

## ONE

# L I N C O L N

Everything was white. And he hated that more than anything.

Bright lights and whiteness seemed to make the sick look even sicker. It was certainly the case for his sister.

He was tempted to close his eyes as he hurried along the corridor of the medico care centre, just to stop the glare of the whiteness. Even the labs weren't this bright. Their walls were a drab grey. He was lucky to get away from his work there. They were so busy right now. His visit to the dinosaur continent, Pistoria, a month ago had quickly been forgotten. Life was back to normal – if you could call it that.

But no wonder. Lincoln hadn't won anything. He hadn't aced the final test. He'd almost lost out on this chance of care for his sister. If Storm hadn't stepped in...

He shook off his thoughts as he hurried the last few steps towards the door to Arta's room. As if she'd heard his approach, it swung open and Storm stepped out into the corridor.

For the briefest of seconds, her violet eyes met his. In less than the blink of an eye, the smile fell from her face and her hand dropped from waving goodbye to Arta back to her side.

He could see something forming on her lips, but then she changed her mind, spun around, with her long brown hair fanning out, and stomped off down the corridor.

He could swear she left an icy blast in her wake.

One month on and she still hadn't forgiven him. Still hadn't forgiven him for trying to save his family.

Storm was now staying in a house. Hardly anyone had a proper house in Ambulus City. The trouble with Storm's was that it now sheltered all the brothers and sisters of Rune and Kronar – their two teammates who had died on Pistoria. Lincoln's sister, Arta, should also have been there, but she'd been so sick she'd only made it to the care centre.

Sixteen people in one house. He almost shuddered to think of Storm moving from her own small room in the Shelter to her new crowded home. The noise levels, the chaos, the fights between siblings – Storm was used to none of this. She had switched from one extreme to the other.

She was lucky though. Space was at such a premium on Earthasia that the majority of families lived in the cramped tower blocks or caves. He and his mother were still in the caves. Another family had even moved in alongside them. They slept in shifts. It was claustrophobic.

But at least Arta had health care now. The whole week he'd been on Pistoria that was all he'd really cared about – winning the prize that could save her life and praying she'd survive until he came home.

He swallowed and pushed open the door. Arta was lying against the white sheets, her skin so pale she almost blended in with them. Her face broke into a smile as she saw him and she winced as she shifted against her pillows.

One month. That was how long she'd been here. And even though part of Storm's rewards had been health care for her and her "family", the Stipulators had already started to grumble about Arta being so unwell and taking up so many resources.

But although Storm seemed to hate Lincoln for his betrayal, she didn't carry that hatred over to his sister. In fact, she was a formidable advocate. She argued with the health staff at every opportunity. Any time she thought Arta's care fell short, she reminded them of her time on the dinosaur continent. She told them about the T-rex, the deinonychus, the pterosaurs, the raptors. She told them about how many Finalists had been lost – sometimes in graphic detail. According to Arta, it always seemed to help the medico staff focus their efforts on trying to get her blistering skin disease under control.

"Lincoln." Arta's voice came out as little more than a gasp. Despite the health care, her disease was still progressing, although slower than before. She held out her fragile hand towards him.

Her arm was bound with bandages, cream smeared over her hands. Cracks were visible in her paper-thin skin, and her fingers were red and swollen.

Lincoln took his sister's hand as gently as possible. "I'm sorry, I couldn't get away from the lab any sooner. It's so busy."

She nodded, then winced. Even tiny movements were becoming painful. "What's happening?"

He shook his head as he sat down in the chair next to her bed. "There's just so many more people working there now. Maybe a thousand. Some days I can barely move. Apparently it's the same in all the labs on the continent."

Arta wrinkled her brow. "Is everyone working on the same thing? Is it all the dinosaur DNA?"

Lincoln's stomach gave a little flip. The dinosaur DNA that Storm had been so against letting the Stipulators have. It still made him cringe that he'd tried to hand it over and steal the credit for himself.

"Do you really get to work on it yourself?" asked Arta.

He smiled and shook his head. "Not really. I get to do some really minor things. Preparing slides. Pulling off reports. Checking rates. They are so desperate to find something. To find anything they think will kill the dinosaurs. It's round-the-clock work."

His sister gently brushed her fingers against his. "Are you getting any sleep?" Her voice lowered. "Are you getting any food?"

He gave her a weak smile. "Some. Regular rations are fine." He tried his best to appear brighter. "Your cheeks have filled out a little. Did you manage to eat today?"

It was easier to turn the conversation back around. His body still hadn't adjusted. There had been unlimited food during the Trials and on the ship to and from Poloria. While on the dinosaur continent they'd existed on ration packs and whatever they could find, but the surprise was that a whole host of other foods seemed to grow there – some rich, some odd, and some that had strange effects on the body. It was so different from their own continent, Earthasia – here, the land had been overworked and food production was at a minimum.

Since that final Trial when they'd arrived home – the one to claim ownership of the dinosaur eggs, the one that he'd lost – Lincoln had been back on normal rations. The hunger pains he felt now almost made him wish he'd never been exposed to the unlimited food.

Arta gave a nod. "I had some soup. And something creamy. I'm not quite sure what they called it. But it was sweet. It was nice."

"Good." He glanced towards the door. "What did Storm want?"

Arta looked uncomfortable. It didn't matter how much Lincoln wanted to shield her, she'd seen his behaviour. She'd watched him try to claim the eggs as his own, then take part in the Trial to try and win them again. She knew exactly what Storm thought of her brother.

"She visits every other day. She checks my skin, my breathing." Arta gave a little smile. "She argues with the medico. She tells him he has to do better. She keeps asking him about a cure." Arta's voice got quieter. "But we both know there's no cure. Apparently one of Rune's brothers – Cornelius – is getting sick too."

Lincoln felt a prickle down his spine. What if the health care he'd risked everything for wasn't enough? Maybe it was time to try something else. Anything else. He pushed his hand into his pocket and kept his voice low. "I found something. I don't know, but maybe it's worth a try."

Arta pulled back as he held out a scrap of cloth to her and a pungent smell filled the room. "Eurgh. What is that?"

It didn't look – or smell – entirely pleasant. The contents, a coiled leaf, had decayed and practically turned to mush, melding with the ointment inside it. "This is what we used on Poloria for healing my dinosaur bites." He paused as he tried to find the words – neither he nor Storm had mentioned Blaine's existence to anyone since they'd come home. Lincoln didn't know how to start telling the story of the exiled Stipulator who survived alone on Poloria and had made this medicine.

She wrinkled her nose again as he pulled up his trouser leg. "Look, the wound on my leg healed really quickly. No infection." He shook his head, as he still couldn't really believe it himself. "I thought it was only for deep wounds. Mum tidied my bag away when I got back, and I just found it again last night. Maybe it could help your skin."

She shook her head. "You want me to smell like that?"

He held up his hands. "Well, are the other creams helping? Do you feel any better?" It was hard to keep the frustration from his voice.

She paused for a second then licked her lips. "I don't know. I don't think so. They're trying five different ones. One for each limb and another on my back and chest." She sighed. "I'm not sure any of them make that much difference." She stared down at her bandaged arms and lifted one a little. "They take these off and everything just looks...the same."

He smiled as he held up the decomposing leaf again. "Then give mine a try. Just on a small patch of skin. Pick a spot and we'll see what it can do." He tried his best to sound convincing. "The smell isn't that bad."

He opened the leaf to expose the ointment and the waft almost overcame his senses. Poloria. He could practically hear the noise of the insects, feel the warmth in the air and sense the earth shake beneath him with the thundering footsteps of the dinosaurs. He almost gagged.

Arta wrinkled her nose for a few seconds then pointed at the crook of her elbow. “Okay, you can put a tiny bit here. But that’s all. And you better find somewhere to put that or it will stink out my room. They’ll wonder what the smell is.”

Lincoln walked around to the other side of the bed and smeared a little of the green ointment on the inside of Arta’s elbow. He opened the door of the storage box next to her and rummaged among the care centre gowns, depositing the wrapped-up leaf near the back.

He hesitated. “I might not make it in tomorrow. So remember where it is. And put a little more on. You never know. It might just help.”

She shook her head. “I don’t believe you – but I’ll try.” He bent to kiss her cheek and she whispered in his ear. “Tell Mum I’ll try and hide some food for her tomorrow.”

Lincoln shook his head. “Don’t, it’s too dangerous. They’re already suspicious of this arrangement. We mustn’t give them any reason to refuse you care.” He gently squeezed her shoulder. “I’ll try and get back tomorrow.”

Arta sighed and sagged back against the pillows. Entertaining two guests in a row was clearly too much for her.

He closed the door quietly as her eyes flickered shut, and took a deep breath. Arta didn’t look better. One month of health care and unlimited rations hadn’t had the effect that he’d hoped for. Had the journey to the dinosaur continent all been for nothing?

## FIVE

# STORMCHASER

Arta smiled as Storm pushed the door open gently. “Hey, two days in a row. What’s up?”

Storm tried to find a suitable excuse, but nothing sprang to mind, so she just smiled and sat down at the edge of the bed. She visited Arta regularly to keep up the pretence that they were sisters and stop the Stipulators getting any more suspicious. But that wasn’t the only reason she came here. For some odd reason, she liked Arta Kreft. Lincoln’s sister was kind and smart, with a wicked sense of humour. Storm had never really had a female friend before.

Sometimes Arta said or did things that reminded Storm so much of her brother Lincoln that it actually made her flinch. Now Arta’s green eyes sparkled. They were just like her brother’s too. “Are the Nordens driving you crazy again?”

Storm groaned and sagged her head down on Arta’s bed. “You have no idea.” She looked up again and put her hand on her chest. “I had no idea. I had no idea how much these kids really need a parent.” Her voice changed as she finished the sentence, as the irony gripped her.

She’d found herself alone at a relatively young age. She’d had to learn to survive in the Shelter.

Arta patted her hand. “They need rules. They need boundaries. They must have had them in Norden. Right now they just can’t believe their luck!” She leaned forward a little. “Are you regretting your decision?”

The obvious answer was no. But it took Storm a moment to form the word.

Arta looked hurt. “Are you sorry that you said we were your family?”

If Storm could punch herself right now, she would. She shook her head fiercely. “No, of course not. But it’s hard. I’ve been alone for so long that I guess I’ve forgotten what family means for some folks.” Her voice grew quieter. “Or maybe I’ve never really known.” She held up her hands. “Even here, in Ambulus City, there aren’t that many big families. I guess in Norden it must be...different.”

Arta gave her an understanding smile.

Storm ran her fingers through her tangled hair. “You’re the one person I actually think I could share a house with without going crazy, and you’re not there, you’re...” She looked around at the bright white walls, then sighed. “You’re here.”

Arta nodded. “And you’ve no idea how much I wish I wasn’t.”

Storm cringed. “I know. I’m sorry, I’m being selfish. I’m just tired and frustrated, I guess.” She took a deep breath. “I got bad news at school today.”

“What kind of news? I thought today was your last day?”

Storm licked her lips. She was still trying to get her head around it. “It was. It is. But I’ve been reassigned.”

“From the hay bales? Isn’t that good?” Arta’s voice sounded bright.

Storm shifted in her chair. Arta didn’t know that Storm had deliberately flunked her assessments so she’d be assigned such a lowly job. For most people it would be a nightmare.

“You don’t know where they want me to go,” she groaned.

Arta leaned forward and smiled. “It has to be the lab,” she said confidently. “They’re sending everyone to the lab right now. It’s so busy there.”

The irony almost killed Storm. Before winning her Trial she’d rebelled: tried to destroy the eggs, and told the Stipulators to leave Pistoria alone. She was lucky the baying crowd hadn’t been able to get to her – they would have killed Storm for her unpopular views. “There’s no way they’d put me in the lab,” she said. “I’m too big a risk.” She raised her eyebrows. “Think of the harm I might do.”

Arta frowned for a second. “So where are you going then?”

“Parliament.”

“What?” Arta’s eyes practically stuck out from her head. She said the word again, as if she didn’t quite believe it. “Parliament?”

Storm was still in shock too. She felt sick just thinking about it.

“What will you do there?” asked Arta.

“I have no idea. What am I qualified to do? Nothing really. Unless anyone wants to ask me questions about Pistoria. But then, no one really wants to know about Pistoria. All people want to know about is how to kill the dinosaurs.”

Arta looked at Storm carefully. She tilted her head to one side and said, “Lincoln talks about Pistoria.”

Storm tried to hide the smile that threatened to appear on her lips. This was the second time Arta had mentioned Lincoln. She wasn’t very subtle.

“Does he?”

Arta tilted her head further. “Yes, he does.” She frowned again as if she was thinking hard. “Sometimes he tells me things about the land. The trees. The flowers. The colours.” Arta squeezed her eyes closed for a second. “I wish I could have seen the colours.”

Arta on Pistoria? Her stomach clenched as a wave of protectiveness swept over her. Storm couldn’t bear the thought of this pale girl being exposed to the creatures there. She had barely made it out alive; someone as fragile as Arta wouldn’t last a day.

But she’d only just been dreaming about the colours on Pistoria herself. It was odd. She’d been so relieved to finally leave the dinosaur continent, but now? Now, the shades of grey on Earthasia seemed even bleaker than before. She didn’t doubt Arta would love the beauty of the place. But the colours and landscape couldn’t mask the danger of the continent.

Arta hadn’t picked up on Storm’s reaction, however. Her expression changed and the tone of her voice softened. She looked at Storm with sadness. “Then he clams up. He won’t talk about the dinosaurs. He won’t talk about his scars. And he won’t talk about the others.”

The others.

Rune and Kronar.

Her teammates, maybe even her friends, who had died on Pistoria. Died on a mission it turned out she didn't believe in.

Storm stared at the white wall. "Sometimes it's better not to talk about things. Sometimes it's better just to forget." She didn't want to talk about what had happened to Rune or Kronar either. Her mind spun in circles every night as sleep evaded her and a thousand different outcomes taunted her.

Them crossing the lake safely. Kronar not being sick and alerting the deinosuchus to their presence. The T-rex not appearing at the lake. Kronar standing in a different spot – one which meant the T-rex's powerful tail couldn't send him flying through the air.

Her nightmares were frequent, leaving her thrashing around her bed and waking up slick with sweat, her heart hammering in her chest. But in the little period of time just before she fell asleep, Storm's mind always drifted off to the vibrant colours, smells and happier memories of Pistoria. The shades of green she'd never seen before. The pops of orange or red in bushes around her. The diplodocuses drinking in one of the shallow pools of water, flicking water over their young with their tails.

Things that she might never see again. Things Arta would never see.

Arta gave her a pointed look. "But talk is all I can do."

The sentence was short but Storm felt the impact. Arta could barely move her arms or legs without pain. What must it be like to be stuck in here all day staring at white walls?

Storm glanced across the room. There was an older lady in the bed opposite who seemed to be permanently sleeping. She nodded towards her. "Does she ever wake up?"

Arta gave a shrug. "Rarely. And only to moan and ask for something for the pain."

"Do you know who she is yet?"

Arta frowned. "I think she's related to one of the Stipulators. He's come in a few times to visit." She shifted uncomfortably. "He always looks at me as though I shouldn't be here."

Storm straightened in her chair, her anger flaring. "Well, you should be. Has he faced a T-rex? Has he had to climb a tree to escape raptors? Who is he to look at you, anyway?"

Arta shifted uncomfortably again. Storm wasn't sure if it was because of what she'd said or because of the pain.

"Are you feeling any better?"

When Storm had seen the frail figure of Arta near the stage and claimed she was her sister, she'd imagined that a few weeks in the medico care centre would make her magically better. How foolish was that?

Everyone knew this was a progressive disease. She'd seen enough kids in school with it to know better. Kids whose skin peeled and blistered until it became bleeding and infected. Kids whose chests started to rattle and wheeze. Kids who started to cough up blood. Kids who eventually never came back.

Kids like Arta.

Arta gave a tight smile then her eyes brightened slightly. "Actually, I am. Or at least one part of me is."

Arta uncrooked one elbow and rubbed at the thin patch of green slime covering her skin there. Storm frowned and stood up, leaning over the bed and putting her face closer. The smell was instantly recognizable.

“What?” Storm looked around, as if some creature from Poloria were about to jump out at her from the perfect white walls. It was a jolt. A vivid reminder of where they’d been and what they’d discovered.

She reached out to touch the green substance, as if to confirm it really was what she thought it was. “Where did you get this?”

“Lincoln,” said Arta simply. “He found it in his backpack when he emptied it.” She laughed. “One month, and he’s just emptied his backpack. Apparently it was once a proper leaf with the ointment inside, now it’s just a pile of mush. Granted, it does smell rotten. I didn’t want to try it, but he made me promise to put it on one tiny spot.” She smiled as she admired that small patch of skin. “And I have. The skin isn’t bleeding any more. For me, that’s better.”

“Can I?” Storm’s finger was poised just above the patch. Arta nodded, and Storm gently rubbed a little of the green away. Sure enough, the skin wasn’t at all perfect. But it wasn’t cracked, blistered and bleeding in the angry way that the rest of Arta’s skin seemed to be. Storm had walked in one day before when Arta’s bandages were being reapplied. She’d seen what lay beneath the cream-coloured wraps. It wasn’t pretty.

Storm shook her head and sat back down. “He used that stuff on the T-rex bite, didn’t he?”

Arta nodded. “And the pterosaur-claw wound. He said it healed both.”

Storm was stunned. But maybe she shouldn’t have been. Maybe she just hadn’t been paying attention. Blaine had given her that ointment for her bleeding feet. At the time he’d said something about hiding the smell of the blood, but her toes had healed within a few days.

Hadn’t he also told them about using the same leaves on a wound of his own that should never have healed?

“How much do you have left?” she asked. She tried to remember how much they’d been given...Blaine had put some ointment into a large leaf and made a kind of pouch for Lincoln.

Arta’s voice wavered. “Not too much. But I’m only using a tiny bit at a time. If I used any more I’m sure the staff would smell it. I’m not too sure that they want to find a cure for this disease. At least, not one they’d want the rest of Earthasia to know about. I’ve heard them having conversations about it. So I wipe this off when I know they are due to come and change my bandages.”

Storm let out a breath. Arta was so much wiser than her years. “But they’ll notice. They’ll notice that one tiny patch of skin is healing better than any other.”

“Then they’ll think that one of the five other creams they’re using on me is finally working.” She glanced towards the door. “Anyway, they’re far too busy right now to notice what’s happening to me.”

“What does that mean?”

“Someone else came in. A girl. She must be someone important, because all the staff went rushing to her room. She’s across the corridor.”

Now Storm was curious. “Who do you think it is?”

Arta sighed. “I have no idea. I heard a name – Tarin – but that’s all. She looked about the same age as me as they wheeled her past.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

Arta lay back against her pillows. “What’s wrong with anyone they bring in here?”



Storm looked over at Arta's closed door. Another person with the blistering plague. She opened her mouth to answer, just as a commotion started outside. She couldn't help herself. "What's going on?" she murmured as she walked over, cracked open the door and peered out.

The sight stopped her dead. Lorcan Field was in the room across the corridor. He was ranting and shouting, pointing to a young woman in the bed. The room was full of people – several of whom were Stipulators.

Somehow, the care centre was the last place Storm had expected to see the head scientist. He barely ever left the lab. Word had it that he even slept there.

But if she was surprised to see Lorcan Field, it was nothing to her shock at seeing the man who glared at her as he slammed the door shut.

Someone she hadn't seen for the last month – not since the final Trial.

Her father.