

DAY ONE

Green.

Swampy, muddy green made up the eyes. Set into a pinched, worried face.

His lip was chewed, chapped. I noticed that first—the chapped bottom lip just before the muddy green eyes. The rest of his face came later, in pieces. Brown hair curling slightly over his ears, like a haircut was a distant memory. High cheekbones, a good-enough jaw. Thick, furrowed eyebrows that never smoothed.

A dimple that deepened only for me.

None of it mattered, not to me. Not when the shock of my own heart pounding back into a steady rhythm overwhelmed the rest of my senses. When the feeling of blood rushing back through my veins, of the liquid they had pumped into my lungs to keep them in stasis, was enough to make me cry out. And when that cry out and subsequent deep breath in caused my lungs to spasm and expel the liquid in continuous, ragged spurts.

Wet, oily coughs punctuated the dead air. Chapped lips turned down slightly at the horrible sound of it, then tipped back up when I finally drew air in, regained my breath. When the regular pounding of my heart began to feel comfortable again instead of foreign.

“Juliette?” His voice was hoarse, rough from either a lack of use or too much.

“Dr. Street?” I didn’t think he was Dr. Street. In my slowly-recollecting memory, Dr. Street was a wizened old man, all white hair and mad scientist glasses. Not this young guy standing in front of me.

The man shook his head. "No. Dr. Street is somewhere... else. I'm Andy. Howell. Andy Howell. We were on the airbus together."

My rapid ransacking of memory must have shown on my face. "And orientation. I think we even sat next to each other in the dining hall one of the days."

I nodded, feigning memory. "Andy! Of course. Sorry. My brain's still all foggy."

Andy shook his head sadly. "You don't have to pretend. I understand."

"No, no," I struggled and tried to sit up, only to find metal plates holding me down.

My hands were also bolted down, metal handcuffs anchoring me in place. A moment of taking in my predicament, then:

Panic.

Shaking my hands, trying to free them from the handcuffs, tossing and turning my body in the hopes that it would knock a screw or two loose enough that I could pull free. All of it useless, Houdini's final act.

All the while Andy was shooshing me, placating me. A hand on my arm, a firm grip on my thigh. Anything to get me to stop thrashing.

"Please, Juliette. You're sending your vitals into orbit. If you stay still for a moment I can get you free." His voice was as panicked as I felt.

I tuckered early, my body still weak from its sudden reintroduction to wakefulness.

To Andy's credit, the second my heart resumed normalcy he typed something into the keypad and my iron chains lifted free.

I sat up too quick, my still-foggy brain rattling around in my skull in such a way as to make me woozy and see stars.

A firm hand against my back kept me upright while my vision cleared, finally giving me access to the world around me.

Clean. Clinical. White and chrome. A lack of humanity besides the warm body hovering next to me.

But most disturbing of all were the thousands of pods in the bay, each one closed to the sterile, recycled air.

I turned to Andy in horror, only to find his expression already as grim as mine.

“I woke up two months ago. Alone. The only life on this godforsaken ship. The most boring sixty days of my life.”

“And me?” My stomach was a resident of my throat.

“I was in the bay when your pod turned green. I waited by your side while the lid opened and you slowly came back to the world.”

His dimple freed itself for the first time. I couldn't help but offer back a simple smile despite the ice coating my spine.

“Why were you in the pod bay?” For the first time, I noticed that my voice sounded just as hoarse as his. Disuse, I decided.

“Sorry?” He cocked his head.

I crossed my fingers that Andy wasn't as daft as he let on. The only thing I feared more than being one of only two people awake in the pod bay was for the other one to be an idiot. “Why were you in the pod bay?”

He nodded. “Did you ever have chickens? Growing up?”

I shook my head. “No. Chickens were all but extinct when we were kids. And even if they weren't, I'm a city girl. Not much space for a coop.”

“Well, I did. For a moment, at least. Our town hosted an essay contest for the children. Winner got an incubator and twelve eggs. Chicken eggs. I won the contest with some bullshit about life and death and heaven. Doesn’t matter. It’s all fiction anyway. But they took that little incubator and got it all set up in my room.

“For three weeks I was the most popular boy in school. My bedroom was a revolving door of school kids. People I had never talked to before brought me treats so I might allow them to catch a glimpse of a perfect white egg. My first kiss happened over that incubator with a girl whose name I never learned. She kissed me and licked my lip and then pressed the same kiss to the glass window over the eggs with a wish I couldn’t hear and then disappeared forever.”

He held his arm out and I allowed him to help me out of my pod. He calmly held me up as my legs became reacquainted with my body weight.

“That’s lovely, Andy, but what-”

He didn’t let me finish. “Despite everything and despite the love, only one of the eggs hatched. A little runt of a chick, from the egg right beneath the girl’s pressed wish. And despite the guarantee that twenty-one days was enough time for whatever eggs were going to hatch, I kept that incubator on my shelf for twenty-one more. And twenty-one more after that. The revolving door stopped and people looked away from me at school, but still I waited for the last of those eggs to hatch, praying to something I don’t believe in for even one more chick to break free.”

We started to walk, leaving the bay. I took one last look at the closed lids of the working pods, at my lid disrupting the peace, and followed him. One sentence echoed in my mind.

THIS SHOULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED

“Forty-two days after the eggs should have hatched, my mom made me throw them out. I screamed and cried and fought tooth and nail to keep them for even two days more, but she said anything that could hatch would have. The rest were dead.

“And when she dumped the eggs in the trash and they shattered open, I saw the little bodies of the chickens, small and days from hatching, but alive and trying. I watched them as their little bodies quickly succumbed to the elements, helpless to save them.

“And my mom cried. Oh, she cried and begged my forgiveness. But I stayed quiet. Even two days longer and one or two might have survived. If only I had kept on watching.”

Andy turned to me, his eyes bright with some unshed emotion. We stopped in the middle of a vacant hallway. The way to the first-class cabins, if my memory was correct.

“Since I woke up, I’ve spent an hour every day in the pod bays, hoping, wishing, wondering if someone else would wake up. Not for their sake but for my own selfish loneliness. And two days ago I almost stopped, thinking there was no chance that I wasn’t alone, that my pod wasn’t the only defective one. But I remembered those chicks and the two days that mattered to them, and I stayed. Today was my last day of vigil. And here you are.”

“Here I am,” I muttered. Something about his story rubbed me wrong, at odds with the warmth he was trying to project.

“Here you are,” he repeated, smiling. His bottom teeth were crooked, one crossed in front of the other. It was all I could focus on as we started to walk again.

"We're going to the first-class cabins?"

"I figured that since we were the only two awake it was only fair to appropriate the rooms for ourselves. I picked Captain's for myself when I woke up but Presidential is still open." He stopped in front of said suite, pushing the already-cracked door open for me.

I stopped before entering, turning on him. "But what about when the Captain wakes up? Or whoever paid for this room? We just... switch back to our assigned rooms then?"

Andy's perpetual smile grew grim. "That's not going to be a problem."

My heart stopped. "What do you mean."

"Juliette, please. Just take the day to yourself. Get settled. We can talk tomorrow." He pushed the door back open, ushering me in.

I grabbed it, keeping it from swinging all the way open. I felt my spine fuse and my head pound. "Andy. Tell me. Why isn't that a problem?"

"There was... a malfunction."

"Of course there was a malfunction. How else would we be the first ones awake?"

"Not that kind of malfunction. A bigger one."

"What kind of 'malfunction', then?"

Andy's throat bobbed. "The kind of malfunction that screws over a couple of people. For life."

"How long?"

He looked away from me. "How long what?"

I gripped his arm, forcing him to look back at me. “How long do we have before the rest of the ship wakes up?”

“Sixty.”

Some of the tension left my body. That was nowhere near as horrible as I feared.

I opened the door the rest of the way, going inside. “Sixty days. Okay. I can work with that.”

“No.”

I looked back at him. “No, what?”

“Not sixty days. Sixty years.”

DAY TWO