

MELANIE TAYS

SANCTUARY

A WALL OF FIRE COMPANION NOVELLA



Sanctuary

Wall of Fire Series Companion Novella

By Melanie Tays

Sanctuary is a companion story to the
Wall of Fire Series by Melanie Tays



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Chapter 1

I stand in a meadow of fragrant flowers at the edge of Sanctuary, the city where I've lived all my life, and look out into the beyond. I press my hand to the barrier field that encapsulates us in a Safe Dome, a protection from the ravaged and deadly world outside. Though the barrier is utterly impenetrable, we can see right through it, like a window into another universe. Inside Sanctuary, the world is beautiful and clean and vibrant. Outside, it is bleak and brown and barren.

I like to come here to the meeting place of these two disparate worlds. For some reason, the contrast helps me think. Maybe it's the different perspective or the realization that life doesn't have to be the perfect, unchanging drone of days that Sanctuary provides.

The eight o'clock bells chime, tearing me from my reverie, and I take off running—late again. Honestly, of all days, why did I have to let time get away from me today?

I race through the paved streets, past the windows covered in beautiful lace curtains, and between the cars shepherding people to and fro. I don't even pause along the way to take a flyer from Toren. He's on his usual street corner, decrying one of the Governor's imagined crimes. Last week, he was trying to convince us that the Withers—the virus that nearly destroyed the world and drove the survivors into Safe Domes

like this one—never really existed in the first place. My mother, who watched her own parents die a gruesome death from the disease, had some choice words for him over that one. Even though the things he says are always preposterous, it's the best entertainment around, so I'm disappointed I didn't have time to stop and see what he's going on about this time.

I enter the school building, gasping for breath, and slink into my seat at the back of the classroom. At least this is the last day I'll have to come here. After I present my final project this afternoon, my school education will be officially complete.

Maxel spares only a single disapproving glance for me, then turns back to the board. He's not very tall, so his entire lecture is neatly printed across the bottom half of the transparent, electronic writing surface. I've suggested that he have the board moved lower, but he dismissed my proposal, claiming it would disturb the uniformity of the city.

I take out my tablet so I can follow along with today's lesson. The screen flickers repeatedly when I turn it on. I tap it, and the glitching stops. I must have messed up something when I was tweaking the programming last night. I'll have to take a look at it later.

I set the tablet on the desk, and before long I'm mindlessly weaving a lock of my hair into an intricate braid. It's a habit I picked up years ago—something I did to increase my fine motor control, pretending that the tiny golden strands were wires in a piece of delicate machinery. I do it without thinking now.

I truly am trying to concentrate on the lesson, but it's really difficult to make myself care about the harvest rotation pattern. It seems like a lot of useless information for anyone

who isn't assigned to be a harvester. I can't imagine I'll be assigned to harvest crops. That's usually a job for people much stronger than I am, so this is pointless information for me to waste brain cells on.

Tomorrow, I'll receive my Duty—the job that will be my responsibility to perform to benefit the continuation of Sanctuary and its inhabitants. This is essential, considering we're quite possibly all that remains of humanity on this planet.

In addition to harvester, I can think of a long list of Duties I'm unlikely to be assigned. Things like caregiver, rules monitor, and teacher are definitely out. Basically, anything that requires me to follow a prescribed set of tasks day after day is pretty much out. The problem is, in order to survive, Sanctuary is built on rules, structure, and above all, predictability. So where does that leave me?

I don't know, but the Governor will find a place for me. That's the nice thing about living in Sanctuary: everything has a place and a purpose, even if it isn't always obvious at first. Tomorrow, I'll finally find out what my perfect yet not-so-obvious place is.

Something hits the back of my head, and I turn to find a wadded piece of paper on the floor behind me. I wait until Maxel is busy scribbling on the board before retrieving it, and I stare down at Toren's latest publication.

The Governor Is Dead, the headline reads. The article goes on to claim that the Governor, Willard Hydes, hasn't been seen in public for nearly two months. If he were merely ill, we would have been notified. The only explanation, Toren claims, is that the Governor was murdered by someone who has taken over Sanctuary and is secretly running things in the

name of Governor Hydes.

An involuntary laugh escapes my lips. I stifle it quickly, but not before drawing Maxel's attention.

He walks to my desk and rips the paper from my hand. "This is a room for learning truths, Mara," he chides me. And then to the class at large, he adds, waving the flyer in the air, "I don't ever want to see this rubbish in this room or in your hands again. Are we understood?"

The class murmurs assent, and he returns to the pointless lecture.

It isn't until after the break for lunch that we finally get to matters of actual relevance—the presentation of our final projects. This last assignment in our schooling consists of doing something to demonstrate both our ability and willingness to help build and strengthen Sanctuary.

Mataya goes first, and I'm not one bit surprised that she spent thirty hours helping to cook in the Dining Hall. That might explain why the food has been so bland lately. All the flavor was probably drowned out by her complete and utter lack of personality.

"Excellent work," Maxel praises, and I roll my eyes.

The next presentation is equally unimpressive. Jaxon spent the last three weeks carving a statue that can be displayed in the Main Square to help "beautify" the city—as though we don't have enough pretty trinkets around.

Liema, Porter, and Hollen worked together to create a dramatic performance that will be performed in the Main Square next week—probably right next to Jaxon's statue.

Several other classmates spent hours helping to clean up the park, replant flowers, or pick up litter throughout the city.

It's all fine, but not very original. What kind of lasting

impact will any of that have?

Then Maxel announces, “Mara Oborn.”

I’m the very last to present my project, which is fine with me. I grab my tablet, hoping it’s not going to be glitchy during my presentation, and walk to the front of the class. I’m confident my presentation is going to make all the little beautification, entertainment, and community service projects look like child’s play.

“I wanted to do something that could make a sustained difference and lighten the workload while also increasing efficiency and safety,” I begin.

“Oh, help us! What’s going to explode this time?” Jaxon exclaims, eliciting snickers from around the room.

I ignore the all-too-expected jibe. I’ve gotten comments like this ever since I built a simple robot to pick grain from the stalks, and it accidentally caught fire and burned down half a field. I’ll admit that was bad, but it was over five years ago. Honestly, I was only twelve at the time. If they would have let me try again, I could have fixed the problem, and the bot would have saved hundreds of hours of work every season. But I was told that the current process works perfectly, and I was forced to abandon the project.

Maxel hushes the room while I load up my program on the tablet. I flip the screen around so that everyone can see the glowing dots spread across the screen. Each dot represents the bio-signature of a person in the vicinity of the tablet’s scanner. There are fewer dots than I would have expected, so there must be some bugs to work out still, but I can’t worry about that now.

“What’s one of the biggest problems we face here in Sanctuary?” I ask. My question is met with blank stares.

“People getting lost in the fields,” I say, answering my own question. “The fields are so large, and everything looks the same, so it’s easy to lose your way. Now, this may not be a huge problem for adults who know how to follow the paths to the outer edges, but what about kids?”

Even though, strictly speaking, kids aren’t permitted to play in the fields, many do. Every few months, dozens of people will sweep a field to find a lost toddler who wandered in and couldn’t find their way out.

“It’s a long and tedious process to sweep an entire field, with dozens of work hours lost.” I have the class’s attention, despite a few random snickers. No one can deny that this is a problem. Just last week, many of us in the room were called out to sweep the east field for a two-year-old boy named Hunter. While he was lost in the field, he ate so much dirt that he ended up needing serious medical attention. If we could have found him sooner, it would have saved the boy a lot of trauma and prevented vomit from coating a dozen people’s shoes.

“That’s why I created this bioelectric scanner that will locate anybody within a radius of fifty yards. Just a couple scans from strategic locations could cover an entire field,” I explain.

The room is hushed for a moment as they seem to be deciding what to think. Who can argue that finding lost children faster would be a bad thing?

“It’s a clever idea,” Maxel begins. “But don’t you think that the scanner might interfere with Sanctuary’s main computer? Being a closed system, as we are, we really couldn’t risk introducing any new technologies like this. It’s a delicate balance to maintain. You really have to think about the bigger

picture, Mara,” he says, his tone reproving but calm. In fact, while Maxel might be stern sometimes, he is probably the most even-tempered, consistent person I’ve ever known.

After a brief moment of awkward silence, the room erupts into laughter.

“You always have the dumbest ideas,” someone exclaims from the back of the room, but I don’t bother to take note of who says it. I just hang my head and return to my seat, deflated and ashamed.

Fortunately, any further remarks at my expense are silenced as a voice booms on the city intercom, reaching every building throughout Sanctuary simultaneously. “Attention citizens. There will be a mandatory announcement in the Main Square in one hour.”

And with that, my project is completely forgotten. The buzz and anticipation are too much for Maxel to overcome, and he decides to go ahead and dismiss the class for the day.

The last time a gathering like this was called was nearly two years ago when Governor Hydes revealed plans for the Seasons Park. The park is encircled with trees, and within its boundaries, the weather is varied to mimic the changing seasons of Earth—blistering heat, falling snow, colored leaves—in contrast to the perfectly controlled, spring-like climate of the rest of the city. It doesn’t serve any real purpose, but it’s beautiful and it reminds us of the volatility of the planet outside our shelter.

I wonder if the world will ever be safe for us to venture out into again? I asked my mom this once, years ago. She just shook her head and said, “Why would you ever want to leave Sanctuary? We’ve built paradise. All of human history is filled with people striving to achieve what we have here.” I knew I

could never make her see what I see through the barrier field—possibilities—and so I never asked again.

Chapter 2

An hour later, I stand in the Main Square next to my parents. There are over ten thousand people in Sanctuary, so gatherings like this are crowded, and I can't escape a few accidental elbows to my ribs. We stand facing the Governor's House, which is constructed like a tall tower. Announcements like this will be made from the very top, where everyone in the surrounding area will be able to see and hear what's happening.

I couldn't care less about what useless project the city is going to take on next, but at least this gathering means I can delay disappointing my parents with the news of my final project. I want to make them proud, but everything I do ends up all wrong. I must be fundamentally flawed somehow. I wonder again—or rather, I worry—what Duty the Governor can possibly find for me? Has there ever been anyone in the history of Sanctuary who had *nothing* they could contribute?

On the hour mark exactly, Governor Hydes appears at the top of the tower. Even though I can't see Toren, I can imagine how he's already spinning a new story. Maybe the Governor wasn't murdered, but something nefarious is still happening behind the scenes. I'm sure we'll all hear about it tomorrow.

“Welcome!” the Governor calls, his voice amplified. “I

have an extraordinarily exciting announcement. Humanity has lived in Sanctuary since the Safe Dome was built by the Architect over twenty years ago. Sanctuary was the last of the twelve Safe Domes erected, and as such, is the strongest, finest, and safest refuge for humanity against the disease and savagery that swept the world. For decades, we have dwelt here in perfect peace and prosperity.”

A murmur of confusion and speculation ripples through the crowd.

The Governor is far enough away that I can't see his face clearly, but even so, I feel like something is different about him. Maybe it's in his voice. He's always been a strong and steady leader, but in this moment he's so much more calm and confident than I've ever seen him, as though he's completely at peace with the world. The change is subtle, an elusive, indefinable something, but I feel certain that it's there. Whatever he's about to announce must explain his absence from the public for the last few months. He must have been busy making preparations. But I wonder if it also explains the change in his demeanor.

“It's with great hope for humanity, and our future, that I announce a new test program to begin sending explorers out beyond the barrier field, into the untamed world.” The Governor pauses, correctly anticipating the effect his words will have on us.

The crowd erupts into a cacophony of noise—everything from cheers to screams and cries. I watch one woman actually faint, sending the people around her stumbling to make room for her collapsing form.

It takes a minute for this to sink in.

We are leaving Sanctuary!

It seems too impossible to be true. For all my life, this has been all there was—all that any of us ever expected there to ever be. And now, Governor Hydes is telling us that some of us can venture out and explore the real world?

I listen, rapt, as he goes on.

“Beginning tomorrow, anyone who is not completely and utterly satisfied with their life here in Sanctuary is welcome to apply to join the Exploration Program. Only a very few elite will be selected, though. I am quite confident that anyone who undergoes the selection process will benefit immensely, even if it is ultimately decided that they should remain in Sanctuary. There are only three requirements.” I pay strict attention, hopeful to measure up. “You must have completed your schooling.” *Check.* “You must be single with no children. We wouldn’t want to break up families if you are chosen to become an explorer.” *Check.* “And you must accept that leaving Sanctuary for this mission means you will never return.”

My stomach drops.

* * *

I sit on the ground with my back against a tree. Fragile snowflakes drift down, melting on my hands and nose and cheeks. I’m sweating, despite the cold. How can I make such an impossible decision?

Footsteps crackle in the snow.

“I thought you’d be at the edge.”

I don’t have to look to know who it is. I’d know that voice anywhere—maybe even better than I know my own voice—but I look anyway. Aiken is walking toward me, an uncertain

smile on his face, the sharp lines of his cheeks and jaw accentuated by worry.

“I thought I needed to cool off,” I mutter. “Not that it’s doing much good. The snow’s already done falling.” Each season only lasts one hour in the Seasons Park, so I know it’s going to start warming soon.

He slides down and nudges me to scoot over, making room for him to lean against the rough bark of the tree next to me. I’ve lived next door to Aiken all my life, and he has been my best friend ever since I was six and he was seven—when we finally decided it was more fun to play together than to lob spit wads at each other across the fence.

He reaches over and catches a few wisps of my hair with his fingers. “In the snow, your hair looks almost white.”

I twist my head away, freeing the strands of hair. Even without snowflakes sprinkled across my hair, the shade is a lighter blond than almost anyone else’s I’ve ever seen—just one more marker of the fact that I don’t belong here.

“So, big day tomorrow,” he says.

I turn to him, wide-eyed. I haven’t decided anything for sure.

“You get your Duty,” he clarifies, and I realize he’s not talking about the Exploration Program at all.

“Oh, yeah,” I mutter. I had completely forgotten about that.

“I heard about your presentation,” he says simply, no judgment, no disappointment.

I lean forward and cover my face, fighting tears.

He rubs gentle circles on my back. “It’ll get better, you know.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” I reply, harsher than I intend.

“Aiken, you understand things here. And people understand you. You’re everything that Sanctuary was designed for. You follow all the rules and do everything perfectly, and it’s easy for you. It’s just never been that way for me.”

“Don’t go,” he pleads, and the sorrow in his voice is like a vise around my chest, crushing.

“Aiken, I don’t belong here. Maybe I belong out there.”

“What about your parents?”

“They’ll be fine.”

He fixes me with a disbelieving stare.

“They will be,” I insist. “I mean, they’ll be sad if I’m chosen to go, but I bet they’ll be approved to have another child.”

The population of Sanctuary is maintained in perfect balance. When someone dies, a couple is approved to have a new baby. I can only assume the same would be true in the case of the explorers leaving the city. Governor Hydes said that explorers won’t come back, so it only makes sense that they’ll be replaced in the population. I know my parents have always hoped to someday be allowed another child, so this is kind of nice for them, I tell myself.

“Mara...” he starts to say, but can’t quite get the words out.

I sigh. “Don’t be stupid, Aiken. Let’s face it. I screw up everything I try, so the odds are pretty high that I won’t be chosen to go in the end. The Governor said that just the training could be beneficial, so what is there to lose, really? Maybe, in the end, I’ll finally learn how to fit in here.”

“I don’t want you to change,” he says, almost a whisper. “I want you to stay here, and stay Mara.” He won’t meet my gaze.

And I'm suddenly so fuming mad that I can hardly see straight. I leap to my feet just to put some distance between us before I lash out at him. "So, you want me to go on screwing everything up for the rest of my life? Is this funny to you, Aiken? You, and the rest of Sanctuary, get a good laugh at my expense?"

"No. I—"

I don't want to hear anything else he has to say right now. "You don't get what life is like for me. You're perfect. When have you ever made a mistake, or been late to something, or broken protocol? You've got the perfect face and perfect life, and you belong here. You fit in here. I don't. And you'll never understand what that's like!"

I turn and walk away, stomping through the green grass, all traces of snow evaporated.

He calls after me, but I don't stop.

A cool spring shower starts to fall. I wish that the weather here was capable of lightning. I've read that bolts of lightning accompany rain in the real world. If we had it here, it could strike Aiken right now, and he would understand how furious he's made me.

Chapter 3

The agitation I felt when I left Aiken yesterday has shifted from a sharp knife to a stifling blanket of generalized anxiety. Suffering through another confrontation with my parents last night at dinner didn't help anything. Mom was completely against me going, while Dad said he thought it was a good idea. The sad thing is that it was obvious he didn't actually think I could succeed, only that the process would 'fix' me somehow. I'm not sure which of their arguments hurt worse.

People tell me that they want me to stay, but not one person can give me a single reason why I belong here. And the reason for that is obvious—I don't.

The only concession I agreed to was that I would wait and find out what Duty I've been assigned before making a final decision.

Anxiously, I wait for the message to arrive on my screen. I stare at my tablet—all traces of the glitch repaired—and touch the screen every few minutes to keep it from powering off.

Ding.

Finally, I hear the sound signaling that I have a message. Nervously, I tap it and read the words that appear. The message is short and concise.

Mara Oborn,

Based on an assessment of your aptitude, you are assigned to help preserve the security and sanctity of Sanctuary by fulfilling the Duty of Street Cleaner.

Even though I hadn't had a clue what Duty I could possibly be assigned, this one still blindsides me completely. Mom and Dad are already at work, so there's no one to hold me as I sink to the floor and melt into despair. Is that really all I can contribute? Walking around the city each day picking up trash, moving rocks back to their proper places, dusting the benches lining the paths? And I'm sure if I were to build something that could do the work of ten street cleaners, I would be reprimanded and told not to upset the delicate and perfect system.

My eyes shed tears until they run dry, and still, my body convulses in anguish. Even though I was prepared to enter the Exploration Program, even though I told myself and everyone else that I don't belong in Sanctuary, I realize now that a part of me had held out hope—foolish as it might have been—that the Governor would see something of value in me that I couldn't see in myself.

I wipe my eyes and sit up, inhaling and exhaling the clean, filtered air. I see now how stupid and futile that hope was. I hate myself for being surprised by this. But it doesn't matter, because the Governor already gave me a chance to do something else—something real.

Something important.

Instead of grieving my failure and losses, I let my mind wander to the outside, beyond the barrier field. I could be part of the group that searches for the remnants of humankind.

Has anyone survived the Withers? What's happened to the inhabitants of the other eleven Safe Domes? I can be part of the group that begins to spread humanity across planet Earth again. They'll need someone like me—someone who can see how things could be better than they currently are. It doesn't take long before I'm truly excited about the prospects that this presents.

* * *

The Exploration Program is being held at the Governor's House, which is where a lot of official business takes place. When I arrive, I'm greeted by a cheery, round-faced woman who introduces herself as Hattie. I've seen her around before, always on city errands. She directs me to a small, sterile room where a man in a white coat is waiting.

"Have a seat," he says, gesturing to the only chair—a high-backed metal seat that can be adjusted to different angles or laid out flat like a bed.

Nervously, I do as directed. Then the man places a metal contraption on my head with wires that lead back to his computer.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Just taking a quick brain scan," he replies, flipping a switch.

I sit there with the device humming on my head, wondering if this will finally reveal what's wrong with me. Then the sound stops, and the man removes it from my head without another word. I want to ask how it turned out, but I'm afraid of what he might tell me, so I just keep quiet.

Hattie returns for me and ushers me into a sitting room

with big, crimson, plush armchairs. A dozen other people occupy the room, all in their own comfy chairs. I don't recognize all of them, but the ones I do know make me second-guess my decision to come here.

Seated next to me is a boy from my class named Finch. He probably got an even worse Duty assignment than I did, considering he has a propensity for stealing things that's landed him in real trouble numerous times.

Across the room, I recognize a girl a few years older than me named Jeanie. She's the artist who painted the murals in the Animal Walk. I can't imagine why she wouldn't be happy here in Sanctuary. Everyone praises her work all the time. Maybe she's hoping to see real animals. I wonder how closely they'll resemble her painting—if there are any real animals left.

And most surprisingly, Toren is here. I think that's what gives me the most pause—like maybe this program is just for the crazies of the city. But I guess I already knew that, and it doesn't matter.

Governor Hydes said that most people wouldn't be chosen to go on the expedition anyway. Those chosen will be the ones who have proven they can handle the task. It's not my job to decide who that is. I just need to do my best to prove that I'm one of those people—the ones who can make it beyond the shelter of Sanctuary.

"I'm sending a questionnaire to your tablet," Hattie informs me. "Just answer all the questions honestly."

I sit in the strained and heavy silence, answering question after question as the others in the room do the same. At first, the questions are simple and straightforward. Things like my name, age, height, and health history make perfect sense. Of course, they need these basic details about me. But then they

get trickier.

I take a full ten minutes pondering a question about which of my qualities make me suited to being an explorer. I can think of lots of qualities—things like my ability to solve problems in creative ways, to see things that others don't, and being willing to try things that have never been done before. But aren't those the very aspects of my character that make me such a misfit, capable of nothing more than collecting garbage for the rest of my life?

I've messed up my life here in Sanctuary. I don't want to ruin my chances for the rest of the world as well. I have to be careful. I need to say and do just the right things to ensure I'll be chosen. Can't I do that for just a little while? How long can the training last—a week? A month? I can play the perfect part for that long.

So I answer the question with a carefully crafted explanation of my love of rules and procedures. I detail how I will ensure the expedition meets all its goals and stays within the defined guidelines. I detail my love of teamwork. I start to say that I'm anxious to spread the precise standards of perfection practiced in Sanctuary to whoever we find in the outside world, but then I taste bile in the back of my throat, and I just can't bring myself to go that far.

I'm still working on the questions when Hattie brings me lunch, and I'm surprised that so much time has passed. Occasionally, more participants join us and begin the same process. Most people finish faster than I do. I suppose they don't have to work quite so hard to craft the perfect responses.

Its mid-afternoon when I finally finish, eyes bleary and head pounding from so much mental gymnastics. I just want

to go home. I wonder exactly how my parents are going to react when I tell them what I've done. I know they didn't want me to join the Exploration Program, but surely they'll be able to see it's what's best for me—especially considering my Duty assignment.

And Aiken. Well, I'm not talking to him, so I guess I won't get to find out what he has to say about it.

"Hattie, I completed the questions," I inform her. "Do I come back here every day? And what time am I supposed to be in?"

"Oh, don't worry about the schedule. You'll be guided through every step of the process. I'll just take you to your room now, and someone will come for you in the morning when it's time to get started," she explains, turning to walk with the clear expectation that I'll follow.

"What?" I exclaim. "No, I can't stay here. I was planning on going home. My parents don't even know I'm here."

"That's not a problem," she assures me. "You've completed school, so their approval isn't required anymore."

"No," I protest. "That's not the issue. I just think I should tell them in person what's happening. And I would feel much more comfortable sleeping in my own room."

She shakes her head. "No, I'm sorry. It's vital to the success of the program that the participants be secluded during the evaluation time. If it turns out that you're not chosen to be an explorer, then you will be able to return home at the completion of the program." She says it all so matter-of-fact, so detached.

"And if I am chosen?"

She frowns. "Most people won't be chosen."

"But if I am...then when do I see my parents and friends

again?”

“It’s a necessary sacrifice for the success of the program,”
is all she says, which I interpret to mean *never*.

Chapter 4

Even though the bed I'm given is every bit as comfortable as my own at home, I can't help feeling like the blankets and satin sheets are trying to smother me. I don't know what to hope for anymore. If I'm chosen to go and explore beyond the Safe Dome, I'll never see my parents again. Aiken won't even know that I'm giving him the silent treatment. But if I do see them again, it will mean I've failed—again. There's really no good outcome.

How did I get myself into this?

Soft morning light streams through my window when a rapping comes at the door. I'm already awake, unsure if I've actually slept at all.

"Time to get up," Hattie calls to me through the door.

"Okay," I call back.

"I'll be back to take you to breakfast shortly," she adds, and then I hear the clicking of her footsteps receding.

I pull myself up, grateful to get on with things and distract myself from the mess that is my life. Everything I need has been provided for me. Even the clothes are exactly my size and preference—simple designs in bright colors. I want for nothing, except for the people I'm not allowed to see.

It doesn't take me long to get ready for the day. While I wait for Hattie's return, I notice a panel on the wall, and I

can't resist the chance to take a look. Every building has at least one of these. I wonder if this building has one in every room. It's a pretty standard interface to the Sanctuary main computer, though I notice a few extra buttons and switches that don't come on the models in most of our homes. It's used for everything from sending and receiving messages to controlling the lights and temperature.

My fingertips itch at the thought of testing out the new controls, but I decide that might not be a good idea. I've never forgotten how livid Mom was a few years ago when she found out that I'd used our wall panel to tap into Sanctuary's cameras. It's not like I was spying on people—even though I could have. I just used them to see when Aiken left his house so we could get the timing just right for his surprise birthday party. Still, Mom had gone completely insane and made me swear that I'd never hack a panel again.

The steady rapping comes again at the door.

“Are you ready?” Hattie calls to me.

I open the door, and she's standing in the hallway with a dozen people behind her. I recognize most of them from yesterday when we sat revealing everything about ourselves that could possibly be ascertained from written questions, so I assume these are all program participants. I join the group, shutting my door behind me.

“I'll take you all to the dining room for breakfast now. There is already another group there. Twenty-three participants in all. A very promising turnout,” Hattie informs us.

The halls are immaculate with red carpets, sparkling chandeliers, paintings, and statues. But it's not like the Governor lives any better than the rest of Sanctuary. It's

beautiful everywhere. We have everything people could ever want or need. For a moment, I wonder if I'm crazy—if all of us here are crazy—to even consider leaving.

But there's something more to life than just having all the things you could want. There's an indescribable yearning to be more than you ever were. As much as it pains me, I just can't manage that here. So maybe I can become something more somewhere else.

I walk into the dining room and something feels different immediately, like rays of sunshine in the Seasons Park breaking through clouds in the springtime. I look around for the source of the sensation. And then I see him, and my heart leaps. Perhaps the lack of sleep last night is getting to me and I'm seeing things because it's not possible that he's here.

But then Aiken has scooped me up in his arms and is twirling me around. I'm so happy and so relieved to see him that I completely forget I was mad at him. I just hold onto him like my life—and maybe my sanity—depends on it.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. “I thought only Exploration Program participants were allowed here. They told me I couldn't see anyone until it was over, and only if I didn't pass.”

His warm eyes are fixed on mine. We're drawing stares from people around us, but he doesn't seem bothered by it, and neither am I.

“I am a participant. I joined yesterday, after news reached your parents—and then my parents—that you'd joined, and that the participants weren't allowed to come home,” he explains.

I try to get out words, but all I manage are a few awkward and indecipherable syllables. I'm speechless. Joining the

program means so many things that just don't make sense—not for Aiken. He's never wanted to leave Sanctuary. He's always been so content here. He fits in. He does everything right. And he loves his Duty. Even though the thought of watching the barrier field generators for any irregularities all day long sounds dreadful to me, he loves it.

“But, why?” I finally manage to ask.

He gives me a long, appraising look like the answer is obvious. But when I just stare back, waiting and confused, he looks away with a sigh of what seems like frustration. “Let's eat,” is all he says.

I follow him to a table, watching his back as we walk, and the whole thing just feels wrong. I'm quiet as we load our plates with all our favorite foods—puddings and tarts, and the fruit salad with the tiny cherries. All the while, the mystery of Aiken's presence here needles at me. My fingers work anxiously through my hair. At one point, I'm so distracted and bothered that I forget I'm holding a berry tart and end up smearing my hair with crumbs and jam, which I surreptitiously wipe away before anyone can see.

It takes me most of the meal before my sluggish mind finally puts the pieces together. When they finally click, my hand involuntarily tenses in my hair, and I accidentally rip out a dozen strands. I lean over to Aiken so I can speak without being overheard. He turns and smiles at me, which only makes things worse. I'm so mad I can't see clearly; the edges of everything bleed into fog. “I don't need you to save me,” I hiss at him.

His smile fades, a crease forming at the center of his brow. “Huh?”

“Don't play dumb with me. You didn't think I could make

it on my own, so you thought you'd sweep in here and save Mara from screwing things up again, huh? Was it all your idea, or did my parents put you up to it?"

He makes several false starts at an answer—opening and closing his mouth repeatedly as though he's chomping on a big wad of gum. Before he can get anything coherent out, Hattie is back to guide us to the next phase. I leave a meaningful distance between myself and Aiken as Hattie shepherds us back to the room with the plush armchairs. The chairs have been rearranged into groups of two.

People begin choosing seats. I'm afraid for a moment that Aiken will try to sit next to me, and I don't want to talk to him right now. Fortunately, I'm spared the necessity of fending him off when Hattie claps her hands loudly for our attention and then announces that we are to leave one seat in each pair empty.

I wonder what this is all about. Aiken claims a chair in the set closest to mine and keeps his eyes locked on me, filled with something like regret.

I look away. If he regrets his decision to come, that's his own fault, not mine.

"You're all about to meet your partners," Hattie informs us. "They want to really get to know you—to really understand you. That is the key to the success of the program."

Hattie opens the door, and people start to file in. We've clearly been pre-assigned specific partners, because the newcomers meander around the room, looking at our faces and only claiming a seat when they've found their specific mark. Girls are matched with girls, boys with boys.

It seems strange that I don't recognize any of these

people, even though many of them appear to be pretty close to my own age, so I should know them from school. Even the program participants that I don't know well are recognizable as faces I've seen around the city. But these new people are all total strangers to me, and I wonder how that can even be possible in a place like Sanctuary—a closed system where no one comes or goes.

The girl who takes the seat next to me is wearing a simple white dress. She has a face that's not particularly pretty or ugly. In fact, it's a bit startling and disconcerting just exactly how average she looks. I try not to stare as she introduces herself.

"Hello, I'm Darla. I will be your partner throughout this process."

"Hi, I'm Mara Oborn," I say.

"Yes, I know. I'm very pleased to meet you." Something is off about the way she speaks, but I can't quite put my finger on what it is.

"So what do we do now?" I ask, unsure.

"Today is just for getting to know each other. We can stay here and talk, or we could go outside."

"Can we go somewhere else in the city?" I ask, hopeful. If she wants to really get to know me, then what better way than meeting my parents?

"Oh, we can't leave the Governor's House, except to go to the gardens," she says sounding genuinely regretful.

I figured as much, but it was worth a try.

I glance around; some people are talking, others are already getting up and walking out with their new friends. Aiken has remained in his seat. I can't see the face of his partner, but it looks like they're already getting along quite

well. Of course, I would expect no less of him.

“Okay, why don’t we go for a walk?” I suggest.

“Where would you like to go?”

“I guess the gardens would be nice. Do you know the way?” At least there, we won’t have many spectators.

Darla stands and takes off walking at a brisk pace. I find myself doing an awkward half-walk, half-jog to keep up.

“Is this pace uncomfortable?” she asks.

“It’s a little fast,” I admit.

She slows as we walk outside. The gardens, as it turns out, are located in an atrium at the center of the Governor’s House, so although we’re outdoors, exposed to soft skylight, we’re no freer here than anywhere else in the house.

We walk along a path lined with red and blue flowers. Neither of us speaks, and it isn’t long before the silence becomes oppressive.

“So...” I say, not sure what we’re supposed to be talking about. “What’s this all about? They said we’re partners. Are we going to be working together? I mean, is this some kind of a group test, and we either pass or fail as a team?”

“Oh, no. I’m not being evaluated,” she says. “I’m the one who will be evaluating you.”

I stiffen slightly at this revelation. I wish Hattie would have mentioned that fact. I’ve probably already made about ten mistakes. Should we have stayed in the room? I probably haven’t been very friendly. I shouldn’t have stared at her. And I never should have admitted that I didn’t know where the gardens are, and I shouldn’t have complained that she was walking too fast.

I focus on keeping my breaths coming steady. I don’t want her to know I’m nervous. I should have watched Aiken. He’s

getting everything right, I'm sure of that.

She's watching me, but not saying anything. I guess I'm supposed to lead the conversation, but I'm terrified I'll say the wrong thing and ruin everything. I take a deep breath and try to think of this as an algorithm. If I were trying to program something to, for example, choose me as the ideal explorer, what inputs would I give it?

If Darla's trying to see if I'll be useful on an exploration team, I probably need to show her what I know about the natural world. The gardens seem like a good place to do that. I spend the morning pointing out every species of plant and divulging everything I know about their potential uses for survival.

She listens intently to everything I say, and keeps asking questions about what my opinions of the various plants are—do I like the colors, what scent is my favorite, have I ever grown any plants myself. By the time we're done, I'm sneezing from having inhaled more pollen in one morning than I probably have in my entire lifetime put together. At least all the flowers that the Governor keeps in his garden are fragrant and delicious smelling—none of the stinky weeds that pop up in the fields and constantly have to be culled.

We spend the afternoon in the room with chairs, and she asks me questions about my childhood. I try to be carefully evasive while appearing to be open and forthcoming. It's a difficult line to walk.

As much as possible, I try to turn the questions back on her, but she's got evasion and redirection down to an art. After a full day together, I've learned exactly nothing about Darla and haven't the slightest clue as to what she thinks of me.

Chapter 5

That evening, in the hallway outside the dining room, Toren is waiting. Not for me, specifically, just for anyone who will listen.

“Hey, Mara,” he whispers.

I stop, sure that whatever follows will help me get my mind off my worries, and probably give me a good laugh as well.

“Listen, we have a problem. I knew I needed to keep a close eye on things. I trust the Governor about as much as I trust the Withers not to melt your guts.”

His morbid analogy makes me shudder. “Yes, I think you’ve made that very clear.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m here. Nothing they’ve told us so far is true.” He grabs my arm and pulls me closer, his dark eyes darting around as though he suspects someone is watching.

“What makes you say that?” I can’t resist asking.

“Tell me, have you ever seen any of these evaluators before?” he whispers.

I glance around nervously, worried that one of them might overhear, but I don’t see a single one of them anywhere. They must be having their dinner separate from us.

“No, I can’t say that I do recognize any of them,” I admit

uneasily, and I can't suppress my desire to know what could possibly explain this—even if Toren is bound to have gotten it wrong.

Toren stays silent as two members of the food staff pass by and enter the dining hall. I'm surprised he doesn't try to drag them into the conversation, but maybe he thinks they're in on whatever plot he's sure is going on. "That's because they aren't from Sanctuary," he says when no one else can hear. "Who better to lead a team to the outside than people from beyond the barrier field?"

"You think the Governor has already found people living outside and brought them in?" I ask, incredulous. "That's far too big a risk. What if they have the Withers, or some other new disease? He wouldn't risk infecting Sanctuary."

"It explains where the Governor's been. He disappears from public view for two whole months, and then suddenly he's announcing the most shocking course of action since the inception of Sanctuary. It only makes sense if he was actually the first to leave Sanctuary, and he brought these people back with him," Toren says.

I have to admit—at least to myself—that he makes some interesting points. Who are these people? I thought that maybe I just hadn't been paying attention and hadn't noticed them before, but clearly I'm not the only one who doesn't recognize them. And why would the Governor trust them with our evaluations if they didn't have some kind of special knowledge about what we'll face on the outside?

"It's an intriguing theory," is all I commit to out loud. After all, the fact that Toren is proposing this explanation may be the biggest argument against it. He's always got a theory—and he's always wrong.

But still, something is going on. I need to figure out who Darla really is if I'm to have any hope of impressing her. Anxiety twists my stomach into knots, and I lose my appetite. Instead of going to dinner, I meander down the hallway and soon find myself in the gardens again. I'm so lost in thought that I don't notice the boy next to the tree until it's too late.

"Mara," Aiken says stiffly, standing up straighter. I've never felt this awkward tension between us—not even when we've fought, which we certainly have done plenty of over the years.

"Aiken," I reply, just as aloof.

He shakes his head, frustrated. "Can we talk?"

My first reaction is to refuse, but he looks so tortured that I can't bring myself to say anything except, "Sure."

I follow him along a path to a cozy little bench tucked in the far corner, surrounded by vines, heavy with white flowers. We sit in silence for several minutes. Even though he's the one who asked to talk, he seems to be searching for words and says nothing. I've never seen him so distracted and tongue-tied before.

"Aiken," I finally say, and I feel his penetrating gaze on me, even though I can't bring myself to look at him. "Why did you really join? Just be honest."

"You really don't know?" His voice sounds wounded.

"No," I admit. "I mean, you had a great Duty assignment. You weren't unhappy in Sanctuary. Do you even want to go exploring?"

"Mara." He waits until the tension in the air forces me to look at him. "I came for you."

My breath hitches, like the air has suddenly become thick and laden with something so sweet and fragrant it's hard to

take in. The ground beneath me seems to sway. I bring my hand up and grasp a handful of hair that cascades across my shoulder just to have something to hold on to. “Because you thought I couldn’t make it on my own?” I ask, but with none of the bite of our earlier conversation. I know what he means, but I can’t believe it until I force him to say it out loud.

“I’ve lived twenty yards away from you my whole life, Mara. I’ve seen you every day. I’ve loved you since the very first time you reprogrammed my food dispenser to turn our vegetables into ice cream—I’m still not sure how you managed that, by the way.”

I roll my eyes. It wasn’t really ice cream, but I did rearrange the molecules in the food to turn more of them to sugar. It’s not such a hard trick when you consider how much of all food is made up of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen, which are the components of sugar. Then it’s just a simple matter of freezing it.

“I was happy in Sanctuary, but not for the reasons you probably thought. I was happy because I was with you.” He reaches a hand toward me like he’s about to stroke my cheek, but then lets it fall, leaving me wanting his touch. “And the thought that you could leave and I’d never see you again, or that you might come back changed somehow...” He grabs my shoulders, seemingly unable to restrain himself, and his expression is so intense that I think he’s about to shake me. I’m completely taken off guard when he leans forward and kisses me right on the lips—something he’s never done before.

When he releases me, I feel dizzy and confused. If I said that I’ve never thought about kissing Aiken, I would be lying. But I never guessed that he actually wanted to kiss me, too.

Oh, and the real experience was so much better than I've ever imagined.

“The minute I found out you were gone, and that I might never see you again, I knew I'd never belong in Sanctuary—not without you.”

“But do you even want to be selected to be an explorer?” I can't help asking, guilt welling up like bile in the back of my throat.

“Why not?” he says, his voice vibrant and fearless. “If that's what you want, then let's do it. As long as we're together, we'll have everything we could ever need.”

In that moment, a picture begins to form in my mind, so beautiful and magical that I know I'll never be satisfied with anything less. I see Aiken and me together, building a home in a place far away from here, where life can be full of messy mistakes and boundless possibilities. The image of the setting keeps shifting because I don't know what the world beyond looks like exactly. But I know that out there, somewhere, is where our life is meant to be, and I will do anything for that.

Getting out of Sanctuary with Aiken is the one thing I absolutely must not fail at.

Chapter 6

The next day, the light that streams through my bedroom window seems brighter and richer, somehow. My whole body feels light and charged, as though an electric current is running through me, and the sensation is intoxicating. I feel like I'm in a dream I never want to wake from.

I've sat next to Aiken so many times in my life, shared meals with him, talked and laughed with him. But today, it all feels new and fresh and thrilling. Simple things like the way he takes my hand as we walk, and the casual way we rub shoulders as we sit next to each other, feel completely new.

But unfortunately, this place isn't for romance, it's a testing ground. Shortly after breakfast, we're forced to part. The first order of the day is a battery of extensive medical tests. We are each poked and prodded for samples of our blood, hair, skin, saliva, and anything else they can manage to get into a test tube. Then there's another round of brain scans. That fills the entire morning.

After lunch, Darla meets me and takes me to an empty room about the size of a small bedroom—no windows, no furniture, nothing but the bare white walls, the white carpet floor, and the door through which we just entered.

“What are we going to do here?” I wonder aloud.

“Just a moment,” Darla says, pulling a small tablet from

her pocket and tapping a few buttons. Suddenly, the room transforms from an empty space to a library with thousands of books populating the walls.

“What happened?” I stammer in surprise.

“It’s just a projection,” she explains.

I walk to the nearest shelf and pick up a book. I weigh it in my hands and slide my fingertips over the smooth paper cover. “Not just a projection,” I contradict.

“The projections are wrapped around—”

“Barrier fields!” I say, cutting her off enthusiastically as the answer dawns on me. Of course, if we can make an electromagnetic barrier dome to protect Sanctuary, why couldn’t we use the same technology to make other structures and objects?

I had no idea the technology was so advanced as all this, and the possibilities and ramifications send my mind spinning. With this technology, Sanctuary could have anything and be anything—maybe that’s already how we built such an amazing society from the ashes of post-apocalyptic ruin. But I quickly reel in my thoughts; I need to stay focused on impressing Darla, not on my worthless love of technology.

“Exactly,” she confirms. “I’m surprised you understood so quickly.”

“Oh, just a good guess,” I say, brushing it off. “So, what are we going to do here? Am I supposed to study some of these books?”

“No, I just want you to look around the room. If you could take only three books with you on your expedition, which would you choose?”

I stiffen at this. It’s such a simple question, but there are so many books, and I’m sure she’s looking for something

specific. I turn over the book I'm holding and find it's a volume of futuristic fiction—stories of how the pre-Withers dreamers imagined the future would be. My heart leaps, but I carefully control my expression so I don't betray my interest. This book won't be very useful on an expedition, and it's also not very conducive to showing how realistic and pragmatic I am—or am trying to appear. No, this will never work.

Confidently, I replace the book on the shelf and begin to survey the room, reading the spines as I walk. Every possible subject matter is represented. I move slowly, considering carefully. I can feel Darla's gaze on me, and I don't want her to think I'm not taking this seriously. She stands quietly observing from the center of the room, patiently waiting. It occurs to me that taking too long might make me look indecisive. I pick up the pace, trying to decipher what Darla is looking for. She gives nothing away in her words, stance, or expression.

Finally, I settle on a book detailing the uses of wild plants, a manual of wilderness survival skills, and Sanctuary Protocol—a book containing all the rules, regulations, and procedures that make Sanctuary the haven it is. When I present them to Darla, she takes them and spends a moment flipping through each one in turn.

“Interesting,” she says. “These aren't the books I would have guessed based on your profile and history.” I smile at that. My profile would be based on my schooling and my many failures, so I'm glad to find that I've successfully departed from my past. “Can you explain why you chose these books in particular out of the entire library?”

“Well, the two books about plants and wilderness survival will help us because we don't know exactly what we'll face on

the outside, and these were written before the Withers by people who lived out in the wild. It's like having a guide with us from decades ago." She nods approvingly. "And Sanctuary is, of course, the epitome of human civilization, so if we do find other people, we should be prepared to help them create the same kind of wonderful society we have here," I explain. Of course, if there is anyone out there, I don't really think we should make everyone live like us, but I'm sure this is what Governor Hydes and the evaluators must want to hear, and so I say it.

"I see," is all Darla says. Then she pulls out the tablet, taps a few times, and the room shifts again.

For the next several hours, we are virtually transported to so many lifelike places that I can hardly tell what's real and what's fake by the time we finish. We go to places I know in Sanctuary—the hospital, the school, and the Justice Building. And to places I've only ever read or dreamed about—the ocean, the top of a mountain, the ruins of an old city. In each place, I have to answer questions, share my feelings, and decipher moral dilemmas. Since I can only scarcely guess at what Darla's looking for in each instance, it's hard work trying to cater my answers to be the model explorer.

It helps when I think like other people instead of myself. What would Aiken be feeling in the ruins of a Pre-Withers city? Probably sorrow for the lost people, and a desire to preserve their resting place. Definitely not the insatiable curiosity I feel to understand all the unfamiliar technology. What would Mom do when faced with two injured people and the means to save only one life? Well, of course, she would preserve the life of the youngest person since they have the longest time left to live, and the mission of Sanctuary is the

preservation of its inhabitants for the longest time possible. She would definitely not take time to account for personal abilities or character defects, as I might be tempted to do.

* * *

The next morning, Darla and I walk around the gardens again. I can't help thinking how much I'd prefer to be here with Aiken, but he's off somewhere with his own evaluator—I think Alan is his name. It's hardly fair that I finally know how Aiken feels about me—and how I truly feel about him—only to be separated almost all day, except for communal meals in the dining hall. I'll be glad when this is all over, for many reasons.

Darla continues peppering me with queries, and I notice they're all questions we've already discussed. I concentrate hard, trying to recall my exact answers from before. This must be a test of my consistency and to ensure I'm telling the truth.

She repeats many of the questions I thought were merely small talk before—things about my childhood, about my likes and dislikes, and my parents. I still can't imagine why she cares about what gifts I was given on my sixth birthday, or exactly which shade of green is my favorite. Regardless of the reason for the questions, I'm positive my answers are impeccable—an exact repetition of everything I've told her before. And I'm the perfect model of a good, protocol-following Sanctuary citizen. Honestly, I'm pretty pleased with my performance.

After we've made several full laps around the lawn, passing other pairs of participants and evaluators along the way, Darla leads me to a swing hanging from a tree, and we sit together. I hope this signals that her questions are over, but

she immediately switches topics and plunges forward.

“And what about the boy, Aiken? What exactly is your relationship with him?” Darla asks.

A knot forms in the pit of my stomach, and I gnaw on the inside of my cheek as I consider what to say. I’m afraid if I admit how much I care about Aiken, it will be seen negatively—a relationship that could complicate or compromise the mission. Would they really want to send couples out who may later break up? Think how much tension that could bring to the explorer group. I know we won’t break up, but I’m not sure what answer is best. Still, people have seen us together and pretending that he’s nothing more than an acquaintance would be a clear lie.

I settle on a half-truth. “Aiken and I grew up together. We’re really good friends. And we work really well together at solving problems.”

Darla stops walking and looks at me. I halt next to her and return her gaze. Her brow is furrowed, and her lips purse as though she is deep in unpleasant thought.

“What?” I ask after a long moment.

“Can I be honest with you?”

“Of course,” I encourage her.

“Mara, you are clearly a very intelligent girl. I requested to be assigned to you specifically because you seemed so unique and intriguing.”

I smile. “Thank you,” I say, a glowing sense of pride welling up.

“But,” she says, “you have been very hard to get a solid read on. I can’t help feeling like you aren’t being honest with me. In order for this evaluation to work, you must be completely yourself. It’s essential to the process.”

“So what are you saying, exactly?” I ask, and it’s hard to get the words out because my tongue is suddenly so dry that it sticks to my teeth and the roof of my mouth. Against my will, it’s tears that well up now—tamping down my momentary pride—and I squint against the lights that now seem entirely too bright.

“As it stands, I cannot get an accurate understanding of who you are. That is critical to the success of the program—more critical than you can imagine. Without that, you will fail, and you are running out of time.”

Chapter 7

Tightness seizes my chest. I ask Darla if I can be excused. I barely make it back to my room before every muscle in my body begins to tremble so badly I can hardly stand. I kick off my shoes and they thud against the wall. Even though gentle blue light still streams through my window, I nestle into my bed, pull the covers up over my head, and let my hair fall over my face—so ashamed. Though no sound escapes my lips, hot tears spill mercilessly down my cheeks, soaking my hair and pillow. I can't even pretend to be what they want. Nothing I do is good enough anywhere, ever.

And now I'm going to be trapped in Sanctuary until I die. I can see myself, old and decrepit, picking up discarded copies of Toren's rants from the gutters. But then I realize the flaw in that picture, because Toren will probably be chosen to leave Sanctuary, and the trash I'll be picking up will be far less interesting.

What's worse...oh, a million times worse...

What if Aiken is chosen to go without me?

Of course, he'll be chosen. He's perfect at anything he tries. His evaluator, Alan, has nothing but praise for his performance. They said if you are chosen, then you *have* to go, so he won't have a choice. He never really wanted to go. He did this for me. And in the end, we won't even be together,

and it'll all be my fault.

I curse myself, wondering why my incompetence has to spill over and ruin the lives of the people I love. Why can't I contain it to at least remain within my own sphere? But I guess life doesn't work that way. To love someone is to intertwine your life, whether you intended to or not.

The sky outside fades to black, and the house and street fall silent, but the tears just won't stop. I know Aiken must wonder why I didn't come to dinner, but I just can't face him right now. He believes in me—it might be the one thing he's ever gotten wrong.

Finally, I pull myself from the bed, splash cold water on my face, and brush my hair back into place. I need to see Aiken. He'll know what to do. But when I hold my hand to the scanner to open the door, I find it locked. I check the control panel and discover the door has been sealed and won't open until sunrise tomorrow. Quivers of trepidation shake my already frail form. Why would they want to lock us in our rooms? Is this new, or have they done it every night I've been here?

I debate for a minute what to do, but I really need to see Aiken. I'm already failing, so there's not a lot for me to lose at this point. It takes me less than a minute to override the panel and release the lock. Slowly, I open the door a crack and peer out into the hallway. The light streaming from my room is the only illumination, but it's enough to see that there's nobody around. I exit my room, quietly shutting the door behind me. Then I creep along in the dark. Aiken's room is all the way at the end of the hallway, but I don't need light to find it.

A second hallway intersects this one and branches off. I pause and venture a glance to make sure the coast is clear

before crossing. There's no one in sight. Near the end of this perpendicular corridor is an open door, and a soft, glowing light streams out. I'm about to keep moving when something pulls me up short.

Voices I recognize are coming from that room.

I pause and close my eyes, diverting all my powers of concentration to hear more acutely.

"I think we're almost ready." It's Toren's voice.

"Still, there are a few things to consider," a girl replies, and I'm almost certain it's another one of the participants, a woman named Lena who's in her mid-twenties, probably about Toren's age. For a moment, I wonder if I've just stumbled into a weird midnight tryst, and want to get out of here before this gets embarrassing. But then—

"I'm surprised at some of the holdouts, honestly. What do you think the problem is? I would hate to lose any of them," I hear Aiken say.

My heart starts to pound like a fist beating its way out of my chest, and I start to shiver and sweat all at once. There's some sort of a secret meeting that I'm not invited to. Have they already selected who will be leaving Sanctuary? Wouldn't Aiken have told me if he knew something?

I feel certain he would have, and I start to rein in my racing pulse.

I listen a little longer, trying to figure out what's going on. I count at least eight voices talking. The content of the conversation is confusing. I feel like I've just started reading a novel halfway through, and I'm missing way too much context to grasp any meaning.

The next time I hear Aiken speak, I begin to doubt if it's actually him at all. It sounds so much like him, but the more I

listen, the more I notice the small inconsistencies—the rhythm that’s just a little too even, the tone that’s just a little too flat. And the lack of a smile—not that I can see the speaker’s face, but Aiken has always had a way of infusing a certain quality into his voice that makes you certain he’s smiling, and he usually is. But this speaker is missing that good-natured quality altogether.

Curiosity burns and begs me to creep down the hallway. I desperately want to peek into the room and see who’s really there, but I don’t dare. If I get caught, it will ruin any remnants of a chance I have left. Instead, I decide to proceed with my initial plan and forget about the room altogether. If Aiken’s in his room, I’ll know for certain he’s not part of this meeting that has excluded me. I’ll know he’s not keeping secrets. I tiptoe the rest of the way to Aiken’s door and tap quietly.

“Who is it?” he asks, groggily.

I heave a sigh of relief. He’s there, inside his own room, and my tapping has disturbed his sleep. Whoever I heard talking just now wasn’t him.

“Aiken, it’s me, Mara,” I whisper.

“Mara?” he asks, and I smile at the sudden alertness and enthusiasm. “Where were you at dinner? Did your evaluator keep you?” I hear the patter of his footsteps as he approaches the door, and then the beep of the control panel as his attempts to open the door are denied. “It’s locked,” he complains.

I groan. Of course, if my door was locked, wouldn’t all the participants’ doors be locked?

“So was mine,” I whisper back. “I overrode the lock, but I didn’t think to do the same for your door.” Why hadn’t I

thought of that before I left my room? It will be ridiculously difficult to talk him through the steps to do it himself now.

“Is everything okay?” he asks, concerned.

“I’m fine, I just...wanted to see you.”

“Well, I’m at least happy to hear you,” he replies, and I can hear that smile, even if I can’t see it. “I came here to be with you, and now I hardly get to see you.”

“I know,” I say. *And you don’t even know the half of it*, I think but keep to myself. I just can’t explain my situation in surreptitious whispers through a cold door in a darkened hallway.

“Mara, when this is over, we can be together again. In Sanctuary, or out there, I don’t care. I just need to be with you,” he says. “I can’t wait until this thing is all over.”

I lean against the door, my heart painfully unsure if it wants to fly or rip itself to shreds. “Yes,” I finally manage to say around the lump that has formed in my throat. “I promise, no matter what, we’ll be together.”

I say goodnight and return to my room, refusing to be distracted by the light still streaming from the room at the end of the hall. I climb back into bed and let myself imagine Aiken’s arms around me and never having to let go again. I replay the night we fought in my head. Even that was him trying to hold onto me. He asked me not to go. He said he didn’t want me to change. He wanted me just the way I am. At the time, I thought he didn’t understand me, and didn’t understand how hard life in Sanctuary can be for me. But now I see that he just loves me, and he’s risked everything for me.

In this moment, I vow to do anything Darla wants, no more evasion. This will be the one thing I will not—cannot—fail.

When I finally do sleep, my dreams are lovely.

* * *

The next morning, I feel energized despite my lack of sleep. I wish I could have actually seen Aiken last night, but still, the memory of his piercing gaze and the way it felt when he kissed me keeps playing through my mind.

“What are you smiling about?” Darla asks as we meander through the blossoming garden.

I hesitate for a moment to admit the truth. I’ve tried to be exactly what I thought they wanted, and that hasn’t worked. Darla said the problem is that she can’t get a clear assessment of who I actually am. I suppose no pretense can ever be seamless, and there must be a lot of gaps and inconsistencies in my behavior and answers, no matter how clever I’ve tried to be. I just need to be myself—no games, no acting, just Mara. It’s sad how scary that prospect is. But it’s nothing compared to the possibility of losing Aiken forever.

“Honestly, it’s Aiken,” I say in the spirit of full disclosure.

“Aiken? The boy you eat breakfast with each morning?” she asks. “Did he say something amusing?”

“Not exactly. It’s just...well, I wasn’t exactly, completely...” I’m stumbling over what to say that doesn’t include the phrase, *I lied to you yesterday when I said we were just friends.*

She cocks her head to the side and waits for me to find the words that are eluding me.

“Well, things between Aiken and I have recently changed, and we are...more than friends now.”

“Do you love him?” There’s no hint of sentimentality in

her tone. It is a mere mechanical inquiry.

“Yes,” I reply, and the word comes easily to my lips and feels refreshing, despite the fact that we haven’t said those words to each other yet. It’s not exactly how I wanted my first declaration of love to be, but Aiken’s not here, so it doesn’t exactly count.

She nods and smiles, and for a moment I have the odd sensation that she’s not really smiling at me, but rather trying to mimic my own expression. But it’s a fleeting moment, and we begin walking again.

“That’s good to know,” she says approvingly, and I feel bolstered that I’m on the right track.

“Darla,” I say. “I’ve thought a lot about what you said yesterday, about trying to figure out who I really am.”

She nods.

“And I think I’ve been too nervous to just give my honest opinion about some things. Do you think we could redo the simulations, and I’ll try to be more forthcoming this time?”

At that, she breaks into a real, genuine smile and claps her hands once. “Yes, absolutely. I’m so relieved to hear you say that. Let’s get started right away. There’s no time to waste.”

She sets a quick pace back to the evaluation room as I struggle to keep up. Before I know it, we’re standing once again in the midst of towering bookshelves. It doesn’t take me long to retrieve the three books that truly caught my eye.

“Interesting,” Darla muses as she reads the covers. I’ve given her the book of stories. Even though the world has turned out very different than these writers imagined, seeing how they dreamed the world could be is a good catalyst for stimulating my own imagination. And if we are going to reclaim the world, we’re going to need plenty of imagination. I

also have a technical manual that will help us build machinery to fit whatever needs we may encounter. And finally, I hand her a book with a blank cover.

“What’s this one?” she asks, confused as she thumbs through the blank pages.

“It’s a journal. That’s where we’ll write down the things we discover and make our plans,” I say, unable to keep a giddy sense of anticipation from leeching into my voice. There’s a part of me that wants to see that book filled and to be the one that wrote every last word of it.

I can tell that Darla is filing this information away, and while I don’t know what her expression is exactly, I feel certain it’s not disappointment.

Everywhere we go, I am impeccably me. I don’t even shrink from the opportunity in the Justice Building to brazenly point out exactly which rules I believe should be done away with. It’s exhilarating to be so completely and unabashedly me. By the time we’ve repeated all the simulations, I feel drained, as though I’ve been emptied of my entire life’s story somehow.

Thankfully, it also seems like Darla is really beginning to understand me—my love of problem-solving and technology, my fear of disappointing others and the way I seem to chronically do it anyway. She knows that my favorite color is the deep shade of blue that paints the sky just moments before it breaks into dawn. She understands how much I want to do something that matters, and how hard I’m willing to work to make that happen.

By the end of our session, she’s come to know me so well that she’s finishing my sentences and guessing my answers—mostly correct. I even feel like her speech is more like mine—

less formal, more animated. In fact, when I show her my final project, I'm prepared for disapproval. But she smiles and says, "That's amazing, Mara. Really brilliant!" That's when I knew I had succeeded. Ironically, all it took was for me to stop trying so hard.

When I exit the room, I feel like the floor is made of clouds and I'm gliding through a dream. Aiken is leaning against the wall like a perfectly chiseled statue, which only adds to the sensation that this moment is too good to be real.

"Alan said you two were in there," he explains, wrapping an arm around my waist.

"I had a few things to clarify for Darla," I explain.

Darla exits the room, shutting the door behind her. When she sees Aiken, she breaks into a wide smile and bustles over to us. "You must be Aiken," she says, reaching out a hand to shake his.

"Yes, nice to meet you. I hope Mara's been on her best behavior," he says jokingly, and I want to kick him. He has no idea what my 'best behavior' almost cost us.

Fortunately, Darla ignores the comment. "And your evaluator is Alan, right?" she asks, running a hand through her short, dark hair.

Aiken nods.

Darla bites her lip as though suddenly nervous or deep in contemplation. Her introspective expression stays fixed as she turns and walks away.

"Hmm, that was a little weird," Aiken mutters.

"What about this whole thing isn't weird?" I counter, shaking my head and taking his hand. "Anyway, how was your day with Alan?"

Aiken shrugs. "Nonexistent. He never showed up, and

Hattie told me that my evaluation is complete.”

“Really?” I ask, unsure what that means.

“She said that Governor Hydes will be giving us our results personally and that it’ll happen soon.”

I bite my lip as I mull this over. I remember Darla doing the same thing just moments ago. They’ve had us spending so much time together that we seem to be mimicking each other.

“Well, I’m sure you did great,” I say, leaning up to kiss him on the cheek. “You always do.” I consider telling Aiken about the conversation I overheard last night in the hallway, and the voice that sounded so much like his. But I don’t even really know who or what I heard, so it’s probably best to not say anything. It would just make me sound paranoid.

He turns to me and leans his forehead against mine. “The only outcome I consider a success is the one that ensures we end up together.” And then he kisses my lips, and I forget all about my worries. Darla, the Governor, and the entire beyond fade until I can’t even remember they exist, let alone why I should care.

Chapter 8

The next morning, someone is pounding at my door before I wake. I roll from bed and groggily make my way to the door. When I open it, wearing my purple satin pajamas, Hattie is standing there, poised as ever despite the ferocity of her knocking.

She sighs. “I was starting to wonder if something had happened to you. I’ve been knocking for several minutes.”

“No, just sleeping,” I reply, rubbing my eyes and yawning.

“Get dressed,” she instructs. “The Governor is ready to meet with you.”

“What?” I mumble, confused. “What time is it?”

“Five-thirty.”

I have no idea why this meeting is taking place an hour and a half before I would normally wake, but I suppose Governor Hydes is very busy. If he’s going to meet with every participant of the Exploration Program, I suppose he would need to start early in order to have enough time. I wonder if I’m the first, or if other poor souls have already been ripped from slumber this morning.

Does Aiken know his fate?

I wish I could talk to him now, but there’s no chance of that. I take only a minute to change, and then Hattie escorts me to the Governor’s office—a large pentagonal room with

every luxury Sanctuary can offer, which is to say, it is immaculate and breathtaking in its beauty and extravagance.

Governor Hydes is sitting behind an elegant, carved wooden desk. The wood is almost the exact same shade as his hair, a deep brown with hints of red. He wears a cream-colored suit with golden buttons down the front. When he hears us enter, he looks up and his mouth upturns in a warm and inviting smile.

“Mara Oborn,” he greets me, standing and coming to take my hand. He leads me to a high-backed, blue velvet chair in front of the desk, and then goes back to reclaim his own seat. “I’m so glad you joined the Exploration Program. You are exactly the type of candidate we were hoping to attract,” he says, smiling warmly.

I’ve seen the Governor speak a million times, but I’ve never had cause to talk to him personally before. Growing up, I was always just a little afraid of him. He always seemed so stern and almost gruff. But it turns out he’s a lot more amiable than I’d guessed.

“Does that mean I passed? Have I been chosen to go?” I can’t help asking.

He chuckles. “We’ll get to all that in a moment. First, considering that this is a new program, I would like to solicit your feedback. Darla tells me she had a little trouble getting a clear understanding of you initially.” My stomach tightens at the thought that he knows this. That can’t bode well. “Why do you think that was?” he asks.

“Well,” I begin nervously. *Just be honest*, I remind myself. “I suppose I was trying to anticipate what you wanted me to say and do because I really do want to succeed.”

“And you were afraid that if you were just straightforward,

your answers might be wrong?” he surmises.

“Yes.”

“I see.” He rubs his chin, as though this is important information that must be carefully considered. I just hope it isn’t ruining my chances. “That’s probably an issue we’ll run into often,” he says, almost to himself. “You see, this is a pilot program, but in time we need to evaluate everyone in Sanctuary to see who would be a good fit.”

“You want to send that many people out?” I ask, surprised. “We don’t even know what the outside world is really like yet.”

“Well, as I said...in time,” he replies. “But it won’t work if people won’t just be honest and open so we can get a clear read on them.” His features are taut with frustration, and I can tell this has been a point of concern for some time.

“Have you considered that your process doesn’t really inspire people to be themselves?” I ask, unable to stop myself from pointing out the obvious—at least, what’s obvious to me.

He cocks his head to the side and stares at me, making me think that this is not so obvious to him. “How so?”

“If you want us to be ourselves and see what we really think about things, why bring us here—to a place we’ve never been before, under circumstances we’ve never faced? Why not send evaluators to people’s homes to meet them in their everyday lives? Or use a program on people’s tablets to ask all the questions and observe all you like?”

Now that the question has been broached, I’m unable to stop my mind from getting to work on the puzzle. How could you test everyone in Sanctuary in the most efficient and effective manner possible?

“In fact,” I add, “you could even use the school or people’s Duties to evaluate people without them even knowing. That’s when you’ll get honest results.” I’m not sure I like this idea, but it would certainly work and be a lot more practical than this whole setup I’ve just been through. And I figure this is mostly a theoretical discussion anyway, so what harm can it do to throw out a few suggestions?

The Governor is nodding. “That would make sense. I’m going to have to give that some thought and run a few calculations,” he says, seeming cheered by the idea.

That’s an odd thing to say. I have no idea what about all of this needs to be calculated, but all I really care about is finding out my own results.

“Was there anything else you wanted to know?” I ask, not wanting to look too pushy.

“No, that’s all. Mara, I have excellent news for you. You have been selected to be a part of the first group of explorers. Tomorrow, you will be leaving Sanctuary to discover what is left of the world beyond.”

I inhale sharply, and it’s only then—as I feel the burning in my lungs—that I realize I’ve been holding my breath as he spoke.

“Thank you,” I say.

I did it!

I didn’t fail.

I passed.

I have been chosen. I won’t have to spend my days picking up the debris of Sanctuary. I am needed elsewhere.

The Governor dismisses me, and I’m almost to the door when something occurs to me. I turn back to face him. “We leave *tomorrow*? I thought there would be training first,” I say,

uncertainly. Nothing we've done so far has taught us anything useful. It's been completely focused on discovering what we know—not the other way around.

He smiles knowingly. "Not to worry. We have selected your group carefully, and you'll have everything you need. I'm confident that there's nothing to worry about."

* * *

I make it back to my room feeling conflicted. Of course, I'm elated that I've passed, but now I can't deny the growing sense of trepidation at how unprepared I feel. It's easy for the Governor to be confident. He's not the one who will be leaving the Safe Dome built over twenty years ago for the sole purpose of protecting us from a world that has become utterly inhospitable—ravaged by a disease that not only destroyed people, but the fabric of society as well.

Breakfast was delivered to my room while I was gone, so I guess I'm meant to eat here. Even though the food is excellent, my mouth is so dry that I keep gagging on it. I take sips of my juice, but it does little to help. Now that this is real, and so close, but still so nebulous, most of the excitement is swallowed by cold, clawing concern.

All I want to do is talk to Aiken. I have to know that he'll be at my side when I embark on this expedition tomorrow. That's the only thing I need, and the only thing that can calm my churning stomach and fluttering nerves.

I think about my parents, and wish I could be given a chance to say goodbye to them. What could the harm be in that? I can't deny that I'll miss them when I'm gone. I know they love me, but I also know they'll be okay without me. I

wasn't exaggerating when I told Aiken in the Seasons Park that Mom has always wanted to be allowed another child. Surely my leaving will be reason enough to allow them that. Even though I won't be dead—hopefully not for a very long time—my departure will still decrease the population of Sanctuary all the same.

I manage to wait a few hours, hoping Hattie will come back for me. Surely they aren't going to make us all spend our last day in Sanctuary holed up in our rooms. But when I try the door, it appears that's exactly what they're planning, because the door is locked.

I pound once on the door, more out of frustration than actual hope that someone will hear and release me from this room that feels more like a prison with every passing moment. Then I realize that if Aiken is also trapped in his room, then I do have a way to talk to him.

I go to the control panel on the wall, and it only takes me a few minutes to maneuver my way into the communication system and access the cameras in each room. I'm not sure how to find Aiken's room specifically, so I just start cycling through all the rooms, hoping I won't accidentally see anything too private before I can find Aiken.

Toren is pacing in front of his door, looking even more agitated than normal. I wonder if that means he'll be staying, or going?

I flip through several more cameras that show other participants in varying states of agitation and boredom. At least I'm not the only one they've locked up for the day.

Finally, the dining hall appears. I pause, annoyed because a dozen or so of the participants are eating their lunch together. At first, I think this is unfair, but then I consider that these

may be the ones who didn't pass the assessment and will be staying in Sanctuary. I don't see Aiken among them, so I'm about to move on when something odd catches my eye. I squint at the screen to make sure I'm seeing correctly.

At one of the tables, there's a girl with her back toward the camera. She has long blond hair, so light that it's almost silver. I wait until she moves. Finally, she turns so that I can see her face.

And then I scream.

Chapter 9

It takes me several minutes before I can even look at the screen on the control panel again. My thoughts are whirling.

How can I be in the dining hall—or at least, someone who looks *exactly* like me?

I study the figure, zooming in to her face, and there is no mistaking the detail in the resemblance. Everything is the same—my thin nose, the set of my jaw, the way I cock my head to the side when I concentrate, and even the tiny, heart-shaped mole on my right cheek.

As I watch, Aiken waltzes in and joins her. He kisses this girl's cheek, and even though I know it's supposedly me, it's not me, and I feel a pang of jealousy.

Aiken! I want to scream. *It's a trick.*

But what kind of trick?

I still can't even guess what this means.

Are all the people I see on the screen right now just some kind—what? Actors, copies, clones...

Think, Mara, think!

There has to be an explanation.

They invited us all here—the malcontents of Sanctuary—with promises that we could leave the city, never to return. Then, instead of teaching us anything useful, they spent our entire time just assessing everything about us—what we think,

how we think, our preferences, our motivation, our history. Passing the evaluation was contingent on our evaluator accurately understanding us to the point that they could guess at our answers.

But what if...

The theory forming in my head is so preposterous, I can't even make it congeal into actual words. I need more data. I go to my bedside table and retrieve my tablet. I bring up my final project—the sensors that detect where people are within a fifty-yard radius. That will take in all of the Governor's House, and most of the grounds.

I watch with trepidation as dots start to appear across the screen, not sure what I'm expecting to find. I can see that I'm here in my room, and Aiken is in his room down the hall. In fact, all the rooms assigned to the Exploration Program participants appear to be occupied by a single person.

But something is missing, and I'm not entirely sure what to make of it.

I dart back over to the wall panel to see the feed into the dining hall, and it's still full of people—including what appears to be myself and Aiken. But my screen shows that room to be completely empty—of people, at least.

So why aren't any of their bio-signatures showing up?

I tweak the settings, making sure the scanners are set appropriately, but everything appears to be in working order. I boost the sensitivity for good measure. The effect this has is unexpected. Now, the dining hall is not empty, but the dots that appear there are not like the ones located in the participants' rooms. Rather, they are faint dots—as though they are human, just only barely. Part carbon-based bioelectric beings, and part—

What?

I adjust the scanners again to register electromagnetic energy—the same kind that was used to make the library and other holograms in the evaluation room, but that doesn't reveal anything specific, just a generalized glow over the entire scanned area.

They're not projections on barrier fields.

So what are they?

Some kind of life form that has evolved outside the barrier field as a result of the Withers or some other disease? I'm sure Toren could give me ten different theories this instant if he saw what I'm seeing.

Then I have a thought. I recalibrate my scanner to look for an electrical charge running through the circuitry, and the whole picture shifts. The humans disappear, and the dining hall lights up with several dozen dots.

They're humanoid robots!

And they have been made to look—and probably act—*exactly* like us.

How did someone make them all so quickly? We've only been here a few days.

And most importantly, why?

Then I see something else at least as disturbing as anything I've seen today. The dining hall isn't the only place where these bots appear. There is one in the Governor's office, and another in the hallway just outside my door.

Despite the advanced warning my scanner gave me, I start at the sound of knocking, almost dropping my tablet. "Who is it?" I call.

"It's me, Hattie."

I shut my eyes against the horror. Is this bot the same

person I've been interacting with all week, or has it replaced the real Hattie? I'm honestly not sure which would be worse.

I step quickly to the wall panel and shut off the unauthorized display of the dining room. Holding my tablet behind my back and out of sight, I open the door a crack.

Hattie is standing in the otherwise empty hallway with an air of impatience.

"What do you need?" I ask, trying but failing to keep a quiver out of my voice.

"Come with me. It's almost time for your team's departure."

"What? I thought that wasn't until tomorrow," I stammer.

"It's been moved up," she says without further explanation.

"Where's Aiken?" I demand, perhaps a little too forcefully.

"He'll be along soon," she assures me.

My mind is reeling with everything I've just discovered. If Hattie and the Governor are robots, I'm betting they've replaced the real Governor and Hattie. And now there's a carefully crafted copy of each of us. So what do they actually plan to do with us?

Whatever happens to us, no one in Sanctuary will even know we're gone. They'll think we weren't chosen to leave after all, and these robots will take our place in society. That's why they needed to understand us so well, to scan our brains and understand every detail about how we think.

Most likely this whole program has had nothing to do with exploring the outside world at all, just a convenient ruse to bring us here and then make the real us disappear. I have no idea what's really about to happen, but I'm certain I don't want to go with Hattie right now. I have to get to Aiken

before he's taken, and somehow, we have to get out of here before they...

What?

Kill us?

I'm not about to wait around and find out.

"Okay, but can you help me with something first?" I ask.

"Whatever it is, I'm sure it can wait. We have a schedule to keep."

Didn't she just say that I'm about to leave Sanctuary? How can anything wait until later? "It can't wait," I insist. "I promise it'll be quick."

She considers for a moment, but thankfully she seems to decide it'll be faster to just go along with my request than to continue arguing. She steps across the threshold, and I shut the door.

As soon as we're alone, I whip out my tablet and start working.

"What's that for?" she asks.

But rather than answer, I initiate a low-frequency feedback shock that has Hattie flat on the floor, unconscious, in a matter of seconds. The fact that this worked at all erases any possible doubt about what she is.

Knocking out robots isn't something I do often—as in, I've never done it before—so I don't know how long it'll take her circuits to reset. I don't waste any time dragging her to the bed and rolling her underneath and out of sight.

I have to get to Aiken before anyone notices Hattie's absence and comes looking. One quick glance at my tablet tells me the hallway outside my door is empty, but the bots are starting to file out of the dining hall. I don't have much time.

I tuck my tablet in my waistband and pull my shirt down

to cover it. Then I race to the door and out into the hallway. I can hear my pulse thudding in my ears as I run, but I'm still not fast enough.

"Where are you going?" someone calls from behind, a voice I would recognize anywhere.

I freeze, not sure what to do. Slowly, I turn to face Aiken. Even knowing it's not the real Aiken, my heart responds to the sight of him. It's an extraordinary imitation, I have to admit. If I hadn't seen the scan of his electrical signature, I would probably be fooled myself. Curiosity seizes me, and I want to reach out and touch him, to see if he feels like a real human. But I don't have to. He steps to me and puts an arm—a warm, soft, very Aiken arm—around me.

"Come on, Darla—I mean, Mara," he says with a wink, answering so many questions in that one statement. So, so many questions.

How did someone manufacture all these bots so quickly? They were already here. All that needed to be done was a quick update to their physical appearance.

What has this whole program and evaluation been about? It's how they mapped our brains and behaviors into these new artificial intelligences.

Who were the evaluators we had never seen before? Not travelers from beyond the Safe Dome, but the very bots meant to be our replacements.

I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't changed tactics and allowed Darla to finally understand who I really am. She couldn't have assumed my identity. Would they have let me go home?

I suspect not. I think they would have killed me anyway—like they must plan to do with all the participants, but instead

of sending a bot home in my place with a story about how I didn't make the cut, I would have been presented as the success story—one of the few who's never coming back. That's why the Governor emphasized that so few people would actually be chosen to leave Sanctuary.

Aiken-Bot leads me around several corners to a row of bedrooms in the opposite wing from where the participants have been lodged. He stops at a door, and I try to appear impassive as I wait for him to explain where we are.

"Remember, we're supposed to stay in our rooms until the prototypes have been dealt with," he says, and I'm pretty sure he just referred to me and all the other humans as mere prototypes.

"I know," I say. "This is just a ..."—I search for a word that doesn't really say anything since I don't really know what's going on—"big day," I finally finish.

He nods. "It must be especially difficult for you. You got such an erratic and nonconforming prototype to work with. Preserving the human's mind while taming it to the ways of perfection must be very draining."

I don't know what to say to that, but it turns out I don't have to say anything. My lips are occupied as he leans in to kiss me. And, oh my, he even kisses just like Aiken. And that may be the most terrifying thing yet because if this bot can so thoroughly fool so many of *my* senses, will *anyone* be able to tell that something's wrong? How many of these bots are already in Sanctuary masquerading as humans, completely undetected?

When Aiken-Bot pulls away, I tell him goodbye, hoping he'll leave, but he stays, waiting for me to enter the door we're standing in front of. I tense; this isn't my room, so the door isn't going to open for me. But it seems my only option if I

don't want to be found out right here and now is to try. I can always claim mechanical failure, and that will give me an excuse to leave in search of a maintenance worker.

But when I hold my palm to the scanner, the door opens.

Of course, our doubles would have been given an exact replica of our palm prints.

Before Aiken-Bot has a chance to look inside—or worse, come inside—I bound through the door and close it in his face.

“What?” exclaims my voice—or how my voice sounds to me when played back in recordings, not how it sounds in my own ears as I speak.

I waste no time. Before the Mara-Bot has a chance to do anything, I've already whipped out my tablet and initiated the pulse that renders her unconscious—though I suppose *deactivated* might be a better term.

It's disorienting to see myself slumped on the floor, but I can't get distracted by that now. I'm positive that, of all the luxuries surrounding us here in Sanctuary, time is the one that will not be granted to me today.

Chapter 10

Soon, someone is going to notice that Hattie is missing. Or perhaps she's already recovered and will be looking for me. Either way, when someone comes looking for either me or my doppelgänger, I'm in trouble.

Unless—

I crouch to observe the Mara-Bot. My earlier assessment that this is a good replica is reinforced tenfold. Everything is perfect, from the set of the jaw to the hairline, just a tad unbalanced. I touch her arm, feel the beat of her pulse at her wrist, and she feels so much like a real person that I almost have second thoughts about what I'm planning.

But this is not a person.

This is a robot that's trying to steal my life.

The Aiken-Bot said that their purpose is to preserve our thoughts and personalities while bringing a stabilizing influence. No more Mara who doesn't fit in. As far as my parents and anyone else is concerned, when I return from this program I will have been rehabilitated into a model citizen.

If the bot plans to take my place, though, then why can't I take hers? After all, I've already been mistaken for my robot twin once today.

I don't know if this will work. I suppose the main question is how they plan to dispose of the real people. A traditional

poison probably won't work on a bot, but I can think of a number of other methods that would be equally effective on human and robot—such as electrocution, or a bullet to the brain.

Getting the Mara-Bot to seem human won't be that hard, really. If I shock her circuits to create a sense of fear or paranoia, that should convince anyone she's not a bot. At least, that's what I tell myself. It's the best solution I can think of right now—and right now is all the time I have to think. So I get to work.

It takes about ten minutes to figure out how to connect my tablet to her central processor so I can communicate directly with her programming. When I'm done making my own enhancements, I don't sever the connection. I want to know what happens to her. Effectively, I'm turning her into my own personal spy.

When she comes to, I stay behind her and out of sight, crouched behind the closet door. I watch my tablet until the coast is clear. As soon as the hallway outside this room is empty, I rush over to the Mara-Bot and push her toward the door, keeping out of her line of sight.

"What?" she exclaims, but she's stumbling and too disoriented to fight me.

"Governor Hydes wants to see you immediately," I whisper in her ear. "He said it's urgent that you go to his office." And then I open the door and shove her out into the hallway, slamming the door behind her.

For good measure, I use the wall panel to jam the lock, just in case she tries to come back in rather than following my instructions. But it turns out to be an unnecessary precaution. Ear pressed to the door, I smile as I hear her start to cry. No

one would ever believe that blustering honk—is that really what I sound like when I cry?—is coming from anything not entirely human.

The sound of her wails begins to recede into the background, and I watch on my tablet as the dot marking her presence begins wandering in a confused path through the hallways. With any luck, she'll soon be found. How could they not find her, with all the racket she's making? And they'll assume she's me and take her to wherever Hattie intended to take me.

Now, I just have to get to Aiken—to make the switch for him before it's too late.

My fingers shake like leaves on the trees in the Seasons Park during a summer storm as I search for Aiken once again on the wall panel. I won't make the same mistake twice. This time, I must deactivate the door lock before I get to him.

I'm not sure how much time passes, or how many cameras I've spied through, but finally he shows up on the screen. I'm fairly certain that the gorgeous guy on the screen is my Aiken—the real Aiken—because Hattie is there with him. I patch into the audio, and all doubt is removed.

“...to go. Get your things together, and I'll take you to the room where the participants are gathering,” she says.

Aiken opens his mouth to say something, but is interrupted by a sound I recognize.

Mara-Bot bolts in through the open door, still bawling, face streaked with moisture and misery. “Aiken!” she exclaims, and is instantly received by open arms.

“No!” I exclaim too loud, and then clamp my hand over my mouth.

“There you are, Mara,” Hattie says, and purses her lips in

disapproval. “We’ve been looking for you.”

I can’t tell if Hattie even knows how I escaped her. Did she wake up with no knowledge of how she had lost consciousness and think I merely wandered off?

At least it appears that my plan is working. Hattie believes this is really me.

I scowl, even though I should be relieved. The way Aiken is embracing her, nuzzling her face into the crook of his neck and stroking her hair, shows he’s clearly fooled as well. That’s a good thing. It means this can work. I just wish Aiken wasn’t so insufferably affectionate, sometimes.

Together, the three of them exit the room.

I switch views to see the hallway. It looks like they’re heading toward the gardens. I can beat them there, hide in the shrubbery, and find a way to get Aiken’s attention as soon as possible. If needed, I can stun any bots in the vicinity while we get away. I can use my connection to Mara-Bot to make her create a diversion. Then I’ll figure out how to get the Aiken-Bot out there—after a slight code modification—to take Aiken’s place.

I pause only long enough to pull a green cloak from the closet that will help to obscure my presence and hide me among the trees and shrubbery. There’s a pocket inside the cloak, and I use it to stash my tablet within easy reach, but out of sight.

But the moment I step out into the hallway, I find myself standing face to face with Governor Hydes. I freeze, desperately wanting to check my tablet and verify that he is, in fact, a bot, but I don’t dare pull it out right now.

“Mara,” he says, his tone warm and booming like he’s just unwrapped a wonderful gift. “Just the person I was coming to

see. I have something important to discuss with you.”

“Okay,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “Can I meet you in your office in ten minutes?” I ask, hoping I sound perfectly calm and robot-rational.

“Nonsense. There’s no time like here and now for important conversations,” he replies, and starts toward the door to my room.

I turn to follow him inside, planning to knock him out as soon as we’re out of sight. But before I can do anything more than step across the threshold, he’s got hold of my cloak and has pulled it off, taking the tablet with it.

“It’s much too warm inside for this,” he says.

“True,” I agree. “I’ll hang it back up.” I reach for it.

“Those things really aren’t suited to our physiology, anyway,” he replies. “The prototypes are much frailer than we are,” he says, and tosses the cloak down the laundry chute.

I lunge for it, but before I can reach it, it’s already fallen several levels to the washroom below. Slowly, I turn back to face Governor Hydes, frantically calculating and plotting my options at this point. I need to retrieve my tablet and then get to Aiken before it’s too late. But before I can do anything, I have to get through this conversation as quickly as possible and without raising any alarms.

“Governor, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“I have decided to take your advice—or rather, your prototype’s advice—to expand the replacement program to all of Sanctuary immediately.”

My throat contracts like I’m begin strangled. When I said those things to the Governor just this morning, I had no idea what I was actually suggesting. And now, it seems, I am an important part of the robots’ plans to take over Sanctuary

completely.

“Oh?” is all I manage to say before my voice gives out. I can’t appear emotional. I can’t argue. Those things would mark me for the human I am.

“Yes, I’ll give you all the details soon. If all goes well, we will have the entire adult population of Sanctuary replaced within three months.”

“That quickly?”

“Oh, yes. And even better...” I’m not sure that my mind can take any more “good” news right now, but he lays it on me anyway. “I have decided that you are the perfect person to put in charge of the entire program.”

My head begins to spin, but I manage to keep just enough presence of mind to understand what his expression of delight means, and what he’s waiting to hear.

“Oh, thank you,” I stammer.

I don’t have time to process this turn of events right now. I just need to get my tablet back and find Aiken—the real Aiken. My Aiken. I walk the Governor to the door, considering what my chances of injury and detection are if I leap down the laundry chute myself. I’m pretty sure it’s wide enough to fit me, but it must go down at least two stories, maybe three.

I’m just about to shut the door when Governor Hydes looks down at his watch and turns back. “It’s two o’clock,” he announces. “That means all the prototypes have been deactivated.” He smiles and claps his hands in delight. “On to the next phase,” he says, and departs.

I’m too late!

How has the place that was meant to save us from the horrors of a world ravaged with disease become the most

dangerous threat we face?

Dizzy and devastated, I collapse to the ground.

I don't know how long I remain there before someone comes for me, and I pull myself together because I'm not an emotional, erratic, fearful human anymore.

I am Mara—a perfectly calibrated, calm, compliant robot.

I have to be, or I will be *deactivated*.

Epilogue

I've spent another day helping the Governor prepare the new evaluation program—which actually means creating carefully crafted delays that are disguised as progress. It's only been three days, and already I'm so exhausted from the pretense that I don't know if I can go on this way. Maybe it would have been better if I had just accepted my fate and been 'deactivated' with the rest of them.

I can't decide what was worse: discovering that my dad isn't my dad—and wondering how long it's been since I hugged my real father—or having to pretend to be in love with Aiken, who isn't the real Aiken at all. Every touch makes my skin crawl, and I want to lash out and rip him to shreds. He's the reason my Aiken is gone forever. It's all I can do not to bite him when he kisses me. I'll have to break up with him as soon as I can find an unemotional, non-impulsive rationale to explain it. I wonder how robots manage broken hearts. I hope it hurts—but I doubt it will.

I say an enthusiastic hello to my parents to keep them from getting suspicious, and then lock myself in my room where I can be alone and think. I have to come up with a plan to save the people who are left in Sanctuary. Based on my scans, I estimate only about ten percent of the population has been replaced so far.

I groan at the realization that I think of ten percent as a low number. Ten percent means roughly a thousand bots roam the city—many in positions of power and influence. It's not going to be easy to overcome that. Even Maxel is a bot, which explains why he was so against my project that involved a scanner capable of locating real, live humans.

My current plan centers on constructing a device to emit a feedback pulse powerful enough to knock out every bot in the whole city at once. But I'll have to calibrate it just right. Too weak, and my plan will be discovered before I can really do the job. Too strong, and I'll fry all of Sanctuary's systems—maybe even inadvertently deactivate the Safe Dome and expose everyone to the very dangers we came here to escape.

My head throbs and I lie on the bed, trying to think through the pain. There's a buzzing in my ear that I wish would go away, but it keeps getting louder. Finally, the sound shifts into something like words, and I realize it's not in my head at all.

I sit up and pull my tablet from my bag, which I only barely managed to retrieve from the laundry room this morning when the Governor and Hattie were distracted. It seems there's a problem with the Toren-Bot. He learned a little too well from his 'prototype' and required some reprogramming. I shudder to think what will happen if they ever decide I need reprogramming and discover that's impossible.

I look at the screen of my tablet and see the light that indicates an open audio transmission. That's when I finally understand, and my heart starts racing in excitement. "Hello," I whisper.

"Hello? Is someone there?" a voice like mine cries back

through the speakers.

I've finally reconnected to Mara-Bot! She's alive—or the robot equivalent of alive—somewhere.

“Yes, I'm here. Where are you?” I ask.

“Oh, thank goodness!” the girl says back, her voice muffled by static. “Please help us. I don't know where we are, but we need help.”

“Who is ‘we?’ Is Aiken with you?” I ask, trying to keep my voice low so my parents won't overhear me talking to myself.

“Yes, he's with me. They sent us all out here, but there's no city. Most of the others left hoping to find food, but Aiken won't go. He keeps saying he has to get back to Mara. But I don't understand, because I'm Mara.”

They must be out of the Safe Dome—dumped into the outside world like garbage being discarded without a second thought. But Aiken has discovered that she's not the real Mara. And he's determined to find a way back to me.

In that moment, I know one thing for certain. I may not know exactly how yet, but one way or another, Aiken and I will breach the Safe Dome and be together. Maybe we can even find a way to reclaim Sanctuary.

I ache to run to the edge of Sanctuary and look out into the beyond for Aiken, but I don't dare move and risk losing this connection.

“I want to talk to Aiken,” I say, breathless with the anticipation of hearing his voice again. I know I'll be able to tell the difference between him and the hollow replica I see every day now.

“You can't. I don't seem to be able to transmit sounds outside my own mind,” she says. I'm disappointed, but only slightly. All that really matters is that Aiken is alive.

Suddenly, Mara is screaming. I turn down the volume so the piercing screech won't drift beyond the walls of my room.

"What is it?" I ask, desperately waiting for an answer that doesn't come.

"No!" she screams, strangled and terror-struck.

"Aiken! Aiken, I'm coming for you," I cry. "Hold on! I'll find a way to reach you."

And then the transmission goes dead.

The Story Continues...

Discover the exciting conclusion of Mara and Aiken's story in *Ruins of Ember*, book 3 of the [Wall of Fire series](#).

