attention." He didn't raise his voice, but he did speak aloud. "*Daystar* has lost some onboard systems. However, shields and life support are intact."

A young voice cheered. Heads turned, clothing rustled. Meris shut her eyes as relief fluttered through her veins.

The door guard crossed his arms. “They’re requesting that any of you who can t-sleep would please do so. They’re going to try and get us down out of slip-state in ten or twelve hours. We do have adequate onboard air for that length of time, plus passage afterward. Still, we’d like to retain a safety margin.”

Tardema-sleep! Meris didn’t dare look at Annalah. It would save oxygen if they all tardema-slept, but surely they wouldn’t make her risk it. It was safe for *them*.

“Please,” she whispered to Annalah. “I’d rather not.”

“Of course not. They’ll be glad to have one of us conscious, since there isn’t a real medspec this trip. I’ll see you when we get . . . wherever we end up.”

Meris straightened, not particularly reassured. Would they finish this trip stranded on some low-tech Federate world? Who would fly the *Daystar* if everyone on the bridge succumbed to radiation poisoning?

Annalah stretched out atop the container.

Meris scooted down onto the deck. She pulled off her slippers and the pullover she wore over her shipboard suit, wrapped them together, and made a lumpy pillow. Straightening carefully, she lay down. She never would be able to sleep, but at least she wouldn’t have to make small talk with strangers. She could concentrate on her litanies.

The woman who’d been sitting next to Annalah leaned over her, covered Annalah’s forehead with a hand, and stared down at her face.

Meris rolled away. *Body, relax. Mind, be still. I fear what I only imagine.* Already most of her shipmates lay squeezed down onto available surfaces, head to head or foot to foot like a school of psychotic fish. A few of them walked back and forth, helping the ones who couldn’t reach tardema-sleep on their own. Soon Meris lay alone, wide awake in blue half-darkness near her immobilized friend. It seemed pathetic, now, that she’d feared instant death. She would have simply become nonexistent. Reabsorbed into the Infinite Divine, free from pain and fear.

Since the shields seemed to have held—so far—it had become likelier that they’d all die over the next weeks or months. Radiation sickness generally set in long after the exposure, in cancers or other debilitations that required bothersome treatment . . . or killed slowly and inescapably.

The cabin smelled distinctly sweaty. Someone’s stocking foot lay close to her nose. She tried to breathe slowly.

A low rustle came from near the door. Meris pushed up on her arms. Uniform Man backed toward that bulkhead panel again, looked around, cleared his throat, and raised a hand toward Meris.

She pushed up onto her knees and finally dared look at Annalah, who lay with her eyes closed and face relaxed. If she were alive, Meris saw no sign. She got to her feet and gingerly stepped over several sleepers.

Lady Fi had also stood. She was probably staying awake until she heard from her husband. They both pressed close to Uniform Man, and Lady Fi spoke first. "Well?"

"Mostly good news, ma'am." He spoke softly. "We've got major systems back on line and a new course calculation. The rad counters in this cabin show no significant exposure to passengers."

Unspeakably relieved, Meris blurted, "But the crew?" As soon as she'd said it, she wished she hadn't.

Lady Fi winced.

Meris tried to look apologetic. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Somebody had to ask." Lady Fi stood stiffly, her chin high. "Well?"

"They're seriously dosed, ma'am."

Wrinkles deepened between Lady Fi's darkening eyes. Almost without thinking, Meris laid a hand on her shoulder. Lady Fi nodded slowly. Plainly, the bridge crew had sacrificed themselves to protect their families. They were the ones who would die slowly, over the next days and weeks.

"There's some good news, though." Uniform Man spoke hurriedly. "We're overshooting the Tallis system, so they've set a course for a safe drop point from slip state and then steady deceleration within towing range of the Procyel system."

Lady Fi's eyes brightened. "Well done, Brenn," she said softly. "Our most gifted psi healer is right there at the Sanctuary."

Their special private world? A whole planet, reserved by Federate law for a handful of Sentinels and nobody else—was *that* where they would end up? Meris had heard terrible things about outsiders who had tried to go there. She tried to push another new fear away. "Your husband. He . . . That is, I hope . . ." Meris faltered, remembering all she had heard about radiation sickness. "I'm sorry. He's very brave." Her own voice sounded awkward. How could she comfort Lady Fi, with the prospect of ending up on Procyel added to her troubles?

But it would be perfect for the crew. For everyone on board except Meris Cariole.

Lady Fi looked down at the deck. “When a second shift relieves them, they’ll all be put into t-sleep. Quickly. That should arrest any damages, until they’re reawakened at Sanctuary.”

This was no time to remind Lady Fi that Procyel II was off limits to normal persons. “That will be a good place for them.” *To die*. Meris thought it but didn’t speak. It was a relief to know Lady Fi, like Annalah, couldn’t hear her thoughts.

A new question occurred to her: Why not? What had happened to those two, out of everyone onboard?

“Yes. The best. Go on, sleep if you can. Or shall I . . . Are you ready to let someone help you?” Lady Fi glanced toward Uniform Man.

“No! But thank you.” After all, the offer had been meant as a kindness.

Lady Fi’s mouth twitched. “I didn’t grow up around these people either. I would have refused at your age. Now I know better.”

Rather than answer, Meris turned and stepped back toward Annalah.

Procyel! Sentinels never let outsiders land on that forbidden world. The planet was blockaded with some kind of mind-destroying technology. Obviously, they had reasons for keeping ordinary people away. They wouldn’t want her running loose down there, spying on their private place. Rumors abounded: military stronghold, genetics research center, a location for secret breeding programs—

But they didn’t seem to be bad people. Furthermore, they wouldn’t want to make an enemy of her father by mistreating her. They would undoubtedly put her in stasis if they had a good med center, but she’d experienced stasis as part of her training. It was nothing to dread.

She found her place and lay down again. There on the deck, the loneliness caught her. All her life, her father had assumed she would intern for his Senatorial position. Through three years of med school he’d pursued her, insisting this was why he and Mother had given her life in the first place.

Two weeks before her scheduled departure from Elysia, he’d made a public announcement: Since his only offspring could not be persuaded to accept the coveted internship in his department, that position would go to someone he barely knew—so far, it had all been fine with Meris—but

then he and her mother had officially disowned her as well, cutting off all contact and financial support.

Originally, she would have been able to afford commercial transport to Tallis. She wouldn't have been Annalah's suddenly impoverished friend. She wouldn't be a charity case, the only normal person on a genetically-altered passenger list. She wouldn't be headed where they didn't want her and she didn't want to go.

Surely, the Sentinels would put her on the first shuttle off Procyel. They would want to get rid of her too.

She glanced into the corner. The young family lay together as motionless as if they all had died, the father on one side of the injured boy, the mother resting her arm on his other shoulder.

Meris shut her eyes and tried to sleep.