

Chapter One

Serenity

Spine straight, shoulders back, demure expression. It's funny that I still hear my tutor's voice in my head since her lessons are second nature to me, now. *Be superior without displaying an air of superiority. Be perfect but don't look like you're trying.* When I step out of my home, I'm not merely a person; I'm a brand, a figure, a symbol. My star is rising, and I shine. Always.

The sky is bright and clear between the buildings that stretch toward it. As I approach the monorail station, my commCuff taps against my wrist with a message. I push my coat sleeve out of the way to see it as I step onto the speedramp. *Oh, come on.* My best friend is maintaining her trend of shirking everything. I can't believe she's wasted our last week of freedom like this. After today we'll have so much less time. Furthermore, I can't silently make fun of the ridiculous pieces bound to go down the runway with anyone else. Vogue is the only one who understands that look in my eyes.

The speedramp carries me up to the station like sushi at a revolving raw bar. I step into the sleek monorail and take a seat on one of the long cushioned benches that line both sides of the car. *Ankles crossed, chin*

up because there's always the possibility of... there it is. A girl scratches her ear to conceal snapping a picture of me with her commCuff. This one is a dedicated fan, probably around thirteen. Only a few years younger than me, but she looks to me as an idol. I'd guess Cosmetology pre-program with the masterful eye makeup she's wearing. Talented. My conspicuous paparazzo busies herself on a holoScreen projected from her cuff. She glances up through long fake lashes and meets my gaze, a twinge of pink coloring her cheeks through her makeup.

"Hello," I say with a warm smile. "I was just admiring your hair. It's beautiful."

"Oh." She tucks some of the long, dark chocolate and purple curls behind her ear, flushing a deeper shade of red. "Thank you. It's inspired by your color last month."

"It looks better on you. I'm glad mine has changed. I don't have to be compared to you." Her eyes are like saucers until I wink, and she giggles nervously.

"The new black and red looks amazing."

"Thank you so much. I'm Serenity."

"I know," she mumbles, then clears her throat. "I'm Jolie."

"Nice to meet you, Jolie." I stand as the monorail slows to a stop. "Have a lovely day."

My tutor, Millie Gersemi, worked hard to ensure that my image would earn me the city's love, but I prefer to give people something real. As I descend from the station, it warms me to think Jolie will bubble excitedly about our encounter. It's a silly thing that my attention would brighten someone's day, but since it does, I sprinkle it around.

At the city's indoor gardens, the young man at coat check goes wide-eyed when I approach him. I give him an amiable smile along with my coat. Under the dome of glass panes, the runway is clear as crystal with a mural of fresh flowers tightly packed underneath it. A sea of colorful clothing, hair, and makeup swirls around the space. I wade into it, collecting a flute of sparkling wine and a myriad of brief greetings as I go.

“Serenity, sweetheart, thank you for coming.” Espy Taylor is a vision in ethereal layers of bright pink gossamer, a similar shade peeking through her light blonde hair.

“Of course. I wouldn't miss it,” I say, kissing the air as our cheeks tap together. “Unlike *some* people.”

She smiles sympathetically. “Vogue isn't feeling well, dear.”

I don't have much confidence in the statement. This wouldn't be the first time Vogue gave her mother a false excuse to get out of such an event.

“So she told me. That's a shame,” I say.

“Yes, well, I'm glad you're here to support Parisa.”

“If you ever deign to retire, I can't be left stranded.”

“Even after I retire, I'd dress you until I die. But Parisa is coming along.” Espy gazes up and down at the Parisa Otto special I have on. I keep these in the back section of my closet, reserved for events where I will see the designer. Her fashion show certainly qualifies. Given a choice between not being able to breathe, risking indecent exposure, or blinding someone if the light hits me just right, I ended up in an

asymmetrical dress reminiscent of a flame. Red and orange bands lick up my body and the single long sleeve.

“I still have her for a year,” she says with a grin. “She’ll be fine. Go enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you, Espy.”

She drifts off into the sea of people, and I find my place in it. Near the end of the runway, two familiar and identical faces wait for me. The twins are in Parisa’s designs, too. Complementary, though not matching, from their dresses to their hair colors, as is their way.

“Come sit.” Adelphie sweeps her fluffy skirt under herself to sit at the low cocktail table reserved for us. She pops an iridescent bon-bon into her mouth.

“Where is Vogue?” Parveena asks. “I haven’t seen her since New Year’s Eve.”

“She’s not coming,” I say.

“Oh, perhaps graduating has made her feel like she should step into her own place in society instead of her mother’s.”

“It was bound to happen eventually,” Adelphie says. “Though it’s a shame she’ll be stuck working in such a dull field.”

I don’t mention that Vogue is quite happy in Technology and doesn’t much enjoy her mother’s world of fashion. Those facts aside, I don’t appreciate their implication that she doesn’t belong among us. I tap my knee, playing my life’s score, which continually sounds in the back of my mind.

“I wonder what my new circle will look like.” They both snap their eyes to me in surprise. “The arts aren’t my world either,” I say. “I’ve always been involved because of my parents, but now that I’ll

be immersed in my program, I guess I can't really claim this to be my own."

Parveena backpedals quickly. "No, no, darling. Grace and Anton's fame may cast some spotlight glow onto you, but your renown is your own."

"You'll be a city leader," Adelphie continues for her sister. "You'll be welcome in all of the circles."

"I suppose we'll see after tomorrow," I say, confident they'll make no such comment about Vogue's place in society again. "I'm eager to get into my program."

"Darling, you've been in your program since you were ten. Graduating from the academy doesn't change much."

Perhaps it didn't change much for them. They were learning their craft in their pre-program classes, putting on plays, and getting roles in films. When they began their Performing Arts program last year, it only meant that they didn't have to bother with other classes. My pre-program wasn't quite as comprehensive. Thus far, my Leadership program has molded me into my perfect form—a person everyone will be content to see on the city council—but I don't know what it is I'll be doing. Working for the Establishment is a far cry from anything my friends and family do, and I don't know what to expect.

I give a little shrug as I take an oyster shooter, balsamic pearls popping on my tongue in lively bursts of acidity. When a hand slides onto my shoulder, I snap my head around to see Adwin standing over me.

"Hello, lovely." He leans in and kisses my cheek. His scent washes over me as he takes the seat next to mine—bergamot and vanilla, soothing as a cup of tea.

“I didn’t know you were coming to this.” The pleasant surprise almost makes up for Vogue’s absence.

“Where else would I want to be? Tomorrow the Establishment will start to monopolize your time. I have to get as much of it as I can now.” As if I won’t give him all the time I can spare.

The designer herself trots out to us. The bodice of Parisa’s dress is encrusted with tiny mirrors, and the skirt looks like silver cotton candy clouds. “Serenity, I’m so glad you’re here.”

I half-expect to be shredded when she embraces me, but her dress only jabs me. “Of course! I wouldn’t miss it.”

A beat throbs through the space, and the hum of voices fades away. Models hit the runway under flashing lights, and I keep my undivided attention on the stage, gasping and *oohing* at all the right times. When a model in a lime green peplum dress comes down, I turn to Parisa. “I *love* that one.”

“I’m so glad,” she gushes. “It’s yours. I made it for you.”

I know. It’s on the only petite model, and I’m familiar with the routine. She wants me to be seen wearing her dresses—capitalizing on the eyes that always follow me. With *that* on, I’d be even more eye-catching. “You are too sweet. Thank you.”

Now that I don’t have to look out for my ‘gift’ anymore, I spare more glances at Adwin. The past six months with him have been as flawless as his wavy brown hair and piercing blue eyes. He came into my life and fit like a puzzle piece. Once I get going in my program, the picture will be complete. All I need is to feel comfortable with my career path and the perfect life I’m destined for is mine. Winter vacation has been lovely, but tomorrow isn’t only the beginning of my program. It’s the beginning of realizing my expectations.

Chapter Two

Serenity

Most everyone I recognize on the monorail gets off here in the Arts District. Muscles in my fingers twitch, but all I allow them to do is to wave goodbye to the familiar faces. These hands won't be dancing over piano keys today, and that is perfectly fine. If I were in the Music program, music would become work. It would be something I *have* to do instead of something I *want* to do. *Or*, I tell myself, *I'd get to do what I love all the time.*

I should be over it by now. It's been six years since that option was lost to me.

Theaters and studios shrink away as the monorail continues into the heart of downtown. All of that can still be my joy, even if it isn't my path. My path takes me to another stop. When the monorail reaches my destination, I rise and slide my palms down my dress, smoothing the pale blue satin. Few people get off my train, but the one across the platform lets out plenty before continuing in the direction I came from. I roll my shoulders back and button up my coat against the winter morning chill as I wade through the colorful current of people. The speedramp carries me down to ground level, and my gaze slides up

the glass tower where I'll spend much of my time for the foreseeable future.

The Establishment Center doesn't look unique. It reflects Kaycie both literally and figuratively. Reflections of surrounding buildings make it a mural of the skyline, and its aesthetically pleasing lines and clean, polished form are the embodiment of the city. For most people, today is the first workday of the new year. For those of us who turned sixteen last year, it's the first day in our programs. Most people walk into their programs with classmates from their academies—people they did pre-program coursework with since they were ten years old. I walk into the Establishment Center alone. The single person with me as I completed my Leadership coursework lives right across the street. Our class of two was considered large. Most years don't have any Leadership placements at all.

The woman at the reception desk flashes a bright smile when I approach. "Good morning. How can I help you?" she asks.

"I'm to meet with Mr. Verity. My name is—"

"Oh, I know who you are. Please take a seat, Miss Ward."

"Thank you." I do as I'm told. Waiting in the airy lobby, I fall into my natural state of statuesque poise.

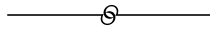
I recognize the Director of Education and Placement when he walks into the lobby. He allows grays to sprinkle through his dark hair—it's unusual, but it works on him. His suit, a purple so dark it's almost black, is crisp and flawless. I rise and close some of the distance between us. "Mr. Verity, it's such a pleasure to meet you."

He shakes my hand firmly. "Please, call me Sophos. The pleasure is all mine. Right this way." He gestures back the way he came, and I

follow him to the elevator landing. “How were your holidays?” he asks as we ascend the building.

“Wonderful, thank you. Now I’m ready and excited to dive into my program.”

“I’m glad to hear that. It will certainly be an exciting time.”



After a tour of the Establishment Center, we arrive at Sophos’ twelfth-floor office. “May I offer you some tea?” he says, tapping a screen on the end table.

“That would be lovely. Thank you very much.”

A teapot and two cups on saucers rise from the coffee table between us. The large corner office boasts this comfortable seating area, set apart from the grand mahogany desk. Sophos pours the tea and sits back, relaxed. I keep my spine straight, my legs crossed at the ankles.

“Serenity, as Director of Education and Placement, I like to start all of these meetings with a discussion about placement. How did you feel when you received yours?”

“To be honest, I was rather surprised. I had never thought of Leadership as an option. Jobs in the Establishment weren’t something I had ever paid much attention to at that age.”

“Certainly, ten years old is before ambitions generally begin to form.”

Ambitions? “At any age, there’s no reason to be ambitious. Even if our roles weren’t selected for us—which is invaluable—all roles offer the same high quality of life. There is no motivation to desire a different role, as long as the role one has is fulfilling. Thanks to the

placement system, we all find our most fulfilling place, and ambition has never had a chance to taint us.”

“Very good, Serenity. The system did aid in the creation of our peaceful society by helping to eradicate ambition. We are very proud of its success, but to prevent complaisance, I always question the process to see how it might be improved. So, I’d like to ask you if you feel your placement was right for you?”

As if I could say no. It’s infallible. What kind of fool would I be to say I disagree with mine? Still, reciting that it’s perfect might sound a little too eager to please. “I don’t think I know enough about Leadership or the Establishment to have a feeling about that yet.”

“Yes, the Leadership pre-program at the academy level is very general. Cognitive development at ten years old is optimal for the placement test. For many paths, this is a fitting age to start engaging children in their future roles. However, the nuances of leadership take a more mature mind, so the program really begins in its second phase. Now you will be introduced to the opportunities within the Establishment and train for a position.

“First, I will be completing your education on the functions of the Establishment, and then in a few weeks, you will be going to the Department of City Planning where you will work and learn as an intern. You will be exposed to various divisions and positions within City Planning throughout the year, and you and I will keep regular meetings to review your progress as well as any questions or concerns you may have.”

“All right.” It’s a relief to hear him making excuses for my pre-program. For the first four years, Millie Gersemi acted as though her etiquette lessons were all I needed to know for my future role. Not

that I have anything against social graces and a polished public image, but I knew there had to be more.

“Now then.” Sophos taps the screen, and a holo map of the city floats above the coffee table. Tall buildings, a few scattered green parks, wide paths, and the monorail tracks weaving throughout. Surrounded on all sides by water. “What do you notice about Kaycie?”

“It’s perfect.” It may be the safe answer, but it’s also honest. I love this island.

The horrors that ended the pre-flood world have the detached sterility of history, and how could anyone regret events that would lead to our current way of life? Having the world be so big seems intimidating. I don’t mind Kaycie being the last little piece of dry land in the least.

Sophos’ thin smile doesn’t reach his eyes. My answer was probably overkill.

“Indeed it is. How do we maintain that perfection, Serenity?”

“We maintain it by ensuring equality among all citizens. There is no poverty or hunger, and we all contribute our skills to the well-being of the city and the people. Everything is fair and equal.”

“Very good. And where in the city do our equally shared resources come from? Food, for example.”

Magic? How should I know? Kaycie provides us with everything we need. It’s known. I get the feeling he does not want me to recite that phrase, though. I stare at the holo of the city. “Are there laboratories producing our food? Indoor greenhouses and such?”

“No.”

I look at him expectantly. He pinches the map to zoom out, and another large island comes into view. My breath catches in my throat.

The new addition is covered in fields and trees with small buildings sprinkled throughout.

“Here,” he says, enlarging the island with a hand gesture, “is where crops are grown, and farming is done to feed the city. All our fruits and vegetables, herbs, leaves that make our tea, grapes that make our wine, even cotton and silk that make our fabrics comes from this island.”

My heart beats faster. I don’t want my eyes to betray my incredible shock, so I keep them focused on this new island. There isn’t anything beyond our coastline. This can’t be.

“There is another island?” My voice sounds small and childish despite my best attempts.

Sophos returns the island to its proper size on the map and zooms out again. Another island appears. My heart pounds in my ears loud enough that I’d expect him to hear it.

“This one is where our livestock is raised. All of the pigs, cows, poultry, sheep, and so on are raised here. Fish and crustaceans are farmed here as well.”

A prickling feeling dances up my neck. I look at him incredulously, but I can’t find any words to say. I’m not sure I could form words in my mouth anyway. Silence is probably a better option right now.

Sophos raps his fingers on his wrist. “You’ve eaten lamb, I presume?”

I manage to nod, trying to control my breathing.

“But have you ever seen sheep in Kaycie?”

I stare back at the map. The third island has so much open space between its wooden buildings. It looks like a different world. Could this be real? Why don’t we know about these islands? Why let us

believe we are alone here? The Establishment gives us everything. Why would they keep this from us?

“Perhaps this is enough for one day,” Sophos says.

I look up and try my best to sound calm and collected. “This feels like the crescendo, anyway. There can’t be anything more interesting.”

Only the infinite list of questions ricocheting around my mind. They are too jumbled to form into words, and I don’t think I’m supposed to ask questions. Curiosity is not a valued trait.

He smiles, and almost appears to laugh to himself.

There is more.

I look at the map, then close my eyes for a moment and take a breath. “If there is more, I can continue.” The world already tripled in size. How much more shocking could anything else be?

Sophos looks at me tentatively, deciding if he thinks I can handle it, I guess. I look back at him—wholly composed—and try to keep my chest from heaving noticeably as my breaths come too fast. Perhaps Millie was right; looking confident might be the most important thing I can do here.

Silently, he looks back at the map and with both hands, pinches it in. Zooming out until Kaycie is just one of eight islands.

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