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## CHAPTER 1

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**I PRESSED MY FACE** up against the dome and peered outside. My eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim light as I tried to focus on what was happening, unsure and hesitant. My breath clouded the glass and my line of vision as I wiped a small space to see through again. What I saw wasn't new; unfortunately, it was very, very old. My mother, backpack on, breathing apparatus covering her once beautiful face, running between those who would rob her and those who would kill her.

I ran my fingers through my long brown hair in desperation, pulling it up into a high ponytail and hoped she would make it back inside AirZone alive. I hated myself for allowing her to run the line. Basically, whoever 'runs the line' is responsible for trading with the other zones to survive. We trade what we have plenty of, and for our zone it is air. The other three zones are divided into fire, water and soil. The essential elements for life are divided and cultivated within their own individual domes. We don't live well mind you, but we survive.

Then there is the fifth zone, *the Prestige Zone*. The Prestige or PreZone was just like it sounded: rich, better, perfect. Certainly, they were segregated in their own dome like our zones; Air, Fire,

Water and Soil, but PreZone had it all – all four elements and more. They had a limitless supply of anything and everything that we kill each other for and I hated them.

Everything was *new* in PreZone, unlike here, in AirZone, FireZone, WaterZone and SoilZone, each subdivisions of our world, *Virozone*. That's just how it was here, old and ugly and there was no escape.

In AirZone, between the hours of 6pm and 6am there is no sign of life in anything, trees, animals, definitely not people, not after AIRLOCK curfew, except the Captors. They still scare me and I hate seeing them, so I rarely look out my window during AIRLOCK. During AIRLOCK, the Captors infiltrate each of the zones and steal what they need to fuel PreZone. In AirZone, they capture our air, stealing it for the Prestige and greedily saving it for themselves. The Captors are in fact men, but to me they are not human. In intimidating masks, complete with octopus-like tubes and spidery wires, which twist around their backs and attach to huge air bottles, causing them to hunch over, they look demented and frightening. They lurk around our zone, sucking up our air, skulking around our houses. They used to give me nightmares. Sometimes they still do.

But all of this wasn't new to me; I'd grown up with it. We stay in our houses, shut all the windows, doors and shutters air-tight, and use the air we have accumulated through the day, as we cannot have anymore. One day we will run out, but the PreZone won't, that's their grand plan: to take all of our air and live forever. I seriously couldn't imagine my life without Mum and my best friend, Cobin.

I'm sure the world wasn't always like this. Apparently, once upon a time, the world was one. No domes, real life assortments

of living animals. It's unimaginable. A world where people actually threw away rubbish. Crazy, who would throw away anything? Yet as the one world slowly died, full of pollution and overflowing with waste, it was decided that the four elements: air, fire, water and soil be divided up to ensure they could be sustained forever. In doing so, four leaders were chosen and they were each given the responsibility of their zone and to ensure it flourished. But even that didn't last long. There were those who wanted more, wanted to have more than others, and that was when the war to end all wars took place. The 'Enmity' lasted one year and three days. The outcome being four dead leaders and a brand new fifth zone: the 'Prestige Zone' or 'PreZone'. Virozone was no longer run by four independent zones, but by one, ruled by one leader, and his name was Sceptre.

My mother flashed her AirZone I.D. Brace against the security lock as she entered the AirZone. Each zone had their own individual I.D. Brace: AirZone was yellow, SoilZone: brown, WaterZone: blue, and FireZone: red. But the Prestige Zone I.D. Brace consisted of all four colours. The only difference between a male and female's is the shape of the individual buttons: male, square and female, diamond. All I.D. Braces have the same two buttons, one identity information and the second - evaporation. You could not enter a zone without the correct I.D. Brace, thus keeping us undesirables out of PreZone permanently.

Neither Mum nor I had ever experienced an evaporation – a simple press of the diamond button on your I.D. Brace causing you to black out temporarily. Certainly, I knew about the permanent evaporation, the removal of your I.D. Brace from your wrist by either yourself or another, causing you to evaporate, meaning you

dissolve and disappear into nothing and are no longer there, here, anywhere. You are gone. But it isn't all bad, there is a chance that you can remove your I.D. Brace at any time and give it to another, hence sacrificing your life for theirs. But this was rare and I wasn't entirely sure that I could ever accept one, or give mine away, so I tried not to think about it.

Instead I watched my mum walk through the AirZone opening. I had stopped pretending that I wasn't waiting nervously for her a long time ago. Now I just hugged her even tighter as she released her mask and smiled at me.

'Waiting again, Lawlie? Couldn't you be doing something more important, like compressing air for my next run?' She squeezed me tighter and I knew she was secretly glad I missed her, after all, it was just us.

'I'm just waiting for news about the next Burning of the Light Ceremony. Sceptre is supposed to announce the sacrifice today.'

'You know I hate that stuff, Law. It's really disgusting that Sceptre feels he needs to sacrifice someone from each of the zones in order to keep his power alive.' Walking home I glanced over at AirZone's community Double U screen and watched images of PreZoners laughing and smiling as they enjoyed all the elements that we were not privilege to.

The ceremony dated back years and was a symbol of the Prestige's power and all that they stood for. They find someone poor, someone worthless, yet strong and determined. They need to be a leader, a voice, someone any zone would follow and love, someone who could destroy the PreZone if given the opportunity.

The Prestige wait until midnight, lay the sacrifice on the ancient altar and have them evaporated into nothing, as if they were nothing

and could never be something. It's recorded live and streamed into all of the zones via Double U screen for all to watch as a warning that the Prestige, the PreZone is in control always.

Opening the front door to our house, I immediately sat down on our couch as Mum unloaded her backpack. 'What did you get this time?'

She placed three bottles of water on the table and a large bag of dirt. She looked sad as she opened the bag and sniffed it. 'Could only make the two zones; Soil and Water. Fire was just too busy. You know how it is coming into winter, they must do an amazing trade.' I took the bottles of water into the kitchen and put them into the fridge.

'Air is pretty important too, Mum, don't forget that.'

She forced a smile, 'I'm just so tired of living like this, Lawlie. The runs are getting more and more dangerous. I saw three people getting mugged today for their supplies and I didn't even think to try to help them.' Of course she couldn't save them, no one could or really, no one *would*.

I watched Mum closely as she scratched at her spiky brown hair, both of us not having showered for a couple of days. My hair felt greasy, pulled back into a rough ponytail, but we couldn't waste our water. We knew water was to be saved first and foremost for drinking. She placed the bag of soil on the floor next to a couple of new pots, perfect for growing our potatoes over the next couple of months. I continued to move the water around in the fridge, making room for the new bottles, when a familiar voice interrupted my sorting.

'Hey, Law. I saw your mum come in. Oh hey, Helen.' I poked my head out from the fridge; it was Cobin Tucker, my best friend.

I told him he was only my best friend because I had no others. But really it was because he could make me laugh even at the most awful times. With his floppy blonde fringe that mostly covered his large blue eyes, he was wearing his usual green hooded jacket and ripped grey jeans.

So, how do I begin to explain Cobin Tucker? I suppose I should start with when we met. I was five years old and he was five and two months, a fact that he never lets me forget. I'd had a fight with Mum and had decided to run away. I made it as far as Cobin's front yard, just as the AIRLOCK warning sirens began to sound.

Mum was beyond worried, racing around to the neighbourhood houses, screaming and howling my name. Everyone was already sealed in and she had no one to help her, except Cobin. He had seen the whole thing from his bedroom window, so, at just five years and two months, he unlocked his window frame, climbed out and started yelling, 'She's here, she's here hiding.' He was wildly pointing at me, hiding in his family's garden bed. I was all scrunched up and clutching my tiny backpack, hoping to not be seen. I looked up and saw him hanging out his window, just as Mum scooped me up into her arms and into his house with two minutes to spare. Mr Tucker, a huge man with a soft, round face and Cobin's cheeky smile, let us in and we stayed the night until the AIRLOCK had subsided. It was a big risk for the Tuckers to take, sharing their air with two more people when they might have only had enough air for themselves. According to Mum and Mr Tucker, Cobin and I stayed up most of the night talking, and it was then that he coined my nickname, 'Spare'. He reminds me to this day that he saved me, became my spare air, and that night

we made a promise that we would always be there as each other's spare air. Thankfully, since then, we've never had to be.

I smiled at Cobin as I closed the fridge door, 'Hey Cobe I—'  
SMASH!

We both jumped, scared, alert, shocked. Running to the window I looked out apprehensively. The sky was streaked red and black, which only meant one thing: AIRLOCK. Every so often AirZone was put into AIRLOCK without warning, PreZone randomly shut down our air and sent in the Captors. Most of the time a few of the unlucky AirZone residents would be trapped outside their house, unable to make it inside and would suffocate. It didn't bother the PreZoners if a few of us died, they'd be happy if all of us just vanished, and maybe that was their plan.

'Quick Cobe, shut the doors, lock them, check the windows. Where's Mum?' Mum had disappeared without me noticing. I shouted out, loud enough for her to hear, 'Mum AIRLOCK's on, come back!' Cobin and I frantically began running around the house, Cobin locking all the openings, while I searched for Mum.

She was missing.

My voice was getting more desperate as I shouted out for her in fear. I pulled back the curtains and searched outside through the lounge window. It was three minutes until lockdown. She was just inside, where could she have gone?

Two minutes until AIRLOCK.

'MUM!' I screamed as loud as I could, knowing it would never be loud enough. Cobin had locked all of the doors and windows and was staring at me, waiting for further orders.

'I don't know Cobin, I don't know what else to do!' I was yelling at Cobin, like a wild animal, howling for dear life.

One minute until AIRLOCK.

I didn't know where else to look or what to do. I cursed Sceptre for the AIRLOCKS.

Thirty seconds until AIRLOCK.

Cobin and I both jumped at the sound of loud banging at the door. 'What?' I turned to Cobin. He shrugged and we raced to the door. It was Mum. I unlocked the bolt on the door and swung it open, pulling her inside by her arms. Slamming the door behind her I locked the door and spun around.

AIRLOCK.

Outside it was jet black and still, no air, the AIRLOCK had begun, and who knew just how long it would continue. I closed the curtains, not wanting to see any Captors slinking around, taking the air I was breathing not ten minutes ago. Mum was staring at me with wide eyes as I yelled at her, 'What were you thinking? Why were you even outside? When did you leave? Don't you know you could have died?'

Mum looked slightly shaken and sat down on the couch. 'I didn't realise. I-I had no idea. I must have wandered off. I'm actually not feeling that well.' She was holding a half empty bottle of water as I stood over her with my hands on my hips. She didn't look how she normally would, she was vague, confused.

I softened a little and sat down beside her, 'Maybe the run was a bit much for you this time, Mum, maybe you need a rest.' She looked at me shaking, her eyes tired but she didn't respond.

Cobin came into the living room and sat down on her other side. He raised his eyebrows as if questioning me and I just shrugged. Eventually she looked up at Cobin and spoke, 'Hello Cobin, how is your father doing?' Cobin looked confused.



‘What do you mean? Wasn’t he supposed to be with you?’

My mother stopped still and bit her lip, her brown eyes widened in shock. ‘No, I thought that was next week. We said next week not today. Unless I got it wrong?’

Cobin’s eyes shot from Mum to me, ‘He left to meet you ages ago and I haven’t seen him since. He was going to your usual meeting spot. Unless—’

I grabbed Cobin’s shoulder and pressed my hand over his mouth. ‘Don’t even say it. He’ll be fine, he would have just realised Mum wasn’t there and gone on the run himself. He’s probably just running late. Mum said it was packed today, right?’ I tried to sound convincing, but the tremor in my voice betrayed me.

Cobin backed away, mumbled something, took a deep breath and ran out the door. Mum and I stared at each other as she continued to chew on her bottom lip. She was the first to speak.

‘I really thought we were supposed to meet next week. What if—’ I shook my head slowly at her, trying to make her stop before she finished her sentence.

‘No Mum, Mr Tucker will be fine. He’s experienced and strong. If you can get through, he certainly can.’

Mum shook her head. ‘Don’t you see, Law? Because he can carry so much more than me, it makes him a bigger target. You should see some of the looks he gets from the Desperate out there. I just hope that if it comes to it he gives them what they want and comes home.’

I didn’t really have anything to say that would fix the situation. We both knew the dangers of the run and also knew that we had no choice. The Desperate are those who had lost all hope in civilisation, who would hurt anyone for anything at any time. I

just wished I was older so Mum would let me go instead of her, but she flat-out refused, even though I asked every single day.

'I think I'll go over to Cobin's and see if I can help, or at least calm him down.' Mum nodded, although she was clearly lost in her own thoughts, no doubt blaming herself for the entire miscommunication.

'Okay, just be back for dinner.' I squeezed her thin arm on the way out, took a deep breath, and opened our front door quietly. Cobin's house was directly across the road, so it didn't give me long to think about how I could help or what I would say.

His front door was closed but unlocked and Cobin was pacing around the kitchen. When he saw me he stopped and spoke, 'I wish Jewel was here. She'd know what to do.'

I shrugged, knowing that was impossible, 'I told you you'd need your big sister one day, Cobe, and that her moving to WaterZone and marrying Marcus was a big deal.'

Cobin's eyebrows frowned, 'Yeah, well I guess it made trade easier for us both, having the connections between the zones, but I need her now, and she's not here.'

'Well I am here, you've got me.' Cobin stopped pacing and shot me a somewhat thankful look, but I knew how he felt.

Other than Jewel, it was just Mr Tucker and Cobin. His mum died when Cobin was little from a mugging in the Void. They ripped her breathing apparatus straight from her face, stole her air canisters and left her to die. Cobin had never really got over it, although he was just three at the time. I know he still struggles with her loss.

I walked over to him. 'He'll be okay, Cobe. He's smart and brave. Really, he's the complete opposite of you.' I tried to make a joke, but he just smiled half-heartedly.

He stared at me and spoke fiercely, 'I'm giving him another hour and I'm going out there.'

I pushed him back roughly, 'No you're not, Cobin Tucker. You have never even been out of AirZone and your dad would never, ever want you to go after him, not ever.' He shrugged at me, clearly his mind was set.

'He'd go look for me, Law. He could be lying somewhere injured, mugged, beaten. He could be dying. They might have stolen more than his goods, they might have taken his breathing apparatus just like-' I shoved my hand over his mouth for the second time that day. I was actually getting quite good at cutting him off.

'No. Not like that. Never like that.'

Tears started to seep from his huge blue eyes as he sat down at the kitchen table. He put his head in his hands and asked, defeated, 'What else can I do? I can't just wait here forever. If it was you, Lawlie Pearce, you would go. You'd already be gone.'

I sat down next to him and put my arm around his skinny shoulders, 'This isn't about me Cobin. It's about you. Your dad would definitely not want you out there. It'll be dark out in the Void soon and you know it is so much worse at night. Just look out the dome if you don't believe me, it's terrifying.'

He knew I was right. He knew exactly how scary the Desperate could become out in the Void if they hadn't gotten anything running the line. The Desperate were more than just those living out in the Void, lurking amongst the nothing between the zones, they were killers. In the darkness they could kill and steal and return home as if it was nothing at all.

'I can't just wait here, Law. It's been too long. You know how long a run for Dad usually takes. He's been gone for ages and I'm

worried. I can't just stay here waiting for him to return.' He stood up and grabbed his backpack from the floor and began loading it up with bottles of water. He filled his pockets with four packets of matches and finally looked down at me still sitting, frozen at the old table.

'I know what I'm doing, Law. I've seen Dad do it a million times; spoken to Jewel about it over a hundred. I'll just keep my head down and move quickly. There are only the four zones, three if you don't count ours.'

I stood up and glared at him with angry green eyes, 'I hate you, Cobin Tucker. I hate you.'

His face softened for the first time in hours as he tilted his head slightly to the side. 'Why, Law? Because I'm doing something I should have done hours ago?'

I stalked over to him and stood up on the balls of my feet, facing him eye to eye, 'No, Cobin, because I'm coming with you.'