PART ONE

THE *ARCADIA*

Good evening. It is 17:00 hours on Sunday
24 October 2094.

This is the captain of the cruise ship *Arcadia*.
We are currently experiencing strong north-westerly
winds, a high of 10°C and a wind-chill factor of 5°C.
All passengers please be prepared for high seas.

Daily reported Virus cases: zero.
Days at sea: 15,934.

1

ESTHER

I shiver against the wind that threatens to take my homework over the ship's rail and into the sea. That's the last thing I need. I don't want to pull an all-nighter, and this close to graduation I can't afford to let my grades slip, so I weigh the loose pages down with my digiscreen. This model was already old when I got it, and that was five years ago, the glass face sliced across by a crack like a rivulet of ice. You can feel the sharp edges with your fingers.

It's aching cold this evening. Autumn cold, getting us ready for winter. Storm season on the ship feels never-ending. Last year we endured night after night of thundering waves. Snow piled up on the deck in great mounds, and the chill seemed to enter every salt hole and frayed seam in our clothes.

Even the memory of it makes the skin on my arms pucker with gooseflesh, so I shake out the blanket from the back of my chair, wrap it round myself and try not to think of bugs. Crumbs and splashes of dried food crust the surface of the wool. By the end of this year, with any luck, I'll be miles away

before the worst winter storms come; I'll be on dry land, sleeping in a warm room, with nothing to worry about but passing my first-year exams.

At least, that's the plan.

The Lookout is packed with customers huddling round tables. Sim, the cafe's stubble-faced owner, makes greasy food on a camping stove, separated from the rest of the Lookout by a counter of tacked-together planks. The cafe furniture is a mishmash of styles scavenged from around the ship. Plastic chairs taken from the staff canteen. Ornate velvet-covered dining chairs from the expensive upper-deck restaurants. A variety of faux-leather tub chairs stolen from the cabins, cracked and faded from exposure. All of them have seen better days.

The cafe itself is a broad, semicircular disc of planks built out from Deck Eleven, landward side. From the decks below you can see it's all held up by a mess of scaffolding poles and oars and planks. It's so rickety it creaks in the wind as though it could collapse into the sea at any moment. In all, there are fourteen residential decks layered above the *Arcadia*'s waterline, and each deck is separated into cabins. A few big, fancy cabins per deck at the top of the ship, and then, the lower you go, the smaller and less fancy they get, until you hit the waterline. That's where the really bad neighbourhoods start.

The Lookout's appeal for most patrons is the cheap food or even cheaper bitter reused coffee. But for me it's the view. Every icy chair faces the land. Even when it rains – which it does a lot out here on the Atlantic Coast – you can still see the city. This evening the sun is slung low behind the skyscrapers, and the coast is a jagged silhouette dotted with

hundreds of brightly lit homes. My eyes trace the outline of the sun-backed buildings, drinking in every familiar detail. The docklands, the low-lying suburbs, the towering midtown. And on the fringes of the city, right at the edge of my vision: the university campus. That's the place I'm aiming for. Up here, I can forget the waves that separate me from the city. Up here, my new life is within reach.

Ten more minutes, then I'll head home.

On the next table, a group of teenage girls chat in Arabic, then slip seamlessly in and out of English. One of the group pulls aimlessly at a hole in her coat sleeve while she gazes at the badges on my uniform. I squirm, suddenly aware of how stiff the collar of my jumpsuit is, and find myself pulling at the neck. I stare down into my coffee, cheeks burning with embarrassment.

A shadow passes over the table. 'Anything else?' Sim says, wiping a hand down the grease-stained apron he always ties round his waist. His face has the deepening lines of someone who spends most of their time out in the elements. He takes my plate and tops up my mug with watery coffee. The mug is an ancient ceramic thing, cracks in the white glaze like cobwebs, and stained by the thousands of coffees it's held before mine.

'No, thanks,' I say, and I hold out my hand to him.

Our comgloves cover most of our hands, but the fingers are free. When we hover in an almost handshake and wait for the funds to transfer, I can feel a hint of warmth. The gloves beep in unison as my ration credits are transferred to pay the bill. I flip my hand over so that I can see the flexible rectangular display on my palm.

'Hey, Sim, you didn't charge me enough.'

'It's . . . a thank you, Esther . . . for the rush on my Virus swab last week. Can't afford to close up while I wait.'

'Just doing my job,' I say. 'But thanks.'

'Well, you didn't have to help me out so . . . thank you. Captain's announcement said it's going to be a rough night, but it'll be clear tomorrow. You'll get a good view of the city. And it's ration day so there'll be bread.'

My mouth waters at the thought of fresh bread, crisp on the outside, soft as a cloud inside. 'I'll be in after class – you'll save me some?'

He gives me a half-smile, which is as much emotion as you get from him most days. 'You're my most regular customer. It'll be behind the counter for you.' He lingers, eyes resting on the pile of handwritten paper on the table. 'Can't be long until it's your turn to graduate. How's the exam prep going?'

My jaw tightens with anxiety. 'Same as always,' I say. 'We study; we're tested; we study again. At this point, I know more about contagious diseases than most doctors will ever need to. Still might not make the cut though.'

The girls on the next table giggle, and I can't help looking up to see if they're talking about me. One of them whispers behind her hand. When I catch the word *collaborator*, I sink further into my chair, wishing the deck would swallow me up. Tears prick my eyes. It's not like I've never heard it before – plenty of people resent me because I wear this uniform – but it still stings, and it's mortifying that this is happening in front of Sim.

He looks briefly at the girls, then he rests the antique glass coffee pot on the table. There's a crack down one side,

weeping coffee, so he carries it with a tea towel pressed against it.

'Now listen to me. There's not a person aboard this ship that hasn't taken something they've needed from the Federated States. But that won't stop them dragging you down. You ignore them, you hear? You've worked damn hard to get where you are. And when you graduate I'm going to put your picture up behind the counter and tell everybody it was my coffee you were drinking while you studied. Got it?'

'Got it,' I say.

Sim takes his coffee pot and moves to the girls' table. 'Who's for some collaboration coffee? Fresh from the Federated States last week.' His voice booms.

The girls scowl at him, but let him refill their cups, reaching their hands out to his, one by one, to pay. He winks at me over his shoulder.

At least I've got a shot at getting out of here. Sim's a whole-lifer, like almost every other person onboard. He was born here, and he'll die here, like all the Stranded.

There's a ping from my comglove, the wrinkles and frayed cuff of the greying fabric so familiar it feels like a part of me. It's a joyful noise for bad tidings. Glowing green text scrolls from the heel of my hand to the folds of my fingers.

Esther, it's getting dark. Are you in?

I've stayed too long. Again. I sigh louder than I'd dare if Mum was in earshot, wipe my fingers on the blanket, then use the middle two on my left hand to tap out a lie.

With Alex, home soon.

Irritation nudges at me as I pull my med bag over my head and stuff my homework in among the bandages and syringes. Mum means well, and without her help neither me nor May would be leaving the ship at all. She taught me and my sister everything; from how to ace our entrance exams to rigging up a desalination system so we're never thirsty when the fresh-water shipments are delayed. It's just that she winds her worries so tight round us that we can barely fill our lungs. And May gets off easy. She's free to stay out past dark. Or eat dinner alone without someone keeping tabs. It all makes me want to scream.

I get up and weave a path between the sticky, plastic-covered tabletops, making my way to one of the exits.

'Hey!' someone yells from the deck above the cafe.

My eyes snap up in time to see a pale hand hanging over the rail, clutching a small white rectangle. The rectangle swings through the air and shatters into a hundred sheets of paper that curl out and down towards me, catching the last of the day's light as they fall. Making them flash.

I'm caught in a leaflet drop.

Aboard the *Arcadia*, news is strictly packaged and sanitized. Anything that doesn't come from the Federated States is propaganda or hearsay or outright lies. Writing it down will get you arrested. Giving it to other people will get you arrested. Reading it, holding it in your hand, standing next to it will get you arrested.

They'll be here soon. I should run, but instead I watch the paper drift to the ground, my heart beating in anticipation.

The air is supercharged with excitement. People grab at the leaves as they arc to the ground. Above me, hands throw ream after ream. Paper litters the floor and the tabletops and settles on the mismatched chairs. A black-and-white snowdrift lined with text.

I anchor my feet to the deck and shove my hands into my pockets to stop them from reaching out. The voice in my head that sounds like my mum says, *Don't even think about reading that message. Don't blow your chances.*

I watch the girls from the next table holding their hands out as more and more paper rains down. One girl snatches a leaflet from mid-air and starts to read, the others gathering round to see what it says.

Just one look. My hand trembles as I reach for a leaflet. A spark of something unfamiliar and not totally unpleasant flickers inside me. It's anticipation mixed with anxiety. It's fizzy. I spin to face the sea, hunching my shoulders to shield the forbidden rectangle from view. A blurry greyscale image of a cruise ship floats in the centre of the paper. Not my ship. I'd recognize the *Arcadia* from any angle. It must be one of the others. Smoke billows out from the hull, and it keels sickeningly towards the water. Underneath the image, the text reads:

CRUISE SHIP *OCEANIA* CLEARED! HUNDREDS DEAD!

'Coalies!' Sim yells behind me.

They're here.

A collective whimper from the cafe's patrons. I screw the leaflet into a tight ball. It whispers, and when I open my

fingers what's left of the paper drifts away on the breeze, leaving a smudge of grey dust on my skin. Recycling paper. Smart.

'It degrades!' I shout.

All around me, people scrunch up the sheets, letting the ashy powder blow away, clapping their hands to get rid of the residue. When the leaflets are crushed just right, they recycle in a hushing chorus that sounds like waves on shingle. There are still hundreds of them strewn across the floor, and no one wants to be caught next to heaps of illegal words. No one wants to be scanned, to have their proximity to the drop entered on their permanent record. No one wants to be taken.

Chairs screech against the wooden deck. People leave steaming drinks and half-eaten plates of food. We shove each other in our need to get away. A table topples, showering the deck with plates and cups, the silverware falling like rain. Sim's coffee pot ends its life in a glassy tinkle.

My need to escape surges with every heartbeat, but each step brings me up against a new obstacle: a chair leg crunching into my shin, an abandoned bag blocking my feet. People scramble round me. The tables and chairs of the Lookout heave as though moved by a churning sea. Ten steps feel like ten miles, but I make it to the Lookout's closest exit. People bottleneck, squeezing through the single-file opening that leads to the next stretch of narrow deck.

A sour film coats the back of my tongue. Epinephrine. My adrenal glands are working overtime, getting my body ready for fight or flight, pushing blood to my muscles and making my heart work harder.

There's a dull thud, a groan, and I look over my shoulder to see a girl lying flat on her face, paper fluttering round her. My instinct is to help. But, in the second it takes me to turn back, a wave of black uniforms surges through the entrance on the opposite side of the Lookout.

The world pauses like a held breath. The Coaly uniforms and weapons are so black they seem to consume light. The mirrored visors of their smooth helmets pan left to right, taking in the scene. The people and the overturned chairs. The piles of forbidden knowledge. A static crackle precedes the Coaly's digital voice, fed through the helmet to disguise the person inside: 'You are in contravention of ship by-law sixty-two B, forbidding the creation, dissemination and possession of inflammatory written material. Remain where you are.'

Panic stretches the girl's eyes into glassy marbles. I've seen that collision of dread and resignation before. Our neighbour didn't fight when the Coalies searched his cabin. He stood by his front door with his arms loose at his sides, his body slack. But his eyes didn't rest. They darted from face to face, searching for a clue – something, anything – that would save him.

Strands of soft brown hair stick to the girl's lips, puffing and sucking in time with her breath. She can only be sixteen, my age, but her face is weathered and her lips raw and cracked.

The Coalies spread into the cafe, pouring between the tables. They catch the stragglers that have been too slow to run. One throws a man down; another shocks him with a taser. He fits, boots drumming against the deck.

The girl's marble eyes are locked on to mine. They make a desperate, unvoiced appeal for help. Why hasn't she got up? Fear? She's paralysed. I could help her – there's still time. She'd move if I pulled her up.

There's not *enough* time. People rush past me, through the opening and down the deck to safety. And the voice in my head, the one that uses my mum's tone, says: *Don't get caught up. Look after yourself. Let her escape – or not – on her own. She wouldn't help you.*

I ball my fists. You put your own life jacket on first – everyone knows it.

I leave her behind.