



CHAPTER 1

ANAYA

THIS WASN'T NORMAL RAIN.

It came as a sudden deluge, pockmarking the water and misting Anaya's view of the battered city across the harbor. It lashed down on the field of Deadman's Island, where she stood with Mom and Dad, Petra and her parents, Seth, and Dr. Stephanie Weber. And it wasn't *right*.

Just minutes ago, all her attention had been focused on Stanley Park, where the cryptogenic grass and vines were dying. Yesterday they'd been sprayed with an experimental herbicide, and now they were wilting and cracking. Up till now, nothing had been able to kill these plants. They'd spread worldwide, crowding out crops, sending strangling vines into houses, waiting underground to trap and eat animals and people in their acid-filled sacs. But the herbicide that Dad and Dr. Weber had created—it *worked*. And seconds ago, Anaya had been cheering along with everyone else on the army base who'd rushed out to witness this huge triumph.

But now came the rain. Mostly it was real rain. She could feel it wet against her face. But among the raindrops were ones that were too big to be normal. They didn't soak into the earth but bounced and settled on the grass like gleaming translucent beads.

"Hail," Mom said.

Her mother was a pilot, and Anaya knew she'd seen all kinds of severe weather. Hail in May was weird but not impossible. And Anaya *wanted* it to be hail. But near her feet, one of the gleaming beads quivered, swelled, then—

Burst.

She stepped back with a gasp as something swift and wet uncoiled from inside. It happened so quickly that she couldn't tell the thing's size or shape—except that it seemed too big to come from such a tiny space. In a second it had burrowed into the earth and disappeared.

"Did you see that?" she cried.

"Eggs," Dad said, kneeling down as more of them hatched. Their squirming cargo slithered into the grass. He lunged and caught something in his cupped hands, but it squirted between his fingers and was gone.

"Holy crap," said Seth. "What are they?"

"There's hundreds of them!" Petra gasped, stamping with her foot.

Anaya's shoulders jerked at the sound of a gunshot. Across the field, a soldier fired a pistol uselessly at the ground until someone yelled at him to stop.

“They’re everywhere!” she heard another soldier shout.

“We need specimens,” Dr. Weber was saying with remarkable calm.

Anaya spotted several more trembling eggs nestled among the blades of grass. She snatched the coffee cup from Petra’s father and splashed out the contents. Dropping to her knees, she scooped up the eggs and snapped the plastic lid back on.

“Good thinking,” said Dad.

“Let’s get that to the lab,” Dr. Weber said. “Fast.”

As quickly as it had come, the rain subsided. Anaya rushed toward the main building. She felt like she was clutching a grenade. Against the waxed paper was a sudden churning.

“I think they’re hatching!”

She sped up, bolting through the doors, down the corridor, and into Dr. Weber’s laboratory.

“In here,” Dr. Weber told her, opening a large glass terrarium that contained some samples of black grass.

Anaya lowered the coffee cup inside. Very quickly she snapped off the lid. Several tiny translucent creatures spilled out. Dr. Weber sealed the terrarium. Squirming at the bottom, the things looked like they were trying to burrow through the glass.

“They all want to get underground,” Seth said.

“They’re larvae,” Dad remarked, leaning closer. “Trying to find somewhere safe to grow. And they’re not all the same.” He turned to Dr. Weber. “Stephanie, can you get that magnifying camera working?”

With a joystick, Dr. Weber angled the small camera mounted above the terrarium. She flipped a switch, and on the monitor loomed some kind of blunt-faced worm.

“Looks kind of like a borer worm,” Anaya said.

Growing up with a botanist dad, she’d been shown all sorts of things—not simply weird plants but the freaky creatures that ate them. She knew it pleased Dad that she’d never been one of those kids who squealed at the sight of bugs. He’d taught her to look longer and closer.

“Yeah,” Dad agreed. “A flat-headed borer larva.”

“So these things are from Earth?” Seth asked hopefully.

“They just fell from the freaking sky in raindrops!” Petra told him.

“I just want to know for sure!” Seth retorted.

“These definitely aren’t from Earth,” Dad said. “Borer larvae aren’t segmented like this, and they don’t have lateral fins.” He pointed at the long ridges that ran the length of the thing’s body.

“They might be for digging,” Dr. Weber remarked.

When the worm opened its wide mouth, Anaya took a sharp breath.

“Oh my God,” said Petra.

Inside were spiraling blades that looked like the turbine of a drilling machine.

On the monitor another creature now plunged into view. This one had an oversized head, which was mostly taken up with a pair of black-dot eyes. Its narrow body was like a chain of

armored blocks, each sprouting spiky hairs. Below its head was a big hump, and through the translucent flesh, Anaya made out something dark and bundled.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing.

“I think those might be the beginnings of wings,” Dad remarked. “This one might be a flyer. What else have we got in there?”

Dr. Weber panned the camera across the terrarium. There were a couple more of the bulgy-headed creatures, a few more worms, and then a grub-like thing so blobby Anaya couldn’t tell which end was which.

“This little dude’s a puzzle,” Dad remarked as the camera zoomed in. Dad had always had a habit of calling his specimens endearing names. *Rascal*. *Scoundrel*. *Smart aleck*. “He’s still completely undifferentiated.”

“Meaning?” asked Sergeant Diane Sumner. Petra’s mother worked for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and liked to understand things as quickly as possible.

“Meaning it’s hard to tell what the heck it is,” replied her husband, Cal Sumner, who was a nurse practitioner at the Salt Spring hospital.

As Anaya watched, the grub thing flopped over to a worm that was busily bashing its head against the floor. She still couldn’t tell which end was which until the grub thing unhinged its jaws and inhaled the worm whole.

“That just really happened,” Petra said, sounding horrified.

Bloated, the grub was motionless for a few seconds, maybe stunned it had eaten something as big as itself. Its body twitched. Then it flumped over to one of the bulgy-head bugs and ate that, too. It finished off all the other larvae in the terrarium. Its swollen body bulged as if its prey were still alive and thrashing around inside. Then it became very still.

“Did it die?” Anaya heard Mom ask.

“What’s all that goo?” Seth said.

A pale fluid oozed from the thing’s flesh, and at first Anaya thought it must be injured, but the fluid quickly hardened into an opaque gray coating.

“A cocoon?” she asked, squinting.

“It’s entered the pupal stage,” Dad said.

“Looks more like a shell,” Dr. Weber commented. “Hard.”

“How could it turn itself into an egg?” Petra asked. “It just hatched!”

“Whatever it is,” Dad said, “this troublemaker’s definitely a work in progress.”

“I don’t want to see him when he’s finished,” said Petra.

“Dr. Weber?”

Anaya turned to see a lab technician at a nearby workstation, pointing at her monitor. It was a weather broadcast showing a huge white swirl over the Pacific Ocean. Its eastern edge covered the west coast of North America, including Vancouver.

“That’s one heck of a system,” said Mom.

“It’s like that big rain a couple of weeks ago,” Seth said.

In a time lapse visual, the enormous swirl of cloud expanded, swelling across North America, billowing toward Asia, bellying down to swallow up South America.

“Except this time the rain is eggs,” said Anaya. “Not seeds.”

“Is this it?” asked Petra. “Are they invading?”

They.

Anaya stared at the creatures behind the glass. “These aren’t them, are they? The cryptogens?”

That was the name they’d given them. It means “species of unknown origin.” Maybe it was more scientific than the word *aliens*, but it was no less scary.

“Not a chance,” said Dr. Weber, nodding at the terrarium. “These things aren’t higher-order life forms. They’re oviparous. Egg layers. Insects by the looks of it. It’s definitely a new invasion, but not the big one.”

“Just another bit of an alien ecosystem,” Dad said. “First they sent down the flora; now we’re getting some fauna.”

“Step away from your workstations!”

Anaya jolted at the booming voice and spun around.

Colonel Pearson strode into the laboratory, soldiers fanning out behind him.

“What’s going on?” Dr. Weber demanded.

He knows, Anaya thought with a clenched heart. Pearson knows what we are.

“I want all your records, your hard drives, all external storage units,” Pearson told the lab staff.

Anaya saw them glancing nervously at Dr. Weber as they pushed back their chairs and stood. Soldiers immediately took over the computers, tapping keys, unplugging devices.

“Colonel Pearson,” Dr. Weber said, “this is completely unacceptable!”

Her voice was filled with indignation, but Anaya had the feeling she would not come out the winner in this battle.

“This lab,” she told the colonel, “is under the authority of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.”

“Not anymore,” Pearson said. “I want a full briefing on your findings. And I mean *all* your findings, doctor. The parents will be detained in their apartment for the time being.” He nodded to the soldiers nearest him. “Take the children downstairs to the holding cells.”

“What’s all this about?” Sergeant Sumner said in her steeliest RCMP voice.

“Come with me,” a soldier said to Anaya.

Instinctively, she stepped toward her father, but the soldier tugged her smartly away and unclasped handcuffs from his belt.

“You’re not serious!” Dad exclaimed. “Handcuffs?”

“Arms behind your back,” the soldier snapped at her.

She’d been brought up to be respectful and obedient, but right now she was overwhelmed by confusion—and anger.

“This is crazy! We helped figure out how to kill the plants! And you’re arresting us?”

“You’ve got no cause for this!” Dr. Weber said.

“I have ample cause, as you know,” said Colonel Pearson.

Because we’re only half human, Anaya thought.

Sergeant Sumner took out her phone and began dialing. “I’m calling my superintendent.”

Pearson himself snatched the phone from her hand. Sharply to his soldiers he said, “Cuff them all. Now!”

Anaya felt the loops of steel close coldly around her wrists.

“Ow!” Petra cried out as a soldier snapped her arms behind her back.

“There’s no need for this!” Mr. Sumner objected.

“Don’t touch them!” Anaya heard Seth shout. And then someone cried out in pain.

When she turned, she saw that Seth had ripped off the bandages on his right arm, revealing his feathers. Their tips bristled, razor-sharp. They were longer than the last time she’d seen them on Cordova Island. Their colors were even more vibrant now, exploding along his arm in a dazzling pattern.

On the floor, a bright line of blood led to the soldier who’d tried to manacle Seth.

“You cut me!” the soldier snarled, cradling his wounded hand.

Immediately, three other soldiers had pistols out, aimed at Seth.

Everyone knows now, Anaya thought numbly. This past week, they’d tried so hard to keep their changing bodies secret: Seth’s feathered arms, Petra’s growing tail, her own clawed feet.

Seth pulled back his bristling arm, ready to lash out again.

“Seth!” Dr. Weber yelled. “Don’t!”

“You crypto freak!” the injured soldier spat at Seth, and Anaya saw the hatred in his face—and the fear.

“Lower your arm, boy!” Pearson barked at Seth.

“Don’t shoot him!” Petra wailed.

“Seth,” croaked Anaya, hardly able to breathe. “Stop!”

Slowly Seth dropped his arm to his side. At once, two soldiers smashed him against the wall and manacled him.

Anaya was given a hard shove toward the exit.

“Hey!” she protested.

“Stop this!” Dad shouted, and grabbed the soldier, but immediately two others pulled him away, twisting his arm behind his back so he winced in pain.

“You can’t do this!” Mom shouted at Pearson. “You can’t separate us from our kids!”

A scuffle broke out between Petra’s parents and the soldier escorting Petra out of the lab. Anaya gasped as Sergeant Sumner actually punched a soldier in the face—and was instantly wrenched away and handcuffed, along with Mr. Sumner.

Anaya was pushed through the doorway into the corridor. With a last backward glance she saw Mom’s beautiful face compressed in anguish, and Dad looking more furious than she’d ever seen. Then she lost sight of them. She felt like a long, invisible tether had snapped, ripping a hole in her belly.

Beside her, Petra called out, “Mom?”

And this was what started Anaya crying. Because her friend’s

voice was filled with the childish hope that her mother, even now, could somehow protect her. Anaya knew that Petra had never gotten along with her mom, and yet she was still the person Petra wanted most right now.

“Don’t worry!” Anaya heard Sergeant Sumner call out from the lab. “We’ll sort this out! The RCMP knows where I am.”

“This is a big mistake,” Seth shouted, as he too was marched into the corridor.

The soldiers escorted them through a fire door and down several flights of stairs.

“I’m a freaking hero, okay!” Petra yelled, her voice echoing off the concrete walls. “I got the dirt that’s killing the plants. What’d you guys do? Huh? You can’t treat us like this!”

Then her voice broke and she was crying again and saying she wanted to go home, couldn’t they just let her go home?

Anaya took a breath, tried to stop herself from shaking.

Downstairs now: a dim concrete corridor with windowless doors.

The guard unlocked one of these doors and shoved her inside, alone.