

# PROLOGUE

**FLAMES LICKED DANGEROUSLY** close to Pierce's shoulder as he dragged an overturned chair into the fire's path. Behind him the steel safety door slid closed, blocking his only escape. He kicked at the chair, hoping the blaze would choose leather and wood over flesh and bone as he crawled to the window overlooking the courtyard. Alarms screamed, and neon-green liquid squirted from hidden ceiling sprinklers. His bloody hand slipped the first time he tried to pull himself up to bang against the tempered glass he didn't stand a chance of breaking.

Swiping at the liquid and sweat stinging his eyes as much as the smoke, he screamed, lifting his hand and slamming it down even though the street was empty of citizens at this hour. Leaning heavily against the unyielding glass while coughs wracked him, he tried to call out again, but the heat seared his lungs from the inside out.

In another fit of coughing, he slid back to the floor and glanced down at his bare, alcohol-soaked chest. It was pointless, all of it, the fame, the credits, Hale's sacrifice.

Harmony's face flashed into his mind. He had never told her he loved her. He'd tried to show her, but he should've said the words he'd thought nearly from the first moment, should've shouted them from the roof of this damn building. He loved her silky curls

against his cheek and the way her blue eyes had stolen his soul that afternoon in the park. He loved the way she tried to protect her sister and how she'd fidget with her shirt when she was nervous. He loved every part of her. She had been his for a little while, and her face would be his last thought.

He smiled, closed his eyes, and waited for death.

# CHAPTER ONE

**“WHAT IS THAT?”** Hale pointed at the dark spot on the front of Pierce’s black, government-issued regimental shirt. “You know you can’t wear that, right?”

Pierce glanced down and shrugged, “It’s a grease stain, Hale. I don’t have another clean one.” He sat down heavily on the edge of the twin-sized bed platform and pulled on the canvas shoes that had a hole worn in the toe. “Besides we’re only working kitchen maintenance. No one will even see us but old Iron Fist, and he’s pissed at me already.” Glancing in the wall mirror, Pierce ran a hand through his black hair, which stuck out riotously. “Damn, I’ll have to spend some credits on a haircut soon before I get cited again.”

“Don’t underestimate Stern, and stop calling him Iron Fist, or you’ll end up saying it in front of him. Stern could be your ticket to something better.” Hale creased his sheets and tucked his blanket into his own platform.

Pierce shook his head and snorted as he tossed his blanket across his platform, not bothering to see if it actually landed on the mattress or not. “My ticket to what? Bartering vegetables? Hygienics? That’s every Drudge’s dream. Getting rid of trash.”

Walking across the stark room, he unplugged his communicator and slipped it into the pouch sewn inside of his regimental shirt

before flipping his platform up with a resounding bang against the wall. Snapping his fingers, he turned to his closest friend with a smirk. "I know. I could barter on the forbidden market, trade illegal games and taboo fiction." He picked up Hale's copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* from the floor and tossed it on Hale's platform, ripping the already ragged cover a little more.

"Hey! Take it easy. I just bartered for this one. Cost me a hundred credits," Hale clutched the paperback novel to his chest before laying it back down gently and folding up his own platform. Irritated, he checked his perfectly-styled, brown hair in the mirror before grabbing his assimilation badge and heading for the door.

Pierce sighed, and Hale stopped, his hand before the door swipe, "I'm not like you. I'm not patient and cautious. I can't stand feeling like I'm kissing Stern's ass and begging for a handout." He huffed again in frustration. "Just because the government says we're Drudges doesn't mean we have to be happy about it. Growing up in a system orphanage shouldn't automatically put us in the lowest stratum." He ran his hands through his hair.

When Hale turned and pinned Pierce with a glare, his brown eyes lit with something Pierce rarely saw from his friend. "I'm not kissing Stern's ass or begging for anything. We don't have a choice, anyway. What're we supposed to do, run off to one of those Reconstruction colonies? Learn to live without electricity and running water? They'd probably find us and give us even worse assignments." He took a calming breath. "In a few months we can both take our aptitude exams, whether they"—he waved his hands vaguely indicating everyone who'd spit in their faces their entire lives—"like it or not. They have to allow us to take it when we turn eighteen, and then our lives will actually start. Almost three years of Drudge work will finally be over." He gazed up as though he could see their futures written on the ceiling.

Pierce nodded, smiling for the first time since his communicator alarm went off an hour ago. "No more overnights in the manufacturing center, no more month-long trips to the farmlands, and no more kitchen duty for rich, stuck-up jerks." He clapped Hale on the back and glanced down again at the stain on the front of his regimental. "Pretty soon Stern will be slaving for us."

Hale smiled, swiped his hand across the sensor, and stepped out into the hallway. Pushing the elevator button, Pierce glanced toward

the other ten doors on the floor, behind each an identical, barren cubicle like the one he and Hale had inhabited for nearly three years. The government-operated facility was filled with Drudges just like Hale and him, all teenagers waiting for a chance at something more.

He wasn't a total idiot; he knew that all four strata were governmentally regulated, but the other three carried prestige, and with prestige came freedom—not true freedom like the freedom he'd read about in Hale's taboo fiction, but the closest thing to it in Omni.

Since taking over the government nearly seventy years ago, the Omni party had firmly established his and every other person's place. Being born to an unmarried couple without a procreation permit, Pierce was immediately placed in the system and, as a result, the lowest stratum, without a chance at the aptitude test until he became an adult. He was deemed Drudge, the working-class stratum, as far away from Artist, the entertainment-class and highest stratum, as he could possibly get. Not that he thought he'd ever become an Artist. He wasn't that deluded. He'd never be able to paint, create music, or act; at least he didn't think he would, though in truth he'd never had the chance to try. He might have the physical strength to play in the OFL or the OBA, but he'd only played sports with Hale and a few of the other strays in the Dependent Childcare System.

He hadn't told Hale, but his greatest fear was that he wouldn't perform well on his aptitude exam, and he'd be stuck forever cleaning up after other people, waiting on other people. No qualifying score meant no chance of a better life. He'd be forced into a consort with some Drudge girl whether he wanted to or not, so they could procreate and make more Drudges. Being a Drudge meant nearly complete Omni control. They'd tell him where to work, what to do, and who to marry.

"So, you want orange or apple?" Hale asked, holding up two juice pouches he'd grabbed on their way out of the building lobby.

Pierce cocked one eyebrow. "Orange." He snatched the pouch from Hale's hand. "Why do you bother asking? It's been the same choice for almost three years."

Hale shrugged. "Never know. You might change your mind someday." He smiled and started down the street toward their job assignment for the day.