



PROLOGUE

‘SKULL! IS THIS THING on? Skull!’

‘Yes, yes, my dear Tash. The Double U screen is working loud and clear and you are now able to address all of Virozone.’

Tash smirked, fluffed her long red hair and began.

‘Attention all Virozone citizens. It is I, Tash, your most fabulous leader. Hear me now as I address any and all of your concerns. Firstly, I must bring you back to that awful scuffle two weeks ago at the Citadel during the Burning of the Light Ceremony, where Lawlie Pearce not only dared to try to evaporate me and failed but also caused the death of your King Sceptre. Yes, I know, horrible girl. Anyway, moving on. It is now with great pleasure I officially announce to you all that I, self-nominated and elected, am your new official leader of Virozone.’

‘Now, I know Virozone was originally created to salvage the essential elements required to survive: air, water, fire and soil, and we all know that each zone was segregated and specialised in their given element to trade, with the exception of PreZone, which could take whatever it wanted, whenever it wanted. Well, no longer. Every zone in their respective dome is equal, and I am the boss. Yay!’

‘Yes. Virozone is mine and therefore all of the zones: AirZone, FireZone, WaterZone, SoilZone and the PreZone are under my control, meaning you are all under my control.’

Tash inspected her long red nails and continued.

‘Now first things first. As of 11 a.m. today, all zones and their accompanying domes will be put into total AIRLOCK. Yes, that is right, total and complete AIRLOCK. Meaning the only air you will have access to will be that inside your house. Unless you have a BA, or breathing apparatus, then this will need to be used should you wish to leave your house, not just your dome. Next, your I.D. Braces that would normally allow you into each zone are now obsolete. They will not be required or needed so throw them away. You can’t go anywhere anyway so who cares. Yes, the evaporation button still works on the I.D. Brace, causing you to temporarily black out, so you are welcome to continue to use it if you choose.

‘Speaking of evaporations, and evaporations are my favourite. Yes, my Captors will still be patrolling Virozone and each of the zones. They will be checking numbers, handing out selected foods and air when required, and of course, evaporating those who challenge my rule. So, here’s a hot tip – don’t challenge me or my Captors in any way.

‘Now, what else? Of course, the infamous Void. Well, now that all zones are in AIRLOCK, the Void is an obvious place for you to go, however, let me warn you. I have heard reports of the Desperate running rampant in there. We all know who they are. Those without a home, trading, killing and stealing to survive, living aimlessly in the Void between the zones. But really, who cares anyway? They can fight amongst themselves and I’ve heard they are now more feral than ever. Go there at your own risk.

‘Finally, and this honestly is my favourite part, Chance Radcliff, ex-Prestige, pretend son of the old ruler King Sceptre, is on the run. Should anyone find him and bring him to me, you will be greatly rewarded.’

Tash paused, glanced slyly over at Skull and grinned.

‘Now, finally, thank you for listening, AIRLOCK will begin in one hour. Oh, and if anyone was wondering about Lawlie Pearce. Well, she’s dead. Goodbye.’

Tash flicked off the Double U screen with her pointy nail as Skull frowned.

‘What?’ Tash asked, expecting flattery and gushing, not confusion from Skull.

‘Well... er... it’s just that Lawlie isn’t dead. We don’t know where she is, but I’m pretty sure she’s not dead.’

Tash rolled her eyes. ‘I know that, but the citizens of Virozone don’t and the quicker they can forget about that little ball of trouble, the sooner they will succumb to my rule. Let them all think no one can save them. If they believe she’s dead, what hope do they have?’

Skull understood exactly what his beautiful Tash was saying. But somewhere, deep inside, something still bothered him. It was the simple fact that no matter what Tash told Virozone, or what she believed, he knew the truth. Lawlie Pearce was out there somewhere and she would not give up until Tash and Skull were gone forever.



CHAPTER 1

I WOKE UP, MY eyes adjusting to the dimly lit room. I couldn't move my arms. They were held down, securely in place. Opening my eyes wider, I realised it was Cobin holding me, his arms wrapped around my body, comforting me as I had slept. His eyes were closed, his face peaceful and relaxed, asleep. Where was I?

As I moved and jiggled my body free, he slowly woke up.

'Hey, Law,' he muttered, smiling and pulling me in closer.

I allowed myself to relax and be held by Cobin. This new-found closeness was a change from our usual friendship zone. Was it morphing into something more? A feeling of love? I suppose maybe it had always been there, but only now there was a reason to express it.

'What happened? Where are we?' I was still a bit dazed and confused about what had taken place and how I had come to be here, wherever *here* was. I hoped Cobin had some answers.

'It's a pretty long story, Law. But the main thing is you're safe, I'm safe and your mum is safe.'

I glanced around the dark room, but I didn't recognise it. There was a tiny light from a candle in the corner and we were

lying on what seemed like Cobin's old green hoody. It wasn't cold, but it wasn't warm either. We were sharing each other's body heat and I could feel Cobin's heart beating as he held me close.

Thoughts continued to enter my mind. *Why am I here? How did I get here? Who knows I'm here? Am I injured? How is Mum safe?* I felt like a version of myself that had been through a washing machine ten times and spat out left to dry. I couldn't really focus on anything except I knew I was safe and I could trust Cobin to keep me that way until I became myself again.

Then I remembered.

'What about Tyron?'

I tried to remember the last image I had of him. We were on the main stage at the Citadel and I had kissed him. I had faced Tash with an evaporation gun. I shot at her, or did I?

Cobin sat up with me and kept his arm around me. His voice remained calm as he spoke in almost a whisper, as if afraid of what my reaction would be.

'Law, he, I know you and him, I mean, I saw you both on the Double U screen. They streamed the whole thing and I saw you with him and the kiss.'

I shook out of his arm and turned towards him.

'Yeah, so? What's it your business anyway who I kiss? And I asked you a question, Cobe. What about Tyron?' I was annoyed that Cobin thought he had a hold over me, literally and metaphorically.

He looked down, anywhere but at my eyes. I pulled his face up to mine.

'I said, where is he, Cobin?'

He pulled away. 'He's dead, Lawlie, do you hear me? He's dead.' He continued. 'I didn't want to have to tell you.' His voice was angry and frustrated combined.

I pushed him in the chest. 'What do you mean dead?'

'I mean, they caught him. Tash and Skull, they took him away.'

I pushed him again in the chest, knocking him slightly off balance. 'He's not dead, he could still be alive. Cobin, he's not dead.' I was convincing myself more than Cobin and knew I had to believe it.

'It's pretty unlikely, Law. I mean, why would they bother keeping him alive? He's not important to anyone, except maybe you.'

I stood up and immediately felt light-headed and began to sway. Cobin stood up with me and steadied me, holding me upright.

'Leave me alone, I have to go. I have to—'

'You need to sit down; you've been through a massive ordeal Lawlie and you need to get better. You can't go anywhere like this, it's not safe. They are still after you. They want *you*.'

I could only vaguely hear what Cobin was saying, and I shook my head in an attempt to disagree. I fumbled around the room trying to find an exit. My eyelids drooped and I collapsed back into Cobin's arms. I thought of Tyron and knew that no matter what, I would find him and find him alive. Even if it meant going back into the PreZone.

'Tell me what happened, Cobin, everything.'

He took a deep breath and I think he kissed me lightly on my forehead. 'You survived, Lawlie, you survived an evaporation.'

My eyes closed as I drifted off. Flashbacks flickered like a nightmare. I watched the images unfold. First, I was on the main stage, and I had hold of an evaporation gun. It was pointing straight at Tash to take her out. But then I felt a stinging sensation in my

lower back, like I had been knifed straight in the back and someone was twisting the blade in every direction possible. I remembered spinning around and that was when I saw him, his face, imprinted in my mind as if tattooed there forever. His eyes wide, staring. His hands tightly gripping the evaporation gun, shaking, trying to hold it steady. His lips were frozen shut, and before I blacked out, I realised who it was. Who I was staring at. Who had shot me with an intent to evaporate me.

How could it be that I was shot by Chance Radcliff?

It wasn't until two days later I woke up again. But this time, I was fully aware of my surroundings and knew exactly what had happened to me at the Burning of the Light Ceremony. I couldn't see Cobin anywhere. Had it been a dream? Had I imagined that I was here with him? Where had he gone? I kept asking the same questions over and over until my head hurt again and I had to wait for the pounding in my head to stop.

I tried to move around the room. It wasn't that big, and maybe I could figure out what I was doing here, and more importantly, how I could get out to save Tyron. If he was still alive. Well, he just had to be.

Cobin's hoodie was still on the ground and some tins of PreZone food were stacked up in the corner. I didn't bother to see what it was but was thankful that there was some food. I opened one of the tins and ate like a starved animal, scooping it out with my fingers and hungrily shoving it into my mouth. It took me a second to realise I was eating custard. I should have known, it was in a cream-coloured

tin. It tasted good and I hoped there was plenty more since I had scoffed the tin down in a matter of seconds.

There wasn't much else in the room to bother with. Just some old blankets and that was it. I saw my clothes, yep, my trusty old pair of jeans and jacket. I was thankful there wasn't a mirror. I didn't want to see what I looked like. But how is someone supposed to appear after being evaporated and surviving?

Then he came through the door. I stepped back in shock, backing my whole body up against the wall as I saw him. The Captor.

I would recognise his long tubes and evil goggles anywhere; I had grown up with them. They were even more hideous close up. I wanted to scream, but no sound came out. Instead I held my breath. He took off his headpiece, as I squeezed my eyes half closed, anticipating what he might do. But as he took off his mask, I realised it wasn't a Captor at all. It was Chance. He smiled at me, reaching out to hug me. I stood frozen, my arms up, hands in fists, full protection mode. If he wanted a fight, he would get one.

'Wha—what's wrong? Lawlie, are you okay?' He was shocked and confused by my reaction to his attempted embrace.

'Stay away from me. I know what you did.' I spat out each word while questioning myself. Did I really know what he did, or had I dreamt it all?

'What are you talking about? You've been asleep for weeks.'

I still remained on edge, standing straight and not allowing him anywhere near me.

'Where's Cobin? What have you done with him?' I demanded.

I was certain Cobin was here. He'd been the one who had told me about Chance evaporating me. Hadn't he?

Chance sat down on the jumper, which on second look wasn't Cobin's at all but another green jumper. It was far too big for Cobin.

'I don't know where he is. I don't even know *who* he is. All I know is that you've been in and out of consciousness for weeks and calling out to everyone but me to come and help you. When in fact I was the one who did the rescuing.'

Still cautious of Chance, I decided not to sit down but relaxed my arms somewhat. What was real and what had I imagined?

'Then tell me what happened. How did I get here? Where is Cobin? How is Tyron?'

'Woaahh, one question at a time, Lawlie, and I'm sorry, but I don't think I'll be able to answer them all. I hardly know much myself. But this is what I do know. You're alive because I saved you. Now can you please relax and sit down while I explain what happened at the ceremony?'

I eyed him closely and decided to sit down and hear him out. Maybe I had imagined the conversation with Cobin. Maybe Chance *was* my saviour.

He placed his captor mask on the floor alongside a plastic bag full of other tinned items and a knife. What did he need that for?

He saw me and laughed. 'Don't worry, it's for protection, nothing else. Gee, Lawlie, would you relax? You should be glad to be alive, but instead you're a nervous wreck. What happened to you?'

I didn't laugh back. I wanted to know that my friends were safe, and I wanted to make sure I was safe. I snatched the knife out of the bag and ran at Chance, pushing him and tumbling him backwards onto the floor. I climbed on top of his strong torso and held the sharp dagger at his throat.

'Now, why don't you tell me what really happened?'