

BEHIND-THE-SCENES

CHAPTER 5

FAUX

“Shall we begin?” Professor Titan announces from the front. “Be sure to follow the directions carefully. The last kid who ignored my instructions melted his face.”

“Are you serious?” a girl in front of us asks in alarm.

“Absolutely,” he says with relish as he steps behind Pete. “The guy’s name was Mansfield or something.” Titan’s mouth twitches, almost revealing a smile.

“Oh, I thought you were going to tell them about that professor who blew up an entire lab,” Pete jabs back playfully.

“Kishbob,” Professor Titan sputters. “It was only half a lab. Tell that father of yours to stop making up stories.” Titan winks before walking on.

Pete half laughs before turning his focus to a beaker which he pours with care. Just then a girl named walks up hooking arms with me. I know her name is Jill, but that’s about it.

“Alysse, you are soooo lucky. I wish I had Peter for my lab partner. He’s so smart and witty and super cute,” she gushes. Pete keeps his eyes on his beaker despite his cheeks flushing slightly. I force my eyes back to our notes as she leans over, her posture perfect as she eyes him. “What do you say Pete? Want to switch tables?”

“Sorry, Alysse and I have a good system here.”

“Oh. I had hoped.” Her lower lip sticks out in full pout position before forming a mischievous smile. “If you ever change your mind...”

She passes behind us, brushing up against Pete and his beaker. The beaker shifts mid-pour, and some of the chemical misses its target.

I glance at her retreating figure before noticing a holo-card spinning above Pete’s JS. Its envelope is sealed with a kiss. Pete just rolls his eyes when he sees it.

“Aren’t you going to read that?” I hand him a rag with a teasing smile.

“No.” He wipes up the spill, tossing the rag aside.

“Well, can I read it?” I beg in a sweet voice, batting my eyes and sticking out my lower lip.

A smile breaks out on his face as shakes his head at my pitiful imitation of Jill. “Knock yourself out.” He hands me his JS and pulls out a stir stick.

I open the note and read in a suspenseful whisper. “*Dear Peter, I’ve watched you a long time. You are so handsome and smart. What’s wrong with that?*” I nudge him. “*I’m free this weekend if you wanted to have some fun . . .*” I stop reading Jill’s note as she goes into more detail just what kind of fun she had in mind. I pass him his JS, chin tucked. “Do you get these a lot?”

He tosses his JS to the side. “Forget the note and give me a hand.”

I immediately grab a canister of powder and slowly spoon it onto the console’s scale. After thirty minutes of following the directions with exactness, we sit back and wait for the mixture to heat to the right temperature.

Professor Titan clears his throat at the front. “Burners off. Our ever important Statesman is addressing the city,” he announces with a hint of sarcasm completely missed by the students busy chattering in excitement. The lights dim and the class holo generator flicks on.

A holo version of Statesman Tallin sits tall at his desk, his suit and hair impeccable. “No wonder Aaron is such a hottie,” Jill calls from the back, other girls laughing in agreement.

“Quiet, please,” Professor Titan calls out as he adjusts the volume.

“He means grow up, please,” Pete breaths.

“ . . . this last year has brought increasing Dissenter violence. Monday’s attack on volunteers ignited both grief and outrage. To prevent further incidents, all City workers will be re-screened for stability . . .” the Statesman elaborates.

Pete snorts, whispering. “Should’ve done that a while ago. Did you hear about that twenty-three year old woman in Urbane?”

“No, what happened?” I ask through closed lips.

“Just last week, stalked and brutally killed by a Compound worker,” Pete whispers, not bothering to hide his lips.

“Again? Our psycho-analysis programs are supposed to prevent things like that.”

“Those programs mean the city will reimburse you if a worker does damage, like breaking a vacuum or stealing jewelry,” Pete explains. “But for a murder victim, it’s hardly a comfort knowing the city’s going to pay for your funeral.”

“Pay attention,” Professor Titan calls, his eyes on us.

“ . . . In response to the increased tension, we have no choice but to tighten regulations on unauthorized political discussions in order to prevent further inflammation of the current situation, as well as a tighter curfew within the Compound itself,” Statesman Tallin drones. “We’ve used restraint and patience in our associations with the Compound, but violence against innocent citizens is intolerable. As Statesman, I have no choice but to implement these new changes, effective immediately,” Statesman Tallin ends.

As the professor turns off the holo, a very foul smoke stings my nose. “I said all burners off!” the Professor yells. The lights flick on to reveal a smoking beaker and two guilty culprits.