

# Eve of Eridu

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I sat on the side of a mountain in Cambodia in 2017 and realised that the only person holding me back from writing a book was myself. I have had endless support from a whole bunch of wonderful people (you know who you are), but I think I really need to dedicate this book to my lovely grandparents in New Zealand. Love you!

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*Ignorance and knowledge are in equal parts necessary to ensure a peaceful society. All will become clear at the time of the harvest.*

*Book of Eridu*

## I

‘Take a seat.’

The chair looks like it belongs in one of those dentist surgeries from the stories of the *old world*, and I hesitate for a moment before crossing the sterile room. The synthetic material lining the back of the seat is cold, and I feel goosebumps prickle along my arms as I ease myself into the chair’s rigid embrace. Up close, I note that there are thick straps attached to the armrests and the head support, and I glance sharply up at the medic.

‘Nothing to worry about, Eve,’ says Sia. ‘The straps are just to hold you still while I complete the procedure.’

I nod, my jaw tight. ‘Will it hurt?’ My voice echoes strangely in the small room.

‘A little. Nothing major. Why don’t you tell me about your day while I prepare.’

My day... The events stretch out before me, a string of indeterminate length so that at first I can’t work out where to begin.

Sia wheels a trolley over to the cupboard on the far side of the room and begins pulling out a number of metal instruments, arranging them on the top of the tray. I look away, focusing my attention instead on the cool, grey concrete below my feet. I don’t need to see what she is preparing to do to me.

‘What did you do this morning, Eve, when you woke up?’

The drink Sia gave me when I first arrived is already starting to take effect, and I feel reality blur slightly at the edges, the way it does first thing in the morning when your dreams collide with the waking world. If only I could pretend it was all a dream.

I see the jagged graph careening across the screen on the side of the illuminated tank. I remember peering into the opaque liquid and checking for any abnormalities. That’s right...

‘I went to the incubation chambers.’

Sia looks up from inspecting one of the sharp, metal tools. ‘On your day off? Why?’

How am I supposed to explain the calming aura that saturates my mind whenever I am around those amniotic tanks? The way they are stacked together resembles the cells of beehives in the *old world*, and I always become readily absorbed in the data which tracks fluctuations in temperature, oxygen levels and nutrient delivery. Then there’s the contents of the tanks themselves, suspended temporarily in a state of complete

tranquillity. Whenever I am rostered on at the incubation chambers, I find myself gazing into the large vats of liquid, imagining that I, too, am so unaffected by the world around me.

But this morning there was no need to be at the incubation chambers – or any of my other regular duties – at all. So, how do I explain it to Sia? I can't, so I just shrug. 'It's the day of the harvest. I wanted to keep myself busy.'

Sia doesn't push the matter, and I close my eyes, recalling the wall of exo-wombs plunging into darkness as I turned off the lights. I remember standing in the darkened room for a few minutes, alone – except of course for the contents of the tanks – preparing myself for what was about to come. The gentle click of tools being placed on the trolley, combined with the effects of the drink, soothes me into a light slumber.

I am brought abruptly back into the present by the sound of the metal trolley being wheeled back across the room. The concrete floor is smooth, but the instruments clang together as the trolley wheels bump over the electrical cables running like arteries across the centre of the room, powering the machine squatting on a small table beside me.

'Sit back.'

I do as she commands, attempting to relax my body in the grip of the cold chair. Sia picks a pair of scissors up off the tray, and I can't help flinching as she brings them close to the back of my head. The monitor on my wrist glows a brighter, more intense shade of blue. Oh for founders' sake; get a grip, Eve. There is slight pressure and a snipping noise, and a moment later a chunk of long, dark hair spirals to the ground. I am being dissected; my shell is finally disintegrating, falling apart at the seams.

'And what did you do once you left the incubation chambers?'

Her voice is calm, soothing, and I appreciate that she is trying to keep me distracted from what is about to take place. I suppose she must perform these types of procedures all the time – when things go wrong.

'I went to the harvest ceremony.' I think for a moment. 'No, wait. First I went back to Block A.'

Sia returns the scissors to the trolley and they clink lightly against the other instruments. Then she picks up another tool, and I turn my head slightly to make out some sort of shaver.

She places a hand on the top of my skull, positioning my head so that I am facing forwards again. 'Tell me about it.'

The buzz of the device reverberates throughout my body and I clench my eyes tightly shut, bringing to mind the unit in Block A where I live with my brother and guardians. The room is small, with just enough space to fit two pods side by side, and a narrow walkway in the middle. My brother's pod sits below mine - eight feet of sleek white metal - and our guardians' pods cling to the wall opposite. Little dark plants cover most of the roof, as well as

all of the available wall space; to generate the maximum number of oxy-creds, of course.

‘I went to my room and lay in the base of my pod for a while, trying to read some of the set texts for the next cycle.’

Sia presses the shaver firmly against the back of my head. It pinches my skin slightly and I grit my teeth.

‘Trying?’ repeats Sia. ‘You were worried, then? About the harvest?’

I know what she is hinting at – that perhaps there were already signs of what was about to happen. That I should have noticed and been prepared for the incident.

‘No,’ I say with certainty. ‘My monitor was blue as always. I was just distracted.’

I recall practising my breathing and feeling the whoosh of blood pumping steadily through my veins, the blue glow of my monitor reflecting dully off the sides of my pod. No, there was never any hint of what was about to occur. ‘Luc was always at the top of the leaderboard, you see. There was no cause for concern.’

‘Of course.’

The sound of the shaver ceases abruptly, and the room plunges into silence. I partially rouse from my memories but my body feels heavy, pulled down by the effects of the medicine. Reaching one hand up to the back of my head, I feel a small bald section and this brings me more fully back into the present.

‘You’ve never felt any strong emotions before, then?’ Sia replaces the tool on the tray and walks around so that she is standing directly before me. The question is unnecessary; she has access to all of my data on the machine beside her.

‘Never.’

Her eyes are a deep blue colour, similar to my own, but I get the uncomfortable feeling that she doesn’t blink enough and I avert my gaze. Sighing, Sia pulls the straps on the armrests over my forearms and fastens them tightly. I try to tell myself that I simply feel secure, and not trapped at all. It doesn’t seem to be working, so I step outside my body and pretend that this isn’t happening to me, but to somebody else, to another girl who went *old world* crazy and redlined this morning. It’s not me. Not Eve. Eve would never lose control like that.

Detaching myself from the world around me is a strategy that has served me well in the past to cope with unpleasant events. Until this morning, of course.

‘Tilt your head back.’

I relax into the seat and Sia does the straps up so that my head is pulled firmly against the headrest.

‘What did you do once you left Block A?’

I watch as though I am a bystander, disconnected from what is occurring to the fragile shell pinned to the chair. After lunch... What did I do after lunch?

Oh.

How could I forget? It must be the effects of the drink, blurring my memories together and making the events of the morning easier to cope with.

'I went to the harvest ceremony.'

Sia attaches a pale, sticky pad to each of my temples, and I feel them adhere to my skin in an abstract way. Then she inserts two wires into each pad and connects them to the dark machine squatting beside me. I try to raise my hand to my temple, but of course I can't – my arms are firmly fastened to the chair.

My pulse begins to quicken, and Sia notices the way the monitor on my wrist is pulsing with more intensity. For founders' sake.

'Another drink?'

'Yes, please.'

She moves across the room to the small basin in the corner and fills a glass with water. I concentrate on every little movement that Sia makes; focusing on the minutiae helps me ignore the weightier thoughts that are pressing against my consciousness, insisting that I entertain them. She tears open another one of the little packets and the ripping sound is grating in the otherwise silent room. Pouring the contents of the sachet into the cup, she stirs it quickly with a spoon until the powder dissolves. The high-pitched *ting* of the spoon against the glass makes me grimace.

'You do understand why this procedure is important, don't you?' she asks, without looking at me.

I try to nod, but then remember the strap around my forehead, pinning me against the chair.

'I know.' My voice sounds strange, like it is coming from somebody else's mouth. I clear my throat. 'I understand why it is vital to have this operation. I am... thankful for the overseers' swift actions.'

I am well aware of what is at stake. If I don't have the memrase procedure then I am at risk of experiencing further unwanted emotions and plummeting to the bottom of the leaderboard. Like most teenagers in Eridu, I am willing to do just about anything to ensure that this doesn't occur.

Bringing the glass across to me, Sia holds it against my lips. The sickly smell of the liquid makes me a little nauseous, but I crave the release it offers. When she finally pulls the cup away, a numb sensation travels from my lips down into my stomach.

Sia picks something up from the tray but I can't see what it is from this position. Moving around behind me, she places a hand lightly on my shoulder.

‘Tell me about the harvest.’

*Do not rely on your own assumptions, but trust in the founders and those who walk in the light of their vision. It is only by surrendering completely to the will of the creators that we will be free to rebuild society – the right way, this time.*

*Book of Eridu*

## II

The format of the harvest ceremony was the same as always. In my mind, I see the screen descending from the ceiling of the auditorium and flickering into life. I remember the images of the past; pictures of war, and famine, and disease; all things that no longer exist. At least, not down here in Eridu. I have seen it all before, numerous times, and so I easily distanced myself from the grim history of humankind depicted before me.

‘I spent most of it thinking about Luc.’

‘Mmm, in what way?’

Something cool and wet is pressed against the skin on the back of my head, and an acrid smell fills my nostrils. I close my eyes and I can see the stage in front of me, flanked by dark blue curtains.

‘Just wondering what he was thinking of. What he would be wearing.’ I knew with almost complete certainty that my brother would emerge from behind the curtains dressed in the red of one of the premium positions. An overseer or an architect, that’s what those at the top of the leaderboard were always harvested for.

When Sia slits the skin, I can feel only pressure. Thanks to the medicine, there is no sting of pain – just the sensation of my skin silently splitting apart, and something wet being mopped from the back of my head.

‘So were you surprised when Luc wasn’t harvested for a premium occupation?’

I fall back into my body, remembering the way my monitor had pulsed with a bright blue light.

‘A little.’

‘Strong emotions are dangerous, Eve.’

‘I know.’ Of course, a little surprise wasn’t the problem. A little surprise might cause your guardian to frown at you, but that was all. Unfortunately, this morning, for the first time in my life, I had felt more than just a little surprise.

When those harvested for the lesser positions had walked out onto the stage, my gaze had shifted from one face to the next, searching for my brother’s strong jaw and furrowed brow. And then I had looked again, thinking that perhaps my eyes had jumped too quickly from one blue-clad

figure to another. That maybe he was standing behind another student and I had simply missed him.

At first, I had felt only mild confusion.

But when Luc's name had appeared on the list of the culled, the confusion had turned into a different emotion; something deep and raw. The walls of the auditorium were closing in on me and I was falling down, down into the abyss. I had tried breathing deeply – *in for six, hold for six, out for six*, as I had been taught at the institute – but the oxygen pumps mustn't have been working at full capacity because I still felt like I needed more air. I tried to step outside my body, but for once I felt anchored to this shell of flesh and nerve endings. I had watched, helpless, as my monitor transitioned from blue, to amber, to crimson in less time than it takes to say 'infraction.'

It's fascinating, really, how emotions work; at least, it is once you are on the other side. From my classes, I knew about the increase in heart rate and blood pressure and the influx of hormones. But I never realised that experiencing a strong emotion could feel so physically painful as well. The professors didn't tell me about that part of it.

'I want you to think about your brother.'

I'm going to throw up. 'I don't think I want to do this.' I try to move, but I am firmly adhered to the chair. My heart thumps beneath my ribcage, and although I don't look at the monitor on my wrist I am certain of how it must appear.

'Calm down, Eve. This is for the best. You don't want to end up like your brother, do you?'

I stop struggling. She's right.

'Think about Luc.'

I bring him to the forefront of my mind. His dark hair and brown eyes, always looking so serious until he looked at me. The machine beside me whirrs to life and Sia inserts her flexi-screen into a holder in the base. It pulses with an array of different colours.

'Good, keep thinking of him, Eve. I want your strongest memory of him.'

My strongest memory... What would that be? Perhaps when we were young, walking along the tunnels that criss-cross Eridu and sharing our secrets. Or Luc tucking me into my pod at night, telling me stories of imaginary worlds with clouds, and wind, and rain.

'That's good, Eve. Keep him right there with you.'

I hear a small device turn on, making a high-pitched whine, and Sia's hand rests on my shoulder to steady herself, or perhaps it is meant to comfort me. I close my eyes. I feel numb. This is it, and I know it's for the best. No more Luc. No more memories means no more threat of feelings. To be content is to be free.

The instrument touches the back of my head and the whine increases in pitch. My eyes prickle, and a single disobedient tear runs down my cheek. Of course, I can't wipe it away, and I taste the saltiness as it reaches the corner of my mouth and slips silently between my lips. When was the last time I cried? In my first few cycles at the institute, perhaps, when I was still unranked. Or maybe earlier, at the preschool, before I even received a monitor. There is no chance of it being more recent than that.

The vibration from the saw ricochets through my head and around my body, and I am thankful for the straps holding me still so the medic can do her job. This shell is not me, of course; not really. I know all about the distinction between body and essence, and I am well aware that the procedure is necessary if I wish to succeed in the next harvest. I try to relax and let the effects of the drink distort the whine and buzz of the small machine.

I sense, rather than hear, somebody else enter the room, and Sia pulls the saw away from my head. I open my eyes and see a blur of red. Strange. Red is not a common colour to see, except at the big events, and it makes no sense for an architect or an overseer to be here for such a routine procedure.

The sound of the saw cuts off, and then there is silence. I feel pressure on the back of my head, and then Sia walks around to where I can see her again. She peers into my face and I try to focus, but her features all blur together.

'I'm sorry, Eve,' she says, and the world stops spinning. I see her lips tighten. 'Equipment failure.'

At first, I think Sia is just going to get another tool – one that's working – but a moment later she loosens the straps around my head and arms. I want to tell her that she can't stop now; that after redlining once I'm worried that I'm going to do it again, tomorrow – when it really counts. My attempts to speak are thwarted by the inebriating effects of the medicine, and my mouth won't form the words. Perhaps she is just moving me to another room so that the surgery can continue. Perhaps there is a satisfactory explanation for why she is pulling the pads off my temples, leaving the thin skin tingling in the aftermath.

But if there is a reason, she doesn't tell me, and the edges of my vision grow dark. I try to talk again, but there is no use fighting the medicine, so I give up, surrendering completely as Sia helps me into a wheelchair. I settle into the seat and fall immediately into a murky oblivion.

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