

HER FIRST EIGHTEEN YEARS WERE FILLED WITH LIES.
SHE IS ABOUT TO DISCOVER THE TRUTH.

ABOVE THE SKY



J.W. LYNNE

An excerpt from ABOVE THE SKY:

Ten throws his arm around me and shoves me against the wall. He lets go of me quickly, but he remains unusually close. Facing me. Looking serious. Even though we are no longer touching, I can still feel his arm around me. Forceful and rough. I want him to touch me like that again.

“Don’t move,” he whispers.

And then, just a few feet past him, I see why.

A large, black, shiny, box-like terrestrial drone is coming out of—not a doorway, but—the middle of a wall, through an opening that shouldn’t be there. An opening I’ve never seen open before.

We remain motionless. Unless it’s a security drone, if we don’t move, it won’t see us as people; we will just be obstacles that it will move past. If it is a security drone, it’s already too late.

The drone starts toward us. I keep my head completely still, watching it only by moving my eyes. As the drone gets closer, I realize how substantial it is. It’s a few feet taller than Ten and almost as wide as the hallway. But despite its commanding size, it moves nearly silently, stealthily. It terrifies me.

The drone doesn’t seem to sense us. It gives no commands and emits no sirens. It just inches along. The drone gets closer and closer until it is right beside us, just a few centimeters away. I take small, shallow breaths, even though my lungs are begging for more air. I feel the heat of Ten’s controlled breaths against my face. As we stand there, it feels as if an electric charge is growing between us, so powerful that it would shock us if we moved even a millimeter closer together. And yet I feel like I want to.

Praise for ABOVE THE SKY

"5 Stars!!!!!! Unputdownable!!... My new favorite book... If YOU love a good dystopian + romance... Then you need this book in your life." --
Megan, i fall in love book blog ★★★★★

"This book was AWESOME!... An epic read... If you... love books like The Hunger Games, Divergent, and The Maze Runner, this book is right up your alley." --Stephanie, TeacherofYA's Book Blog ★★★★★

"This book is incredible!... Imaginative... fast paced... full of action... filled with a lot of twists and turns... and the world building is truly fantastic... 5 Brilliant Stars." --Karen Jo, Sincerely Karen Jo ★★★★★

"This post-apocalyptic, young adult, science fiction is a page turner from start to finish! Similar to The Giver in the beginning and things just get more and more interesting... Highly recommend!" -- Susie, Goodreads
★★★★★

"An intensely awesome read... The suspense and the thrilling scenarios kept me on edge... Very creative and brilliant... Highly recommended." --Denise, Goodreads ★★★★★

"An amazing read... Most stories seem predictable at some point but this one surprised me. At only one single point was I able to say, yep I see what's going to happen next. Yeah, right. I was totally wrong." --Amanda, Goodreads ★★★★★

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To M.H., who taught me what it means to be a warrior

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THURSDAY, JUNE 11

1637

Our teacher, Professor Adam, doesn't know we're just going through the motions. He doesn't understand that nothing he's saying really matters anymore. This classroom, and everything that happens inside it, once seemed big and important. Now it all seems silly and insignificant. I try to pay attention, because we're supposed to, but my mind can't focus on the present. It's too busy thinking about the future. A future where every life in this room is in jeopardy.

Every one of the eighteen years I've been alive has been leading up to what is going to happen in less than forty-eight hours—on Assignment Day—when the path of the rest of my life will be determined, just as it has been for every eighteen-year-old for as long as anyone can say. On Assignment Day, my classmates and I will find out what our adult jobs will be. Some of us will become computer technologists, or doctors, or agriculturists. But some of us will become warriors. Warriors are sent above the sky—to fight in The War—to defend us. They will never return.

The professor stands stiffly at the podium. From this distance, he appears human, but like all professors, he's a robot. The twenty-eight students at the twenty-eight individual desks arranged in four semi-circular rows in front of him sit facing straight ahead. Everything in the room is plain white, except for the blue letters and numbers on the screen behind the

professor's head that illustrate what he's saying. There are no distractions, except for the thoughts running through my brain.

To my right is my sister. We're identical twins. She was born forty seconds before me. Because our names are determined by our birth order, she is Two Thousand Six, and I am Two Thousand Seven. Six and I have the same shade of light-brown hair and the same tiny flecks of gold in our hazel eyes, and we're both exactly five feet three inches tall. But we're far from alike. Her eyes are intensely focused on the lecture.

I glance at my best friend, Ten. I can tell by the glassiness of his eyes that his mind isn't on the lecture at all. Even without looking at my navigator, I know it's almost the end of the school day because Ten's short brown hair, just a bit darker than mine, which starts every day neatly combed flat and parted to one side like all of the other boys, is as tousled as the rules will allow. I think it's because the waves in his hair stage a daily rebellion against the gel used to try to control them. My hair is wavy too, but wavy hair is easier to manage for girls; once hair is gelled and secured in a tight bun—as it is required to be whenever we are in public—it more or less stays there.

“Two Thousand Seven!” Professor Adam calls out.

Hearing my full name rips me to attention.

“Pay attention please, Seven,” he scolds.

I turn my focus to the professor and will myself to think about calculus.

But before Professor Adam starts to speak again ... the room begins to shake.

Just like it has done many times before.

“Down. Down. Duck and cover,” Professor Adam says in the type of singsong voice usually reserved for small children.

I slide to the ground and kneel underneath my desk with my hands over my head. The desks don't move, because they are bolted to the floor, but the

lights above us tremble at the ends of the skinny wires that suspend them. There is a soft *boom, boom, boom* ...

We all know why everything is shaking. It's because of The War. Above the sky, a battle is raging. Every once in a while, The War intensifies so horribly that everything shakes and we feel how very close we are to danger. Even though the shaking has happened many times in my life, my pulse still quickens, wondering if this will be the time that The War will break through the sky and make everything crumble into dust.

I don't like that The War is intensifying so close to Assignment Day.

"Psst," I hear someone say.

I cringe and turn my head just enough to confirm what I already know: the "psst" is from Twelve. As always, every strand of his thick, black hair is in perfect position.

"Don't 'psst' me," I hiss at him.

Twelve's gaze moves over my body. Suddenly, I feel self-conscious about the way my white jumpsuit hugs the curves of my chest, my hips, and my bottom. The jumpsuits hug everyone's bodies just as tightly as they hug mine, but other people don't look at one another the way Twelve is looking at me now. It isn't allowed.

Twelve has been tormenting me ever since kindergarten. On the first day of class, he sat down next to me and watched me cut a circle from a piece of pink colored paper. Him staring at me made me so nervous that my hands shook. But when I finally finished cutting, I was proud of my little circle.

Twelve looked at my circle and smirked. "You cut yucky."

I stared at the pink circle that I held in my hand. Twelve was right: it was ugly. The edges were raggedy and jagged. It certainly didn't look like the pretty orange circle that Twelve had just finished cutting out. I felt my cheeks redden. I felt inadequate. I wanted to cry, but somehow I knew that I shouldn't let the tears flow in front of Twelve. As I turned away from him,

Ten caught my eye. He wrinkled his nose at Twelve. Fortunately, Twelve didn't see it, but unfortunately, I giggled.

"What's so funny?" Twelve demanded.

"Nothing," I said.

Twelve grabbed my pathetic paper circle and ripped it into a bunch of tiny pink pieces. I started crying. Twelve laughed so hard that I thought he might pee himself, but sadly, he didn't.

That was the beginning of the worst relationship I've ever had. Over the years, Twelve has continued to tear me down every chance he gets. Ten says I shouldn't let Twelve get to me. And he's right. But I can't help it.

Twelve creeps closer to me. We're still under our desks because the room is still shaking, and so Professor Adam can't see us.

Twelve smiles. "I was just thinking about what it would be like if you and I get paired together."

My stomach tightens. On Assignment Day, after we receive our jobs, every eighteen-year-old will be paired with someone of the opposite gender—except for the warriors; warriors are not paired. Each pair is given a domicile, where they must live together for the rest of their lives and raise their children. Being paired with Twelve would be torture.

"If we get paired," I growl to Twelve, "I'll volunteer to be a warrior."

He rolls his eyes at me, as if I just said the stupidest thing ever, "You can't *volunteer* to become a warrior. You have to get chosen. Besides, you know what happens to warriors, don't you?"

I do. At least I think I do. No one knows for sure.

"They die," Twelve says. "All of them die."

"Being dead would be better than being paired with you," I shoot back.

I don't want to die, but I don't think I could survive living in the same domicile as Twelve. Or raising children with him.

And, if I am paired with Twelve, we'll be expected to fall in love with each other.

I could never make myself love Twelve, no matter how hard I tried.

* * *

When the chimes indicate the end of the school day, I jump to my feet and race out of the classroom. I go to the place where only one person will come looking for me. And he does.

“What’d Twelve say this time?” Ten asks as he slides into our little hiding spot, inside the aerial drone tunnel under the tenth floor walkway, high above the plaza garden, close to the sky. Delivery drones carrying small brown packages whiz through the air above our heads.

“He wants to be paired with me,” I say, hugging my knees against my chest to make room for Ten.

Ten sits down opposite me. “There’s no way they’ll pair you with Twelve. They monitor us for compatibility. I’m sure they’ve noticed that the two of you don’t get along. They’ll most likely pair you with ...”

I raise my eyebrows, holding back a smile. “Who?”

Ten looks away. “Who do you think?”

“You?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

My cheeks flush with heat. “You’re probably right.”

Ten and I have been best friends ever since we were babies. My first memory of him is from when we were three years old. It’s actually my first memory of anything. I was standing at the window of my family’s domicile. I looked far across the way and saw little Ten standing at his family’s window. I wanted to reach out and touch him, but he was so far away that I couldn’t. I pressed my palms against the glass of my window. Ten smiled and put his palms up against his window. And I *felt* him. I felt the warmth of his hands through the cold glass. Or I imagined I did.

My next memory of Ten is from when we were in preschool. I was sitting on a cushion in the story circle of the four-year-olds’ classroom,

looking at an old-fashioned picture book with cardboard pages that you turn with your hands. When I looked up, I noticed Ten sitting on the floor by the craft table, all alone. He looked so miserable. I wanted to make him feel better. I put down the book and walked over to him.

I stopped right in front of Ten and held up my hands, palms facing him, as if there were an imaginary window between us. He put his hands up too, palms facing mine.

Very slowly, we moved our hands closer and closer together. Until ... they touched. Ever so gently. A warm, tingly feeling traveled from my fingers, through my arms, to my heart. All of the sadness drained from Ten's face. His expression became one of pure delight.

Suddenly, a robot grabbed my arm and yanked us apart. "You must not touch," our preschool teacher, Miss Barbara, admonished.

Ten's face fell. His happiness instantly transforming into hurt.

I never forgave Miss Barbara for that, but I guess I should. She was just following the rules. We're not allowed to touch non-family members, unless we're paired with them. And even then, only in private.

If Ten and I are paired, we'll be allowed to touch each other. A tingle springs from my chest and dances over my body. I take a breath to make the feeling go away and slide close to the end of the tunnel. Just centimeters separate me from a ten-story drop to the plaza garden below.

"You're such a daredevil," Ten says moving up next to me. "Better watch out or they'll make you a warrior."

I look toward the sky. It's already starting to turn that orange-red color that means the day is fading. "I wonder what it's like above the sky," I say hesitantly. We're not supposed to talk about Up There, but it's hard not to think about it given that, soon, some of the people who I've grown up with will be going there. "Aren't you even curious?" I ask. Ten is curious about everything.

"I know what it's like," he says, shifting uncomfortably. "It's The War."

“But what *is* The War? What does it look like?” I keep my voice soft. We shouldn’t be talking about this.

Ten squeezes his hands together tightly. “Do you remember when Mr. Fifty-three fell off the walkway?”

“I think he jumped—”

“It doesn’t matter whether he fell or jumped. Remember what he looked like afterward? Bloody and deformed?”

I try not to picture it, but my mind instantly calls up the image of Mr. Fifty-three lying on a flowerbed. His flesh torn. His head at a right angle to his body. The red of his blood nearly matched the red of the roses. I remember staring at him as my mom tried to pull me away.

“Mommy, aren’t you going to take him to the hospital and fix him?” I asked her. My mom is a doctor. Even at five years old, I’d already heard countless stories of the sick people she helped make all better. I didn’t understand why she wasn’t helping Mr. Fifty-three.

“I can’t, Seven,” she said. “I wish I could. But he’s just too broken. He has to stay dead.”

I’d never seen a dead person before.

I shake away the memory and look back at Ten.

“*That’s* what The War looks like,” he says roughly. He scoots back from the edge and gets to his feet. “We’re going to be late for evening recreation.”

I look down at the roses far below us. Beautiful and lush. Wetted years ago by the blood of Mr. Fifty-three.

Suddenly, I feel the danger of being so close to the edge. I slide back and follow Ten up to the safety of the walkway.

* * *

“Today, we are going to play a game called War,” a deep-voiced man says. He is big and muscular, and his skin is dark, almost black. I don’t recall

having seen him before. I wonder if he's a human or a robot until I notice beads of sweat on his forehead. Robots don't sweat.

For the past year, one day per week, our evening recreation period has been decidedly different. Instead of the usual physical fitness activities, like jogging, push-ups, and squats, we've been doing tasks that involve intricate problem solving, like fixing a malfunctioning computer or building an aerial delivery drone. Of course, we all know why. We're being tested to determine our assignments. Once assignments are given, they cannot be changed, and so the Decision Makers need to be sure they're making the right choices.

Although my classmates and I are standing in the entry room for the gymnasium, it's obvious that this evening we'll be doing another test. It sounds like we're going to be tested for warrior skills. It seems strange that they would wait so late to test us for warrior aptitude.

The man tells us that we've each been assigned to one of two teams: blue or green. There are fourteen people on each team. We are already wearing colored jumpsuits over our white ones. Mine is green. Ten is next to me in a blue jumpsuit. Six is on my other side, also in blue.

The man holds up a thick, black, L-shaped object, about twice the size of his hand. My curiosity ignites, cooled by apprehension.

"This is a weapon," the man says, offering it to me.

I hold out my hands, and he places the weapon onto them. I almost drop it, because it's much heavier than I expected. I finally get control of it, gripping it awkwardly with both hands. My cheeks burn with embarrassment.

Some people give a stifled giggle.

"Quiet," the man growls, instantly silencing them. He turns to me. *"Hold it like this,"* he says, grasping a make-believe weapon in the air. I hold the weapon the way he demonstrates, both hands on the shorter bottom piece. Then he points to a tiny, green, glowing dot on the wall in front of

me. “That light is coming from your weapon.” With his finger, he draws an imaginary circle over the center of Twelve’s chest and says, “This is a ‘vital area.’ Shine your light on this boy’s vital area.”

I move the weapon until the green light originating from it lands on the center of Twelve’s chest. Twelve cocks his head, trying to look brave, but I see uneasiness rising on his face.

“Finger on the trigger.” The man flicks my right index finger downward using his finger. For a split second, I feel his skin against mine. My face flushes, hot and numb. My heart pounds in my throat. *This man TOUCHED me.*

The mouths of my classmates gape, their eyes shift uneasily, and their bodies are as stiff as if the touch happened to them instead of me.

It was just his finger touching my finger, but non-family members are not allowed to touch. That’s a rule. This man is the first adult I’ve ever seen break that rule. I wait for a security drone to come swallow him up and take him away to be punished, but nothing happens.

I feel less safe now than a moment ago. I slip my trembling index finger into the little opening in the base of the weapon, and rest it against a piece of metal sticking out there.

“Press the trigger,” the man says so softly that I’m not sure whether I heard him right.

“What happens when she presses the trigger?” Twelve squeaks.

The man shakes his head abruptly, dismissing Twelve’s question. “PRESS THE TRIGGER!” he bellows.

His voice sends a jolt into me so unexpected that I tighten my grip on the weapon. White light shoots out of the front of it, heading toward Twelve. At the same time, the weapon shoves itself back at me, almost hitting me in the face. The chest of Twelve’s jumpsuit illuminates with gushes of red light, like blood flowing from a large, invisible wound, as

Twelve's body slams into the wall with so much force that there is a loud metallic boom when he hits it. He slides to the floor, his eyes wide open.

"What happened to him?" I ask, my heart racing.

"You killed him. He's dead," the man says calmly.

"What?" Twelve croaks.

The man rolls his eyes. "Relax, it's only a game." He pushes a button and the gymnasium door opens. The light extinguishes from Twelve's jumpsuit, leaving it plain blue once again. "Get up, Two Thousand Twelve."

The man turns to the rest of us and gestures to the rack inside the gymnasium door. "Everyone take a weapon and proceed into the arena. Your objective is to kill as many people on the opposite team as you can. If you don't hit a vital area, they don't die." He looks at Twelve and continues, "Once you're dead, you're useless, so try not to die."

The testing sessions are always like this. We're given very little instruction, and then we're thrown into the task. They're evaluating us to see how well we can figure things out on our own.

I throw an uncertain glance to Ten and Six and race into the arena. I already have a weapon, and so I take this opportunity to get a head start.

The gymnasium is dark, but I can distinguish panels of portable wall scattered about and piles of cardboard boxes. I run deep into the room and hide behind some boxes. Far away, I hear people yelling. Squeals of pain. Bodies slamming into things. The sounds are getting closer. I peek around the edge of a box and see a girl in a blue jumpsuit "kill" a boy in a green jumpsuit. I'm not sure who they are; I can't make out their faces in the darkness. The boy moans in pain and crumples onto the floor. The girl steps over the boy's body as if he's a discarded object and heads toward me.

Now I can see the killer girl well enough to identify her by her dark skin, black hair, and hooked nose; she's Three. I shine the light of my weapon on her vital area and quickly press the trigger. In that same instant, Three whips her weapon toward me. As red light spills across Three's chest,

a sharp sting hits my left arm and red light streams down it. I grit my teeth to prevent a scream of pain from alerting other people to my location.

I've been hurt, but I'm not dead. Three is.

Three stares up at me as I move past her, her face contorted with distress. Strangely, other than her rapid breathing, she lies completely motionless.

As I direct my attention forward, a weapon appears from around the edge of a wall. And then a boy's face. It's Ten.

I run to him, still watching my surroundings for possible dangers. As I slip behind Ten's wall, I notice red light dripping down both of his legs.

"Does it hurt a lot?" I ask, gesturing to his legs.

"When it first happened, it felt almost as bad as breaking my ankle did when I was a kid," he says. "Now it's just throbbing. The worst part is, the red light makes me easier to spot."

I show him my left arm. It's throbbing too. I think the jumpsuit is producing the uncomfortable sensation by intermittently constricting, never quite releasing its grip.

"It's only red on one side," Ten says. "Try to keep the light hidden against your body."

I smile. "You're not supposed to give me helpful tips. I'm on the other team."

"I guess I missed that rule. The only rule I heard was that you're supposed to kill as many people on the other team as you can."

"Then I guess we should try to kill each other." My heart speeds up, anticipating the pain.

Ten shakes his head. "Are you kidding? I'm not going to kill you."

"The game probably won't end until one of us is dead." If I have to die, I want Ten to kill me. Then he'll be there to comfort me when I'm hurting.

"I'll see you at dinner." Ten turns away, heading back into the game.

"You're not going to try to kill me?"

“I’m surprised *you* didn’t already try to kill *me*. You’re the one who wants to be a warrior.”

I wanted to know what it’s like above the sky, and now I do. *This* is what it’s like: people killing one another with weapons. And when they kill someone, they really die, like Mr. Fifty-three.

“I don’t want to be a warrior,” I say, finally certain of that.

“Good,” Ten says. He glances around the edge of the wall and then disappears past it. I peer around the wall and watch him. He gets safely to another hiding spot, and I exhale. I didn’t want to see him die.

I go in the other direction. I don’t want to risk encountering Ten again in this game. We’re already probably going to be scolded for not killing each other when we had the chance.

The gymnasium is quiet, except for soft sounds of pain, I assume from the dead. I pass a whimpering blond-haired boy in a green jumpsuit, Nine. Red light spills from his chest. His left leg lies at an awkward angle, bent at the knee and wedged beneath his other leg.

“Help me, somebody, please!” he whispers.

I crouch down next to him. “What’s wrong?”

“My leg. It hurts,” he says. “And I can’t move it.” His voice rises with worry. “I can’t move my body at all—” His eyes shift away from mine, and panic floods his face. “Seven, look behind you!” he shouts.

I turn and see Twelve standing just a few feet away, his weapon raised. I shine my light on his chest, but he kicks the weapon from my hand before I can press the trigger. I curl my body into a ball, so he can’t get his light on my vital area, and I reach for my fallen weapon. It’s just outside my grasp.

“Take mine,” Nine moans.

Nine’s weapon is close enough to reach, but I notice something. On my weapon there is a little red light on the base. It’s lit. On Nine’s weapon, the light is off. *His weapon is dead, just like him.*

Twelve smiles. “Go ahead, take Nine’s weapon.”

Twelve must know that Nine's weapon is dead. I shake my head.

"Well, you'd better do something," Twelve says.

"Why?" I ask, feeling bolder than usual. "You can't get to my vital area when I'm like this."

"No." Twelve shines his light on my left leg. My pulse races. "But I can get you in the leg. And that'll hurt. A lot. Eventually, I'm going to kill you. Why don't you save yourself some pain? Just lie down, and I'll kill you nice and easy and quick."

"No," I say, staring at him.

Light erupts from Twelve's weapon, and pain worse than any I've ever experienced takes hold of my right arm.

"Ow!" I yell. "I thought ... you were going to ... get my leg."

He smirks. "Oh, sorry." He puts his light on my left leg. "Now I'm going to get your leg."

Light erupts from his weapon again, and pain rips into me. I clutch my leg to my chest even though it begs to extend. I can't risk exposing my vital area.

"Twelve! What are you doing?" a girl's voice calls out from behind me. I recognize the voice instantly. *Six*.

"The vital areas are on our backs also!" Twelve shouts to *Six*. "Kill *Seven*!"

"I'm not killing my sister," she says.

He shrugs. "Then I'll kill you both."

As he raises his weapon toward her, *Six* ducks behind a tall box. She peeks her head and weapon out. Twelve scrambles behind a wall and pokes his head and weapon out too.

"You're not supposed to kill me," *Six* says to him. "We're on the same team."

"The instruction was to kill as many people on the other team as you can, not to ensure the survival of those on your own team," he says.

Light erupts from Six's weapon, and Twelve cries out as red light splashes down his left shoulder. I use the distraction to dive forward and grab my weapon, but before I can use it, light surges toward me from Twelve's weapon.

I collapse next to Nine, agony burning through my chest. My whole body is paralyzed, except for my head. The red light bouncing off the walls and boxes around us has doubled. *I'm dead.*

Six kneels by my side. "Are you okay?"

"I guess so," I say, "but I can't move my body. I think the jumpsuit paralyzes you when you die. That must be why the dead people just lie there."

Suddenly, Six raises her weapon and white light blasts from it. Twelve moans in pain. I lift my head just in time to see him fall to the ground, the center of his chest drenched in red light.

I look back at Six. "You killed Twelve?" I ask her.

She nods.

And then she falls to the floor. Between me and Nine. Red light spilling from her back. I whip my head around to see who killed her, but the killer is already gone.

"That *really* hurt." Six winces. I can tell she's trying to move her body, but can't. "I'm paralyzed. You're right; something happens to the jumpsuit when you—"

A girl's bloodcurdling scream comes from behind a pile of boxes. And then a thud. The entire gymnasium goes dark. Even the red light from our jumpsuits has been extinguished.

"I think the game is over," I say. I have a feeling that everyone on either the green team or the blue team is now dead.

And then there is a loud click. White light floods the gymnasium. My paralysis instantly disappears. Six and I get to our feet. Nine crawls into a

sitting position, appearing too weak to stand. I look for Twelve and see that he has vanished.

“Proceed to the entry room for debriefing,” a male voice—that I’m sure belongs to the weapons instructor—says over the speakers.

Even with the gymnasium lights on, it’s hard to tell which way is out. The obstacles from the game are disorienting. Once Nine is standing, Six and I lead the way, walking in as straight a path as possible until we find one of the gymnasium walls. We follow the wall until we find the exit.

A few people have already gathered in the gymnasium entry room. They’re slumped against the wall, wearing just their white jumpsuits. Some of them look as if they’re still paralyzed, but I’m sure they’re merely exhausted. Twelve is among them.

I unzip my green jumpsuit and hang it on the rack next to the others. Then I sit against the wall, next to Three. I feel like I should apologize for killing her, but no one else is speaking. I give her a little nod and she nods back; apparently all is forgiven. Six sits by my side. Nine sinks down beside her.

Ten enters the room next. His eyes scan until he finds me, but his easy smile doesn’t come. He removes his blue jumpsuit and then sits next to Nine, keeping his head down.

Once everyone is back in the room, the weapons instructor enters. “As always, you are not to discuss this activity with anyone, not even each other,” he says in a low voice. “You are dismissed.”

People slowly rise to their feet.

“Aren’t you going to say which team won?” Twelve mumbles.

Everyone freezes in place.

The man walks over to Twelve and puts his large head right in front of Twelve’s face. “Did you *not* hear me?”

Twelve bristles. “I was just curious.”

“I said, ‘You are dismissed,’” the man growls. My skin turns cold.

Twelve nods and backs toward the door. As soon as he's close to the exit, he gives the man one final uneasy glance and then nervously slinks out of the room.

The rest of us remain immobile.

"YOU ARE ALL DISMISSED!" the man bellows.

We rush out of the room as if our legs can't carry us fast enough.

Once I'm safely in the hallway, I feel my anxiety grow, rather than diminish.

We have just completed the most important test of our lives. The results of this test will help determine our fates. The day after tomorrow, about half my class will be selected to be warriors. They will be sent to The War. A war like this test.

But the war above the sky isn't a game.

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THURSDAY, JUNE 11

1827

“*Bienvenidos!*” Miss Teresa says to me with a smile. She’s sitting in her usual spot, at Reception Desk 8 of Puerto Vallarta Restaurant. Her dark-brown hair is pulled back into an always-perfect bun. She holds out her hand.

I pull my thoughts away from Assignment Day—where they’ve been ever since the war game—and place my forearm above her hand, careful not to touch her. It isn’t against the rules to touch Miss Teresa, because she’s a robot. But touching robots feels weird. Their skin is somewhat rubbery and it isn’t warm like human skin.

“*Buenas tardes, Seven,*” Miss Teresa says, indicating that she’s done scanning the chip in my arm and checking my weight on the scale beneath my feet. “*Por favor agregue su familia en La Mesa de Treinta.*”

“*Gracias,*” I say to her.

“*El gusto es mío,*” she responds.

Miss Teresa always speaks to me in Spanish because she’s registered it as my preference.

I learned Spanish from my mom. She learned it from her father. When I was younger, my family tried to speak only Spanish whenever we were in our domicile, but most of the time we ended up forgetting and speaking English. I taught Ten a few words and phrases in Spanish. Sometimes we use it as our own special language.

I step out of the way so Ten can check in.

“*Bienvenidos!*” Miss Teresa says to him, again she punctuates the greeting with a smile. She holds out her hand and Ten puts his arm above it. “Good evening, Ten,” she says a moment later. “Please join your family at Table Thirty.”

“Thank you,” Ten says, staring at the floor. Any human would sense that something is troubling him. But Miss Teresa won’t.

She smiles. “My pleasure.”

We wait for Six to check in and then the three of us proceed into the festive dining room. Small, intricately-cut, red and green paper squares hang from strings crisscrossing the ceiling. The colorful murals on the dining room walls contrast sharply with the plainness of our clothes; all of the adults wear dark-blue jumpsuits; the children wear white ones.

Lively music plays over the speakers. The songs are sung in Spanish, and I can occasionally distinguish a word or two, but I can’t understand enough to tell what the songs are about.

Of all the restaurants, this one is my favorite. I’d like to eat here more often, but we must dine at every restaurant as dictated by our monthly schedule, so we only get to eat here once a week.

Tonight, even my favorite restaurant can’t lighten my mood.

My dad looks up as Ten, Six, and I approach our table. “Hey, kids!” he says.

“Hi,” we murmur as we take our seats.

As usual, my family and Ten’s family are dining together. His parents are good friends with my parents, and my little brother and his little sister are both eight years old and as inseparable as Ten and I.

“How was school today?” Ten’s dad asks us. Like Ten, he has brown hair, brown eyes, and a muscled build.

“Good,” Six says with a blank expression.

“Okay,” I mutter.

“Fine,” Ten answers, keeping his head down, eyes focused on the red and green tablecloth.

“Are you feeling ill?” my mom asks us.

“We had a tiring day,” Six explains.

“Today was your second to last day of high school!” my dad exclaims, smiling broadly. My dad has been abnormally cheerful about *everything* for about a week now. It’s quite a departure from his usual quiet, serious self. It’s similar to the way he acted when my little brother, Forty-one, was born. Forty-one’s birth wasn’t the happy occasion that most births are. Just before he was delivered, my mom’s uterus ruptured. My mom nearly died. Forty-one nearly died too. I know my dad was terrified that he was going to lose them, even though he didn’t say it. He must be worried about Assignment Day. About the possibility of losing Six, or me, or both of us.

My parents and I haven’t talked about Assignment Day. It isn’t forbidden to talk about it, but I haven’t brought it up because I don’t want to upset them.

“I wish we didn’t have medical evaluations tomorrow,” Six laments. I’m surprised she’s focused on that rather than on Assignment Day. But, maybe, Assignment Day is just too overwhelming for her to think about.

Our dad nods. “Nobody likes them, but they help keep you healthy. If they find anything wrong, they can fix it before it becomes a problem.”

He’s right. When I was twelve years old, my medical evaluation scan showed that I had developed a type of brain cancer called glioblastoma multiforme. I remember my mother showing me the bright red spot on my scan where the tumor was growing inside my head. She told me that, long ago, that type of cancer was nearly one hundred percent fatal, but now we have a medicine that cures it. That medicine cured me. If the Decision Makers choose me to become a doctor, maybe someday I’ll help develop a medicine like that, one that saves lives.

“Food’s here!” my dad declares cheerfully.

Robots in white puffy blouses and colorful flowing skirts surround our table. With a flourish of their arms, they present plates piled with veggies, beans, and fruits and say in unison, “Enjoy your meals!”

Forty-one piles food into his mouth as if he hasn’t eaten for days. Our dad eats the same way. Forty-one looks like a smaller version of our dad. They both have a wiry build, dark-brown eyes, and perfectly-straight, dark-brown hair that hardly needs to be gelled to stay in place. Six and I have our mom’s slim build, and her hair and eyes.

As usual, Forty-one is the first to finish eating. He stares longingly at the food on our plates as we continue to eat. It makes me feel guilty when he does that.

“I wish I could have an *adult* portion of food,” Forty-one says. “How am I going to get big if I don’t eat like a big person?”

My mom smiles at him. “You are getting exactly the amount of food you need to grow into a very strong and healthy big person.”

Forty-one looks to my dad as if requesting a second-opinion. Like my mom, my dad is a doctor.

“Your mom’s right,” my dad says, stuffing another forkful of food into his mouth.

“Is it okay if I take a walk after dinner?” Ten asks his parents.

“Of course,” his mom says.

“May I go for a walk too?” I ask my parents.

“Sure,” my dad says.

“Can Forty-seven and I go for a walk also?” Forty-one asks, including Ten’s sister in his inquiry.

“The two of you have recreation,” my dad answers. After-dinner recreation is mandatory for children under twelve years old.

Forty-one sighs.

Ten and I empty our plates, and then, without a word, Ten gets up and heads toward the exit. I follow him.

As soon as we're outside the restaurant, he turns to me with a playful sparkle in his eyes. It's as if a switch flipped inside him. "Let's get out of here!" he says, and then he takes off running.

I sprint after him. "Where are we going?"

"Anywhere," he shouts back.

We dash down the stairs that lead to the plaza. The plaza is a spacious place with a sprawling network of pathways leading to cozy alcoves for people to gather in. The middle of the plaza holds a magnificent garden where blossoming vines envelop towers two stories tall and the paths are lined with flowers of all different colors. On either end of the plaza are glass-enclosed elevators that hardly ever operate; if you're able-bodied enough to use the stairs, you do.

Because everyone else is still at dinner, the plaza is empty. We race along the deserted paths, stopping to slip out of view whenever we spot one of the hulking, white, boxlike security drones on patrol.

When we arrive at the garden, I inhale the sweet scent. I feel my shoulders finally relax. "The flowers smell wonderful," I say.

"Let's see which one smells the best," Ten proposes. It's a strange thing for him to say. He's never cared much about flowers. He's more into mechanical things than natural ones.

"Okay," I say, eager for something to distract me from the Assignment Day thoughts working their way back up into my consciousness.

Ten leans close to a collection of tiny purple flowers clustered at the ends of thin green stalks. Then he shakes his head. "Hardly anything."

I take a whiff of some bright orange flowers with dark red streaks that plunge into their deep centers. "These just smell like ... air."

Ten laughs and tries a large yellow flower with numerous narrow petals. "Almost nothing."

"How about the roses?" I suggest.

Ten sniffs a dark-red one. "That's good."

I try a yellow one with a blush of pink at the edges of its petals. “Just a little scent here, but it’s pretty.”

Ten tries a light-blue one and shakes his head. “Not as good as the red one.” He walks around, sniffing and sniffing until he stops near the base of a tower and leans into a tangle of vines bearing tiny, white, star-shaped flowers. “Check these out,” he says to me.

I bend over next to him and sniff the delicate, curved petals. “That’s it!” I say. “These are the flowers that make the whole garden smell so wonderful.” Ten’s face is just centimeters away from mine, so close that I can feel the warmth radiating from him. I look into his eyes and my entire body flushes with heat.

“I can’t believe we’ve never done this before,” Ten says, but I don’t think he’s talking about sniffing the flowers.

I hear voices. People are starting to stroll into the plaza. “The restaurants must be emptying,” I whisper, without looking away from him.

He smiles. “Let’s go watch the fish.”

I take a breath, trying to get my brain back from the cloud to which it has ascended. “Okay.”

Ten and I rush to the fish tank in the center of the garden. We need to get where we’re going before anyone else arrives. There are rows of benches where people sit to admire the fish. But we won’t be sitting on the benches.

Ten pulls a silver beaded chain from the neck of his jumpsuit. He runs the small metal tag that hangs from the chain over the wall beside the fish tank, and a door slides open. We slip into the room beyond the doorway, and Ten hastily scans the door closed.

Ahead of us, a lattice of pipes runs from the floor to the level of the top of the fish tank, four stories up. We hoist ourselves onto the bottom pipe and climb to a flat area about twenty feet off the ground, where we settle down to watch the fish.

At least a hundred silver fish—each about the size of my forearm—undulate as they swim between stacks of gray rocks. Occasionally, one of the fish suddenly speeds up or slows down or changes direction. Watching fish is a little like watching aerial drones, but fish are much more mesmerizing. I think it’s because they don’t move like they’re on a mission. They move like they’re at leisure, like people sometimes do.

We aren’t supposed to be in this secret room behind the fish tank, but Ten and I have been coming here for years. Ten won’t tell me how his strange charm—his “dog tag”—is able to open the doors to the restricted areas. But his tag has always granted us access to anywhere we’ve wanted to go.

If we ever get caught using Ten’s tag for this purpose, we will certainly be punished; fortunately, we never have. Ten’s dad works in technology, and Ten knows lots of security secrets, like the fact that the cameras mounted in the hallways and common rooms are completely unmonitored. The cameras used to be monitored a long time ago, but it was determined that monitoring was a waste of resources, because nothing important was ever discovered by the monitors. So they were shut down. The only things we have to concern ourselves with are other people and the security drones.

The first time Ten and I snuck in here, we were twelve years old. I remember being completely awed by this place, with its pipes extending up to the ceiling and the weird bubbly noises and nobody to tell us what we could and couldn’t do. We climbed the pipes. And swung from them by our arms. And hung from them by our legs. And then we settled into the same spot we’re sitting in now, breathless, and I said to Ten, “*Quiero tocarte.*”

“Are you talking in Spanish?” Ten asked me.

“Sí,” I said.

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘I want to touch you.’”

Ten looked at me sideways. “Why?”

“Because it feels good,” I said, remembering the only time I’d ever touched Ten. At preschool. Even though it was a sad memory, I smiled, recalling how the warmth of his hands traveled through my fingers to my heart.

“*Está bien,*” Ten agreed.

And so I held up my hands, palms facing him, and Ten held up his hands, his palms facing mine. Ever so slowly, we moved our hands closer and closer together. Until they touched. Ever so gently. Tingling radiated through me, like a warm shower *inside* my body.

Ten pulled his palms partly away from mine. “We’re not supposed to —”

“I know,” I said softly. And then I held my breath, not wanting our touch to end.

Ten bit his lower lip. “Maybe it’s okay as long as we don’t do it in front of anyone.”

I nodded. “Only when we’re in private.”

“Okay.” Ten smiled. And then he pressed his hands fully against mine. I closed my eyes, letting the heat swallow me up.

From that moment on, sometimes, when it’s just the two of us, Ten and I touch. I want to touch him right now. I almost *need* to.

I look at Ten’s hands, all grown up, like mine. “*Quiero tocarte,*” I say.

Ten smiles at me, without a hint of hesitation. “*Está bien.*”

He puts his palms up in the air. I raise my hands and place them opposite his, just a few centimeters away. Tension rises deep inside me, but it’s not a worried tension, it’s an excited one, full of anticipation. I squeeze my muscles tight, trying to stop my body from trembling. We move our hands closer and closer together. Until they touch. My body fills with unbearable, incredible heat. My breaths come fast and shallow, as if my lungs are starving for air. Our touches have felt more intense lately, but tonight, the feeling is the strongest it’s ever been.

As we stare into each other's eyes, hardly blinking, Ten's face grows sad, almost imperceptibly so.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

Ten exhales. "That warrior test we had today ... the war game ..."

"What about it?" I ask.

He swallows. "The blue team won."

My heart beats faster. "How do you know that?"

"At the end of the game, I was still alive," he says. "Just before the gymnasium went dark ... I made the last kill."

The heat in my skin instantly transforms into an icy dread. "Succeeding at the task isn't the most important factor in the Decision Makers' decision," I say. That's what we were told. Still, fear courses through me. *Ten won the war game.*

He presses his palms against mine so tightly that our hands throb, like the beating of our hearts. I close my eyes and feel the throbbing spread through me until my entire body is pulsing with energy. Energy that steals the focus of every bit of my mind and takes every ounce of my strength to contain it. I feel like I won't be able to contain it much longer. And I don't want to.

Ten and I stay like that until after the plaza lights darken for the night. When I finally glance at my navigator, the time is 2052. "It's almost curfew," I say to Ten.

We release each other's still-throbbing hands and silently climb down to the floor. Even though it's late, Ten walks with me all the way to my family's domicile. He's been doing that a lot recently.

"Goodnight," he says when we arrive.

"Goodnight," I say, suppressing the urge to invite Ten inside. I wish we could spend the night sitting side-by-side at my family's window, looking up at the starry sky. I want to be near him tonight. But bringing a non-family member into one's domicile isn't allowed.

I scan open the entrance and go inside. Then I scan the door closed again with a quiet, contemplative-looking Ten on the other side.

My body slack with disappointment, I walk down the hallway to the gathering room. Six is sitting on the couch, reading something on her tablet. She's wearing pajamas—which look nearly identical to our jumpsuits, but are made of a thinner, more-breathable material—and her hair is loose, in preparation for bed. Judging from her droopy eyelids, I assume she's rereading an enrichment book, one of the two hundred and eight optional-to-read books in our libraries. Six and I have read each book at least once. Although I look forward to having something new to read after Assignment Day—when the adult books will be added to our tablets—I find it soothing to reread my favorites. That was my plan for tonight. I was going to read a book from my childhood, one my mom read to Six and me many times, *Little Wizard*. It's about a boy who uses his magical powers to end the war above the sky.

Six swipes off her tablet, folds it, and slips it into its docking station on the wall. I collapse onto the couch next to her. “Why aren't you in bed?” I ask.

“I can't sleep,” she says.

“Why not?” I don't look at her. Sometimes, it's easier to talk to Six in parallel rather than looking into her eyes, because her eyes are just like mine. I focus on the darkness outside the window. Lighted delivery drones zip through the sky. Across the way, the window of Ten's domicile is opacified for the night.

In my peripheral vision, I see Six begin to anxiously twirl the ends of her hair with her fingers. “I keep thinking about Assignment Day,” she says.

“What about it?” I'm glad we're finally having this conversation. I hadn't brought up the subject with Six for the same reason I've avoided it with my parents. I didn't want to upset her. But I *do* want to talk about it.

Six inhales deeply. “The Decision Makers aren’t going to pair me with the right person,” she says, her voice catching.

I shake my head. “You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.” The certainty of her tone surprises me.

“Who do you want to be paired with?” I ask. Six has a bunch of male friends, but she’s never expressed a favorite, at least not to me. I didn’t think she cared so much about who was chosen for her.

“Three,” she whispers, as if she’s afraid someone might overhear her.

I’m not sure if I heard her right. “Three?” I ask. Six doesn’t respond. She just stares straight ahead. “But Three is a *female*,” I say.

“Yes,” she says, sounding frustrated.

“Why do you want to be paired with Three?” I ask. When I think of being paired with Ten, of sharing the same domicile with him and sleeping next to him at night, I feel tingly and warm in my chest. I don’t get that feeling when I imagine being paired with anyone else, male or female.

Six lowers her head. “I feel connected with her. In a different way than I do with other people. There’s no one else who I want to spend every moment with. There’s no one else who I want to touch.” She smiles and hugs herself tightly. “Three told me she wants to touch me too.”

My eyes widen with shock. “Did you do it?”

She looks at me as if I’ve completely lost my mind. “Of course not.”

I take a deep breath. “I’ve touched Ten.”

“In preschool,” she says. “I remember.”

“We did it after that too,” I admit. “Recently.”

Six’s mouth gapes in horror. “What if you’d been caught? You’d be *isolated* for months.”

Isolation is the second-worst punishment there is. People over eleven years old who are caught breaking a rule are locked in a special booth—where they see and hear no one—for at least twenty-four hours. When they reappear, they always seem changed. Twelve was isolated once, for two

days, because he spoke in an angry voice to Professor Adam and called him a “simple-minded machine.” After Twelve’s isolation, he was always quiet and obedient in class, at least whenever he was in view of the professor.

“Touching Ten is worth the risk,” I whisper.

Her eyes shine with wonder mixed with fear. “What is it like?”

“When I touch him, I can feel warm energy traveling through every nerve in my body,” I say.

She gives a very small smile. “They’ll probably pair you with him.”

A sense of longing squeezes my chest until it hurts. “I hope so.” Even though everyone seems to think that Ten and I will be paired together—including me—there’s certainly no guarantee.

“I wish we could choose who we’re paired with,” Six says, her voice shaky.

“Me too,” I say.

Six begins to cry, and I cover her hand with mine. To comfort her. To comfort both of us. We haven’t touched each other since we were small children. Now it feels awkward, but at the same time, strangely soothing.

I sit silently, listening to her sob until, completely drained, she falls asleep. I consider waking her—because we’re only allowed to sleep in our bedroom capsules—but instead, I reset her navigator’s alarm to five minutes before the rest of us will awaken and then quietly crawl into my capsule.

I spend the final moments of the day listening to *Tchaikovsky’s Sleeping Beauty* as I watch illustrations from *Little Wizard* flicker on the ceiling. It takes only three images for my eyes to close and refuse to reopen as I fall into a heavy, stormy sleep.

FRIDAY, JUNE 12

0700

My navigator indicates that I slept nine hours and twenty-two minutes last night, but I don't feel like I slept at all. My morning and afternoon go by in a preoccupied blur. When the chimes indicate the end of our final school day, I can't recall a single lesson Professor Adam gave us. It's as if none of the words he spoke had any meaning.

There's no evening recreation for my classmates and me today. Instead we have appointments for our medical evaluations. I go to my family's domicile to wait for my appointment time. I wish I could be with Ten or Six right now, but they're already at their evaluations. Mine isn't for fifteen minutes. Forty-one is at evening recreation and my mom and dad are still at work, so I have our whole domicile to myself.

I try reading *Little Wizard*, but my gaze drifts along the first sentence over and over: "Every child is born with a purpose in life." I can't make myself read further.

My navigator beeps, startling me. "Seven, it is time to depart for your medical appointment," it says in a cheerful tone.

Sometimes I hate my navigator. We're required to wear it at all times, even during sleep. Its female voice—which sounds human but isn't—usually reminds me of things I don't want to do, like tests and medical appointments. The navigator's voice is always cheery when it tells me about these things. I wish it wouldn't be so inappropriately pleasant.

I slide my feet into my shoes and step out into the hallway. As I scan our domicile closed, my right foot vibrates. My navigator is telling me which way to go. Most people visit the medical center only for their evaluations, every three months. With the maze of corridors that all look alike, it's easy to get lost, and so the navigator is programmed to offer directions.

I'm guided to the stairs—the same ones Ten and I ran down last night. My chest tingles when I think of sitting with him behind the fish tank, touching him, our hands throbbing.

Both of my shoes vibrate. I'm on the second floor. A few turns later, both my shoes vibrate again. I stop at the door to the outpatient clinic and it slides open, as if it were expecting me.

Miss Julie, a blond, fair-skinned robot, is standing behind the counter. She wears a white lab coat over her dark-blue jumpsuit. "Welcome to your medical center," she says, holding out her hand. I place my left forearm above it. "Good afternoon, Two Thousand Seven," she says an instant later.

"Good afternoon, Miss Julie," I say.

She smiles and hands me a tablet. "Please have a seat and answer the questions presented to you. Miss Andrea will be with you shortly."

I walk over to the comfy plush recliners, but I don't bother sitting down. I'm too tense to get comfortable. I scroll down the questionnaire. It's the same sixty-four questions about my body and bodily functions that I must answer at every evaluation: Do I have difficulty falling asleep? Do I experience pain in any part of my body? What is the consistency of my bowel movements?

Immediately after I answer the final question and tap "Done," a door slides open and a robot with light-brown skin and hair enters. I haven't met her before. "Two Thousand Seven?" she asks, looking straight at me.

"Yes," I say.

The robot approaches me. Her gait is almost human, but—like all robots—it’s a bit too stiff. It makes me uncomfortable sometimes that the robots look so much, but not quite exactly, like people. I’m not sure whether I would like it better if they looked exactly human, or if they looked distinctly not human. I have a feeling I would prefer the latter.

I follow Miss Andrea down a plain, white hallway of closed doors. One of them opens as we arrive at it. We enter a small room containing six lockers and a toilet. An antiseptic smell stings my nose.

“Please disrobe and deposit your belongings in the open locker,” Miss Andrea says. And then she “politely” stares at her feet.

I reluctantly pull off my shoes and socks, then my jumpsuit, and finally my underwear, and I place them all into the locker. I swipe my arm to close the locker door, and I rejoin Miss Andrea.

Her gaze moves down my body. She almost looks as if she’s nodding, but she’s not; she’s externally scanning me to ensure that I’ve followed her instructions. Her gaze returns to my eyes. “Please remove your jewelry.”

My fingers jump to my necklace. I’d meant to leave it at home. It’s the most precious thing I have. It belonged to my great grandmother on my dad’s side. She died before I was born. The charm is a silver ring with a tiny white ball—called a pearl—in the center.

I unhook my cherished necklace and secure it in the locker. Miss Andrea’s eyes assess me again, and then she says, “We will now obtain your urine specimen.” She gestures to the toilet. As soon as I sit, warm water washes my bottom and then a little fan dries me off. “Begin urinating,” Miss Andrea says. Her gaze is fixed on me. It makes me uncomfortable.

“Can you please look away?” I ask. I don’t remember other robots watching me while I peed.

“I apologize, but I must supervise the collection of all specimens,” she says. “Please begin urinating now.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. If I don't see her staring at me, this won't be so hard.

Finally, I feel the pee leave me.

"Thank you," Miss Andrea says.

"You're welcome," I say, knowing that the robot will expect this response. It's best to give robots the response they expect. Things go more smoothly that way.

The warm water washes my bottom again. And the little fan dries it.

* * *

Miss Andrea leads me into a room with a softly-glowing, seven-foot-tall ring in the center. If I was wearing clothes, the temperature in this room might be comfortable, but because I am naked, the cool air tenses my skin.

"I'm feeling cold," I tell Miss Andrea.

"I will raise the room temperature," she responds. A moment later, warmth begins to radiate from the walls. "Please place one foot on each of the lighted squares, and raise your arms above your head," Miss Andrea says.

As I step inside the ring, the room lights dim and stars appear on the ceiling. Despite the darkness, I feel even more exposed than I did moments ago. My body is about to be examined in excruciating detail, both inside and out.

"Your scan will now commence," Miss Andrea continues. "Please remain still. Take relaxed breaths."

The scanner comes to life. A bright ring of blue illumination rotates around me, its light inching over my body, as it performs the external scan—where my skin, nails, and hair are carefully checked for abnormalities.

Once it has made a one hundred eighty degree turn, Miss Andrea announces, "We will now begin the internal scan."

The light of the scanner extinguishes. Images are projected on the wall ahead of me. Illustrations from children's picture books. I've seen these same images at every scan since the very first one I can remember. I wonder if adults get different images.

The scanner makes a dull banging sound, as if there are tiny people inside it, trying desperately to break out. Pounding. Beating on the inner walls. The machine probes me with its unperceivable beams of energy as it creates detailed three-dimensional images of my brain, heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, nerves, and blood vessels. My mind drifts to Ten. To the way I felt last night when he touched me. How I felt energy from his hands radiate deep into my body.

"You seem aroused. Try to relax," Miss Andrea says.

Aroused? I've never heard that word before. Based on the context, it means something similar to "tense." But I wasn't feeling tense. I was feeling excited. Excited in a way that only Ten makes me feel. Excited in a way that feels dangerous and wrong. And scary.

I keep my attention fixed on the fairy tale images on the wall until Miss Andrea announces that the scan is complete. She instructs me to step out of the scanner. I take a relieved breath. *My medical evaluation is over.*

Miss Andrea leads me into the empty back hallway and turns left. I shudder. Miss Andrea is not taking me back to the locker room to get dressed. She's leading me *away from* the locker room. My heart beats faster.

We enter a room with a treadmill—like the ones in the adults' recreation room, but this one is surrounded by medical equipment. The air in this room is like ice.

"I'm feeling cold," I tell Miss Andrea, my teeth chattering.

"Due to the nature of this test, I cannot raise the room temperature," she responds. "You should feel warmer shortly. Please step onto the treadmill and place your feet inside the blue square."

Shivering, I do as she says.

Miss Andrea silently proceeds to hook me up to so many gadgets that I feel like I'm becoming part of a machine. I've never had this test before. I try to reassure myself that it's something they do to everyone when they're about to become an adult, but I can't shake the feeling that the reason I'm undergoing this test is that something is wrong with me. *Maybe something abnormal was detected on my scan.*

Miss Andrea wraps a vest-like device around my chest and zips it closed. "You might feel some movement inside the chest piece. This is normal," Miss Andrea tells me. The insides of the device immediately conform to the shape of my body, and I feel something press against my ribs on the left side, moving around a bit. It doesn't hurt. It just feels odd.

Miss Andrea secures a mask to my face. "The mask will provide you with plenty of oxygen. Please breathe normally." Her eyes scan my body, with a little nod of her head. "Are you ready to proceed?" she asks.

I don't feel ready to do *anything*. My chest is compressed inside a strange device. My mouth and nose are covered with a mask that—although it is providing me with enough oxygen that I don't feel lightheaded or anything—makes me anxious. There are sensors all over me and a cuff around each of my arms. This doesn't seem like a routine test; it's just too involved and unpleasant. I'm really worried. I could ask Miss Andrea for an explanation, but all she will do is reassure me. Robots aren't allowed to give any bad news to patients. Only doctors can do that. I wish my mom or dad were here. I want someone to *talk* to me. To tell me what's going on. I lower my head, trying to hide the tears forming in my eyes.

"Good," Miss Andrea says. *She must have thought I nodded yes.* "Please take hold of the padded bar in front of you. In a moment, the platform beneath your feet will begin to move. When it does, start to walk. If you feel any unusual symptoms at all, squeeze the bar firmly with both hands. I will be monitoring you closely throughout the procedure."

The platform starts to move, and so I am forced to walk. Something in the chest piece presses against my ribs. My hot breath blasts against my face whenever I exhale. The cuffs around my arms tighten.

“Excellent job,” Miss Andrea says. “The platform will now move faster, please accelerate your gait to match.”

The platform starts to pass underneath my feet more quickly. I have to jog to keep up. My heart is beating rapidly now, a combination of anxiety and exertion. I feel weird movement again in the chest piece.

“You are doing very well,” Miss Andrea assures me. “I will increase the speed.”

Now I must run in order to keep up with the treadmill. I run fast, then faster still. Faster and faster and faster. Without restraint. Soon, I am running faster than I ever have. I don’t feel any of the “unusual symptoms” that Miss Andrea alluded to. *Nothing is wrong with me. Nothing at all.*

I feel the air enter my lungs. I feel my bare feet pound against the machine. Sweat rolls down my forehead. Sweat forms under the chest piece and drips down my belly. My anxiety melts away, replaced by a new feeling. The feeling is intense. Amazing. Wonderful. I’ve never felt this way before.

I feel ... free.

FRIDAY, JUNE 12

1828

I took a shower after my medical evaluation. I had to. I was sweaty and my appearance was unpleasant. Once I'm back in my jumpsuit, I look up the meaning of the unfamiliar word that Miss Andrea used during my scan: "Aroused." It means: to evoke or awaken a feeling, emotion, or response. A fairly non-specific word. I wonder if Miss Andrea had any idea what kind of feeling I was experiencing in the scanner when I was thinking of Ten. I hope not.

Unfortunately, I'm running late for Celebration Dinner. Every Friday evening, we have a community-wide celebration for no particular reason other than the fact that it is Friday. All of the restaurants are made extra fancy, with white tablecloths, elegant meals, special desserts, and soft music. Then everyone gets together in the plaza for socializing and entertainment. Tonight's entertainment will be the annual performance of *The Woods*. It is the responsibility of the eighteen-year-olds who are due for their Assignment Day to give the annual performance. My classmates and I have been rehearsing for weeks.

The Woods is a collection of fairy tales. Our class voted on who should play each character. I play Little Red Riding Hood, a girl who must walk through the woods to deliver dinner to her granny. I wasn't surprised that Twelve was chosen to play the wolf, a monster who ends up eating Little

Red Riding Hood. Ten was selected to play Beanstalk Boy, a disobedient child who climbs all the way up a magic beanstalk that has grown tall enough to reach the sky. The role fits him well. If there were such things as magic beanstalks, Ten would be first in line to climb one. Six is playing Golden Hair, a girl who is locked in a tower by a witch. Six has to wear a lengthy hairpiece for the role, which she says makes her feel foolish.

As I join the queue at the entryway of Tokyo Restaurant—my family’s assigned restaurant tonight—Twelve steps up behind me. “Hello, little girl,” he says, quoting one of the wolf’s lines to Little Red Riding Hood. And then he puts his face close to my ear. “Why is your hair wet? Did you take a shower in the middle of the day?”

I respond to him with a sharp stare.

“Wait a minute,” he says. “Did they run you on the treadmill at your medical evaluation?” His lips curl into a mean smile, and then he adds, “They only do that to *warriors*.”

My heart pounds. *Could that be true?* I’d assumed they did the treadmill test on me because there was something abnormal on my scan. But the test went well, and afterward, Miss Andrea took me back to the locker room and then sent me away—rather than having me speak with a doctor—and so I was no longer concerned. *Was I put on the treadmill because I am going to be a warrior?*

“*Konnichiwa!*” Miss Hiroe, my greeter for Tokyo Restaurant, says to me. I step forward and place my trembling arm over her hand. Miss Hiroe bows. “Please join your family at Table Fifty-eight.”

“I guess this’ll be your last Celebration Dinner,” Twelve calls out as I walk away. “I hope you enjoy it.”

In a daze, I go to my family’s table, off to the side of the room, next to a virtual window that shows an image of a black mountain with a white peak and a blanket of pink flowers at its base. My family and Ten and his family are already seated.

Six stares at the white tablecloth blankly. I haven't seen her since the end of school today. She wasn't home when I got back from my medical evaluation. I wonder if they ran her on the treadmill too. My stomach twists. *What if we both become warriors?*

I look at Ten. He gives me a small, relaxed smile that makes my chest tingle, before it constricts with anxiety once again. I wish I could talk to him alone right now. I wish I could ask if they put him on the treadmill.

"We're looking forward to your Senior Performance this evening," Ten's mom says to Ten, Six, and me as I take a seat. And then she smiles and turns to my parents. "Remember *our* Senior Performance?"

My mom's face tightens. "Oh yes," she says, as if she'd rather forget it.

"Which character did you play?" Forty-one asks her, his eyes wide with curiosity.

"I played Beanstalk Boy's mother," she says. Beanstalk Boy's mother is one of the least desirable roles in the show, mostly because of the tattered dress and blouse she wears. I'm not sure why the costume is so ragged. None of the other costumes are like that.

"I played the cow," my dad says to Forty-one. A cow is a kind, gentle, nonhuman creature. "Mooooo," he adds in a low, deep voice.

Forty-one and Forty-seven laugh. I cringe. Dad is still acting abnormally cheerful. He must be really worried about tomorrow.

Forty-seven turns to her parents. "Mom, Dad, who did you play?"

"I played Cinderella," Ten's mom says. "And your father played my prince." As she says that, she lightly touches Ten's dad's hand. The touch is mostly hidden by the tablecloth, but even so, it makes me shiver with apprehension. *Touches between paired adults must never occur in public.* That's a rule.

My anxious mind drifts to Assignment Day. I force myself to picture a good outcome. I imagine Ten and me sitting at a table for two at our first Pair Dinner. I imagine Six at an adjacent table, content even though she

couldn't be paired with the person she wanted. Six and I are doctors, like our parents, and Ten is a technologist, like his dad. We chat happily about our exciting new lives. The image is so wonderful. But I have a horrible feeling that this nearly-perfect, fairy-tale life will never be.

As robots wearing silky, floral kimonos arrive with our dinner plates, I lean toward my dad. I need to know if what Twelve told me is true. "At the pre-adult medical evaluations, is there a treadmill test for the warriors?" I whisper. We're not supposed to talk about our evaluations with anyone, not even our families. I'm surprised when my dad doesn't instantly reprimand me. Instead, a worried look crosses his face.

"They didn't do that test on you, did they?" he whispers back.

I slip my shaking hands under my napkin. "Someone was just talking about it," I say.

"Well then, you have nothing to worry about," he says, with a small exhale.

"Enjoy your meals!" the robots say in unison.

I stare at the beautifully-arranged food set out before me, a tower of vegetables topped with a seasoned piece of blackened fish. It looks delicious, but I'm not hungry anymore. My dad just confirmed my deepest fear. Today, I was given the final warrior test.

And I think I passed.

* * *

After dinner, I excuse myself to go to my family's domicile to retrieve my Little Red Riding Hood costume. Six and Ten brought their costumes down to the plaza before dinner, so they go directly there.

The hallways are empty. Everyone is already assembling to participate in the pre-show festivities. I scan my arm at our domicile entrance and go inside. When I enter the gathering room, I reflexively look across the way at Ten's family's domicile. I am surprised to see Ten standing at his window. I

give him an inquiring look. He holds up his Beanstalk Boy shoes and shrugs, smiling sheepishly. He must have accidentally left the shoes in his domicile. Ten is hardly ever forgetful. His mind must be extremely preoccupied, like mine.

My gaze locked with Ten's, I walk to the window. The memory of three-year-old Ten and me "touching through the glass" flashes into my mind. We haven't done that for many years, but I feel an overwhelming desire to do it again now. I lift my hands, one at a time, and press my palms against my window. Ten drops his shoes and places his hands on his window. I close my eyes, trying to feel Ten's warmth.

All I feel is cold, hard glass.

* * *

By the time I make it down to the makeshift girls' dressing room that has been set up inside a supply area near the plaza stage, all of the other girls have already finished changing into their costumes and have gone. Quickly, I remove my shoes and jumpsuit, tuck them into my bag, and slip on my Little Red Riding Hood blouse, stockings, skirt, and shoes. I tie the red velvet cape over my shoulders and survey myself in the mirror. I look like a fairy tale character, both real and not real. And then I see something shift behind me. *Someone is watching me.*

I consider calling for the security drones, but instead I march over to the pile of boxes opposite the mirror and smash the top one to the ground.

Twelve—in his wolf costume—jumps out from behind the pile. "Hey! You could have injured me!"

"You were watching me get undressed!" I shout. It makes me want to vomit to think of Twelve looking at me in my underwear. I wish we were back in that war game. I would aim my weapon at him and systematically make every bit of his body sting with pain until he begged me to kill him for real. It's wrong to have thoughts like these, but Twelve has caused me so

much distress, for so long, that I want to hurt him back. And this might be my last chance.

My fist shoots out and slams into Twelve's chest. It must surprise him, because he doesn't even attempt to move out of the way. He falls to the ground, staring up at me, his face tense with an expression that almost looks like fear. But that expression rapidly vanishes, replaced with his usual cocky smile.

"You *are* a warrior," he says in a low voice.

I turn and march out of the room. It isn't until the door closes behind me that my heart begins to pound with fear. Because Twelve is right.

I am a warrior.

* * *

During the first few scenes of *The Woods*, although I stand on the plaza stage, my mind is somewhere else. When the audience applauds, they sound like they're far away, as if I'm listening to them from above the sky.

It isn't until my first scene with Ten that I feel like I'm present again. In that scene, Little Red Riding Hood warns Beanstalk Boy not to climb up the beanstalk, but he runs off to do it anyway. When he returns, he says that there are angry giants in the sky. He must return to the sky to battle them or the giants will destroy the woods.

I look up at the starry sky above us. I wonder if there really are giants up there.

Unfortunately, it looks like I'm about to find out.

* * *

After the show is over, I don't head into the plaza to socialize with everyone else. Instead, as soon as the curtain closes, I whisper to Ten, "Let's get out of here!"

We slip away, me in my Little Red Riding Hood costume, Ten in his brown knickers and blousy white shirt. Away from our celebrating classmates. Away from the congratulating crowds. Away from the lights and noise.

We probably look strange—Little Red Riding Hood and Beanstalk Boy running through the hallways—but there is no one here to see us, and so it doesn't matter. The only "life" around us are cleaning drones sanitizing the floors.

Ten and I dash up to the tenth floor. We hop over the safety railing of the walkway overlooking the plaza and scoot deep into our secret hiding spot in the aerial drone tunnel, careful to completely hide ourselves from view. On Celebration Nights, all delivery drones are grounded so that kids can fly toy drones above the plaza. Soon, colorful drones will fill the air. Many of the eyes in the plaza will be looking toward the sky tonight. I don't want anyone to see us here.

I lean against the tunnel wall. "I can't believe that tonight is our last night as kids."

"You sound sad about that," Ten says.

"Aren't you?" I ask.

He glances over at me and quickly looks away, but then his gaze returns, and lingers. "I'll miss *this*."

"Me too," I say. And then I take a deep breath. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"Do you even need to ask?"

I'm not sure why I asked. Ten and I have lots of secrets together. "At my medical evaluation, they tested me for warrior."

Ten's brow furrows and his expression turns tense. "What did they do to you?"

"They hooked me up to a bunch of medical devices and had me run on a treadmill," I say. "Did they do that to you?" I ask, my heart beating

harder.

His face relaxes. “They did that on everyone. My mom said they’re trying out a new portable scanner, and they needed baseline data.”

Ten’s mom works as an administrator. She occasionally shares little tidbits of top-secret information with Ten, who promptly shares them with me. My parents never divulge things like that—although, based on my dad’s response to my treadmill question, he didn’t know about the equipment testing.

I feel giddy with relief. “I liked running on the treadmill,” I say. “It made me feel ... awake.”

Ten smiles.

“What?” I ask.

“I have an idea.”

* * *

Ten scans his dog tag at a door labeled “No entry.” The door opens and we slip into the restricted hallways. No people or robots are allowed in these hallways. The walls are black. Blue stripes of light along the floor are the only illumination. When we were little kids, Ten and I used to come in here so we could run fast without anyone telling us not to.

We haven’t run through these hallways in a long time, but tonight we do. Just like when we were little. Sometimes I dart ahead of Ten. Sometimes he sprints past me. Most of the time, we’re side-by-side, racing.

My Little Red Riding Hood skirt dances against my stocking-covered legs. My body tingles with energy. I feel like, if I tried, I could leap up and soar through the sky like an aerial drone—

Ten throws his arm around me and shoves me against the wall. He lets go of me quickly, but he remains unusually close. Facing me. Looking serious. Even though we are no longer touching, I can still feel his arm around me. Forceful and rough. I want him to touch me like that again.

“Don’t move,” he whispers.

And then, just a few feet past him, I see why.

A large, black, shiny, box-like terrestrial drone is coming out of—not a doorway, but—the middle of a wall, through an opening that shouldn’t be there. An opening I’ve never seen open before.

We remain motionless. Unless it’s a security drone, if we don’t move, it won’t see us as people; we will just be obstacles that it will move past. If it is a security drone, it’s already too late.

The drone starts toward us. I keep my head completely still, watching it only by moving my eyes. As the drone gets closer, I realize how substantial it is. It’s a few feet taller than Ten and almost as wide as the hallway. But despite its commanding size, it moves nearly silently, stealthily. It terrifies me.

The drone doesn’t seem to sense us. It gives no commands and emits no sirens. It just inches along. The drone gets closer and closer until it is right beside us, just a few centimeters away. I take small, shallow breaths, even though my lungs are begging for more air. I feel the heat of Ten’s controlled breaths against my face. As we stand there, it feels as if an electric charge is growing between us, so powerful that it would shock us if we moved even a millimeter closer together. And yet I feel like I want to.

We remain frozen in place until well after the drone has disappeared around a corner. Then Ten rushes over to the spot on the wall where the drone emerged. The opening has closed. The wall looks just like a normal wall now. Ten puts his hands on it, examining it with his fingers.

“What kind of drone was that?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I’ve never seen anything like it. And it came *out of the wall*.” He reaches for his dog tag.

“You want to go *in there*?” I ask, my anxiety flooding back.

“Aren’t you curious?” he asks.

“Of course I am.” I *do* want to know what’s behind that wall. “But we’ve only gone through *doors* before, never *walls*. Something about this feels dangerous.”

Ten shakes his head. “After tonight, we won’t be able to do anything like this ever again. Tomorrow we become adults. All of these forbidden areas will be off limits to us ... forever.”

I hadn’t really thought about it, but he’s right. We can’t risk accessing restricted areas once we’re adults. As adults, we’ll be held to a different standard than we were as children. Adults who break rules are isolated for long periods—weeks to months. The length depends on the severity of the crime. By the time they emerge, their personalities have changed so much that they seem like different people. Many of the punished never return from their isolation period. No one knows where they go.

I take a deep breath. “Let’s open the wall.”

Without a change in his expression, Ten turns away from me and begins searching for the hidden scanner. He meticulously runs his tag over the wall panel and then the surrounding areas, but nothing happens. As I watch him painstakingly repeat his search, I realize that the invisible scanner he’s searching for probably doesn’t exist. After a while, Ten seems to realize this too. He drops his tag down the neck of his shirt and exhales. I can’t help feeling disappointed.

“Celebration Night must be almost over,” he says. “We should go get our clothes.” He starts toward an exit door.

“Ten, wait!” I say, reflexively dampening my shout even though I probably don’t need to here.

Ten stops and turns toward me. We are standing much too close together, but neither of us steps away. Suddenly, I feel embarrassed by every move I make. Ten looks like he does too. His gaze falls down my face.

“Thank you for stopping me from running into that drone,” I mumble, staring at my Little Red Riding Hood shoes.

“You’re welcome,” he says.

And then, without warning, surprising even myself, I grab Ten and pull him against me, as if he’s about to disappear if I don’t hold him tightly enough. He puts his arms around me. Strong and firm. His breaths come fast and deep against my chest. I barely breathe at all. Heat floods my trembling body. I feel energized. Alive. What we are doing is absolutely, completely forbidden, but it feels so ... incredibly ... wonderful.

We don’t let go of each other until it’s nearly curfew. When we finally step apart, I don’t look at Ten. It feels too awkward.

Ten scans his tag at an exit door and it opens. The blinding white light of the main hallway illuminates our faces. Ten steps into the light and I follow him. Then he scans the door to the restricted hallways closed. For the last time.

We walk in silence toward the plaza. I’m not ready for my last night as a child to end, but really it’s already over. There’s nothing I can say or do to get it back.

It ended the moment Ten put his arm around me to save me from that drone.

SATURDAY, JUNE 13

0934

I wish I could stay in my bedroom capsule all day, but my mom is knocking on my door. Even if I don't answer, I'm fairly certain she won't go away.

"I'm awake," I say, hoping that will be enough to satisfy her. I rub my eyes and turn off my sleeping music, Debussy's *Clair de Lune*.

"You're going to miss Assignment Day brunch," my mom calls back.

"I'm not hungry," I say.

"May I come in?" she asks. But I know I don't really have a choice in the matter.

I push the button that activates the door at my feet, and my mom crawls into my capsule. She hasn't done that since I was a little girl. My mom and I grew apart around the time I turned twelve. I'm not sure how or why our relationship changed. I don't remember an inciting event. I don't think there was one. It just ... happened.

Now that I'm fully-grown, there's just barely enough room in my capsule for the two of us. I scoot all the way to the side—so our bodies won't touch—and stare up at the picture I chose for my morning ceiling image. It's a painting I made when I was a child—of my mom, my dad, Six, and baby Forty-one. In the picture, my mom has orange hair cascading down her shoulders. I don't know why I painted her hair orange rather than brown, like it is in real life. I painted the rest of us with brown hair. It's also

strange that I chose to show her hair unsecured. The rest of us have our hair appropriately groomed for public. My sister and I have our hair pulled back into buns. My dad's and brother's hair is neatly parted.

"Feeling nostalgic?" she asks, gazing at my painting.

"Last night was probably the last night I'll spend in this capsule," I say. Tonight I'll move into a new domicile with the man who I'm paired with. Unless I become a warrior. Warriors spend their final night with their families.

She inhales. "I hope so."

I didn't think she'd really care if I were selected as a warrior.

Our gathering room is unusually quiet, even though the rest of our family must be awake by now. "Where is everyone?" I ask.

"Your dad and brother went down to family recreation. Six decided to join them. I suppose she was feeling nostalgic as well."

Six hasn't gone to family recreation in years. At family recreation, they sing silly songs and play silly games. Everyone thinks it's babyish, even the little kids. Six usually spends her Saturday mornings sitting on the couch and reading, with me.

I feel a pang of guilt for not being there for my sister this morning.

"So why aren't you hungry?" my mom asks.

"I'm eighteen years old and it's Assignment Day." That's more than enough reason to lose one's appetite. But that isn't the only reason I don't want to eat. Ever since last night, my stomach has been doing somersaults over Ten. I feel a mixture of the excitement that overtook me when our bodies were pressed against each other and the worry that I might never be able to touch him again.

"It doesn't make sense to concern yourself with things you can't change," my mom says.

I was hoping her response would be different, more honest. But I guess I wasn't expecting it to be. I stare up at my painting of my family, trying to

distract myself from the tears that are threatening to escape from my eyes. “Why did I paint you with orange hair?” I whisper, mostly to myself.

“Because I was ‘more beautiful than the most beautiful sunset,’” my mom says. “At least that’s what you said when I asked you.”

I turn toward my mom. For a moment, I see her through my childhood eyes. The mom who once held my hand and walked with me through the garden. The mom who read me fairy tales. The mom who told me I was beautiful, even though we’re not allowed to use the word “beautiful” to describe people.

I wish I could have that mom back. I wish I could talk to her about my feelings and my fears. I wish I could ask for her advice. But I don’t know how to ask for her guidance. And I feel like she can’t or won’t or doesn’t know how to guide me anymore.

“I’m going to take a shower,” I say.

I crawl out of my capsule and walk fast down the hallway. I snatch my fresh clothes from the hatch, lock myself in the shower room, and strip off my pajamas.

Once the water is running full-force, I sit on the floor. And I cry.

* * *

The plaza is still dressed up from last night. The stage and seating is all in place from the Senior Performance, but now, instead of sitting backstage dressed in my Little Red Riding Hood costume, waiting for my cue, I take a seat in the first row of the audience with the other eighteen-year-olds. At the Assignment Day ceremony, we must sit in birth order, and so I am between Six and a dark-haired boy, Eight. Ten is sitting a few seats down. We haven’t seen each other since last night, when we said an awkward goodnight outside my domicile door, both of us looking at the ground. I glance toward him now and he meets my gaze for just an instant. He gives me a small smile before he looks away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Twelve making his way down the row, on his way to his seat. He pauses for an instant in front of me and coughs out a word, “Warrior.” That should make my pulse pound with anger, but right now my body is in a strange, numb stupor.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Ten’s mom’s voice breaks me from my thoughts. I look up at the stage and see her standing at the podium. I force myself to watch her intently even though I would prefer to stare at my lap.

Each Assignment Day ceremony is the same. Ten’s mom calls the eighteen-year-olds to the stage. One by one, they are given their assignments. Then, those who were assigned to be warriors leave the stage and the remaining eighteen-year-olds are paired. Afterward, there is a reception, with games for the kids and socializing for the adults. After a while, everyone goes home.

Ten’s mom continues, “Today, new adults will join our ranks as productive members of society. Some will be given jobs. Others will have the honor of defending us from The War. The Decision Makers have deliberated long and hard about the proper place for each of our young people. Every year, their decisions prove to be insightful and appropriate. I have no doubts that our young people will rise to their adult roles.” She looks at Ten when she says that last statement, and she smiles.

I wonder if Ten’s mom already knows the assignments. Necklaces indicating each assignment are delivered to her during the ceremony, one-by-one, in sealed boxes, but she never seems surprised when the boxes are opened.

Ten’s mom continues, “I would now like to welcome our eighteen-year-olds to the stage.”

I stand, along with my classmates, and turn to my left. We march—single-file—to the stage. There are twenty-eight chairs set out there, one for each of us. We line up in front of them and then sit in unison. Ten’s mom nods her approval of our orderly assembly, and then she goes on, “When I

state your name, please join me at the Decision Table and receive your assignment.”

As a round black column—the Decision Table—rises from the floor of the stage, I feel like the brunch that I just forced myself to swallow is about to make its way back up. The table locks into position, and a single gold box rises out of the center. Ten’s mom lifts the box, places it onto the palm of her right hand, and says, “One Thousand Nine Hundred Ninety-nine.”

Ninety-nine, a gangly girl with olive skin and black hair, strolls over to the table. She doesn’t look nervous at all. I wish I could be that brave.

Ninety-nine stands opposite Ten’s mom. She isn’t given any further instructions—by the time we’re eighteen years old, we’ve witnessed enough Assignment Days to know exactly what to do. Each box must be scanned open by its recipient. Ten’s mom presents the box to Ninety-nine with the same words she says to every eighteen-year-old on Assignment Day, “Please accept your assignment.”

Ninety-nine positions her left forearm over the gold box. The lid parts down the middle and the two edges flap out to the sides. “Administrator,” Ten’s mom announces. She reaches into the open box and removes a necklace with a charm that looks like a miniature stack of old-fashioned books. Ninety-nine is smart and fair-minded. A good choice for administrator. Ten’s mom discards the empty box into a slot on the back of the table and hangs the chain around Ninety-nine’s neck. The audience applauds as Ninety-nine returns to her seat.

A new box rises to the surface of the table. “Two Thousand,” Ten’s mom says.

Two Thousand walks stiffly toward the Decision Table, as if she has suddenly become conscious of her own gait. She shakily puts her left arm above her box and it opens.

“Technologist,” Ten’s mom says. She drapes a necklace with a charm that represents an old-fashioned computer around Two Thousand’s neck.

Two Thousand returns to her seat, smiling broadly, accompanied by a wave of polite applause. During our assignment testing, Two Thousand was almost always first to successfully complete the technology-related tasks. She will be an excellent technologist.

“Two Thousand One,” Ten’s mom calls out.

One is a tall, quiet boy, and one of the nicest people in our class. On the day that Twelve ripped up my little pink paper circle in kindergarten, One gave me the circle he’d made. He always does things like that. Everyone likes him, except Twelve. But Twelve doesn’t really like anyone.

Two is on his way to the Decision Table by the time I realize that I didn’t hear One’s assignment—even though I’m sure, like the last two announcements, it was broadcast over the speakers. I glance at One’s necklace. The charm is a shiny silver circle with black and green patches inside. I shudder. It’s a warrior necklace. *One is a warrior.*

“Two Thousand Four,” Ten’s mom calls out.

What was Two’s assignment? What was Three’s? I look down the row, checking necklaces. Two is a doctor. Three is a scientist. Four returns to his seat wearing the necklace of an agriculturist. *Only one warrior so far.*

“Two Thousand Five.”

Five is an engineer.

“Two Thousand Six.”

I startle to attention and turn to my right. The seat next to me is empty. Six is already stepping up to the Decision Table.

My heart pounds. *Doctor. Please make her a doctor.*

Six holds her left arm over her box, and the box opens.

Ten’s mom clears her throat. “Warrior.”

My breath catches in my chest. I must have heard her wrong. *Six is not a warrior. She can’t be.* But hanging from the chain that Ten’s mom pulls from Six’s little gold box is a silver charm with a center of black and green. *Six is a warrior.*

My eyes blur as I fight tears that beg to come. I must not cry. Adults aren't permitted to cry in public. I make my body numb, cold, unfeeling.

"Two Thousand Seven," Ten's mom says.

I don't stand. I can't.

"Two Thousand Seven," Ten's mom repeats, her voice gentle.

Six takes her seat beside me. My eyes can't focus enough to make out her expression. Everything around me appears distorted, as if I'm inside a room of thick glass.

Ten's mom turns to me and says, "Come, Seven."

I force myself to stand. And walk.

Ten's mom's hands are trembling as she presents my box to me. I've never seen her hands tremble before. *She doesn't know what's inside. Or maybe she does.*

I stare at the box, and my eyes finally focus. The golden exterior has been delicately etched to create images of flowers below two horizontal rows of slowly-spinning wheels. The edges of each wheel are spiked. The spikes interlock where the wheels touch one another. Above the wheels is my name, written in numerals: 2007.

I place an unsteady forearm over the box, and the tiny wheels instantly stop rotating. The lid splits open. Inside, on a bed of white velvet, is a silver chain attached to a charm: a gray rope wrapped around a silver stick. It matches the ones my mom and dad wear.

I think I see a sigh of relief as Ten's mom leans toward the microphone. "Doctor," she says. And then she puts the necklace around my neck.

My legs carry me back to my seat as if they are robot legs without any human consciousness guiding them. I sit next to Six and reach over and grip her hand. She squeezes my hand tightly.

I don't hear Eight's assignment or Nine's. The next thing I hear is Ten's mom saying, "Two Thousand Ten."

My heart pounds so hard that I feel like I will pass out. Ten walks toward the Decision Table. His expression is serious, the way it was in the hallway last night when the terrifying drone rolled past us. He stops, facing his mom, and she holds out his box.

When Ten's mom finally speaks, her voice isn't strong and steady like it was with the other announcements. It almost doesn't sound like she says the same word I've heard her say so many times before. The word echoes in my head. Exactly the way she said it. Weak and strained.

Warrior.

Six's grip on my hand tightens. As Ten walks back to his seat, he looks at me without any of the awkwardness of last night. His expression seems to hold no emotion at all, as if the life has been drained from him.

All at once, pain explodes in my chest, breaking through my numbness. It is as if my heart has burst open and hot blood is rushing into the space around my lungs. Suffocating me from within. I feel *everything*. All the hurt and the loss and the fear.

My life has become a nightmare, one from which I will never awaken.

* * *

There is an empty space beside me where Six once was. All of the assignments have been given out, and the warriors have left the stage. Six is now seated with our mom and dad. Forty-one is sitting on her lap, even though he's much too old to do so; quiet tears run down his cheeks. Six and my parents are maintaining their composure. I'm sure they will fall apart once they are back inside our domicile.

Ten is with his dad and sister. They seem very calm. I probably appear that way too. Every feeling inside me has been replaced by silently smoldering anger. *How could the Decision Makers choose Six and Ten to be warriors? How could they choose them to die?*

Ten's mom is giving her speech about the pairings. I don't care about the pairings. The only person I ever wanted to be paired with is about to be sacrificed. I don't care who the Decision Makers have chosen for me. I will always yearn to be paired with Ten. Even after he's gone forever.

A small white box rises out of the Decision Table.

"One Thousand Nine Hundred Ninety-nine," Ten's mom says.

Ninety-nine walks to the table, suppressing an excited smile. *How can anyone be happy right now?* She scans her left arm over her box, and the lid splits open.

"You are paired with Two Thousand Sixteen," Ten's mom says.

The audience applauds as Sixteen walks to the Decision Table. He stands facing Ninety-nine and bows. She bows back to him. Ten's mom presents Sixteen and Ninety-nine with matching bands that they each slide onto the finger next to their pinkies on their left hands. Then Ten's mom sends them back to their seats.

Two Thousand is paired with Twenty. Two is paired with Twenty-six. Three is paired with Four. As Three slides the ring onto her finger, she looks at Six, no doubt wishing she were standing with her instead of Four.

Five is paired with Fourteen. And then it's my turn. I walk to the Decision Table. It's easier to go there now, knowing that what is about to happen doesn't matter. Unless ...

I glance back toward our seats. To Twelve's seat. But Twelve isn't there. And then I realize that I don't remember hearing Twelve's assignment. I don't remember hearing anything after Ten received his. My eyes scan the audience and then I see Twelve, sitting with his parents, staring blankly up at the sky. *Twelve must be a warrior.* I look away, before he sees me gaping at him in disbelief.

I place my left forearm over the small white box in Ten's mom's palm. The box has been etched with images of birds. Instead of spiked wheels, two rows of interlocking silver rings line the center. I hope that the box

won't open, that somehow it will realize that this pairing is a horrible mistake. But the rings split in half, releasing one another, and the lid opens.

"You are paired with Two Thousand Nine," Ten's mom says quietly; I know she wishes that Ten's name was printed alongside mine on the two small rings tucked into the pink velvet inside my box. I don't risk looking at Ten. I don't want to see the expression on his face as I am paired with someone else.

Nine joins me, looking stiff and tense, as he almost always does. My mind flashes to the memory of him whimpering on the gymnasium floor during the warrior task, red light spilling from his chest. I remember feeling sorry for him as I knelt by his side, trying to comfort him. Is that when the Decision Makers decided that we should be paired? It must have been.

I slide a ring onto my finger that matches Nine's, fighting back furious tears that threaten to appear. I don't want this ring. The only ring I want is one that joins me with Ten.

But that ring will never be.

* * *

After the pairing ceremonies are over, we are officially dismissed. The people in the audience stand. My family and Ten's family surround their warriors, forming a protective circle around them. I can't be with them right now; I can't stand to watch my family or Ten's fall apart.

I sneak out the side of the stage, race to the nearest stairway, and sprint up ten flights of stairs, hardly feeling my heart and lungs heaving in my chest. I run to the railing overlooking the plaza and swing my body over it. I hang there, imagining myself plunging to the plaza below, like Mr. Fifty-three. But I don't let go until my feet land in my little hiding spot.

I crumple inside the empty drone tunnel. Tears of anger and helplessness burn my eyes. I curl into a ball and press my arms into my belly, trying to make myself empty out. Being empty would be less

unbearable than being filled with so much pain. I gag and wretch, but I can't make the emptiness come.

Minutes—or possibly hours—later, something drops down next to me. Through hazy eyes, I see Ten. His demeanor is oddly calm. It unnerves me enough that my tears stop without any effort.

“There’s something I need to show you,” he whispers. His eyes stare directly into mine, unblinking.

I don’t ask any questions. Whatever Ten wants to show me, I want to see. And so I just say, “Okay.”

I wipe my eyes on the sleeve of my jumpsuit, and then I follow Ten back up over the railing and down a hallway. He stops at the same door that we entered last night and scans his tag.

“I thought we couldn’t do this anymore,” I think aloud, as we step into the restricted hallways.

“If we get caught, tell them I forced you.”

I would never, ever do that. But I nod rather than argue.

Ten walks to the hallway where we saw the drone emerge last night. He pulls out his dog tag and swipes it very deliberately over a single spot on the wall. Immediately, a panel of the wall slides to the right, revealing a narrow room, dimly illuminated by a blue-lighted ceiling. The drone from last night is up against a wall, appearing deactivated, but still intimidating.

“How did you ...?” I start. But then I stop. The answer doesn’t matter.

I follow Ten into the room, and he swipes the wall closed behind us. He strides to the far wall and runs his tag against it. Nothing happens. He runs the tag over the wall again and again, more furiously each time, with no result. I’m starting to worry that he’s lost his mind when, suddenly, a panel of the wall slides away. *Another hidden door.* On the other side, there isn’t any light at all. I approach the opening, unsure of what I’m seeing.

Ten sits on the floor and drops his legs into blackness.

I inch closer, my heart pounding in my throat.

“Sit,” Ten whispers.

I sit and let my trembling legs fall into the dark, like Ten’s.

The air we breathe is still and warm and has a strange, completely-unfamiliar odor. My eyes try to find something, anything, in the darkness, but the darkness goes on as far as I can see.

“What is this place?” I ask Ten, my jaw slack.

“The edge.”

“The edge of what?”

He inhales slowly. “Everything.”

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SATURDAY, JUNE 13

1514

Ten and I sit on The Edge for a while without speaking. I'm not sure what to say. I'm not sure what to make of any of this. Over the years, Ten and I have ventured through every doorway we could find, even exploring the housekeeping and storage rooms that branch off the restricted hallways. But I never thought about what was *beyond* those places. I don't recall ever considering that question. I only recall being told—by whom I don't remember—that there are certain questions that must never be asked. Of anyone. Even oneself.

Ten leans into the darkness and points to the left. Just a few inches away from his fingertip, I notice a skinny ladder secured to the exterior wall of The Edge. The ladder extends up and down, disappearing into inky blackness above and below.

“Where does it go?” I ask.

“I don't know.”

“You haven't already climbed it?”

“I didn't want to do it without some light.” Ten pulls two self-illuminating headbands from his pocket. “Besides, I figured you'd never forgive me if I climbed that ladder without you.”

I smile, for the first time today. “You're right,” I say, getting to my feet. “Let's climb.”

As I slip on a headband and tighten the strap, Ten removes his dog tag from around his neck. “You carry this,” he says.

“Why?” I ask.

Ten’s gaze locks with mine. “Just ... in case,” he says quietly. Before I can protest, he hangs the chain around my neck and then quickly turns away, grabs hold of the ladder, and disappears into the blackness.

I drop Ten’s tag down the front of my jumpsuit and grasp the cold metal ladder. Darkness embraces me as I leave the blue glow of the drone closet behind. Soon it’s just the ladder and me and my little bit of light. I aim my light upward and see that Ten is climbing fast, despite not knowing what lies ahead. He’s at least twenty feet above me. Higher than I thought this ladder would go.

What if the ladder never ends? How high will we climb before we turn back? Will the ladder take us above the sky? To The War? I push those thoughts from my mind and I climb, keeping three extremities on the rungs at all times, not like Ten is climbing—quickly alternating his right and left sides. The rubber soles of my shoes slip on the smooth rungs. I take slow breaths, fighting the jitters that have taken over my muscles.

“How you doing?” Ten calls down, sounding just as relaxed as he does when we climb the pipes behind the fish tank.

“Good,” I say, trying to sound less nervous than I am. “You?”

“Good,” Ten says, and then he adds, “Shoot!”

“What’s wrong?” I look up, but I can’t see him anymore. “Where are you?”

“Right here.” He sounds close enough that I should be able to spot him.

“I don’t see you.”

“My light went out.”

I consider what it would be like to climb this ladder in the darkness, and my palms tingle with fear—not for me, but for Ten. “We should go back down,” I say.

“No,” Ten says. And so I keep climbing. Until I hear him say, “Whoa.”

“What?” I ask.

“I’m at the top of the ladder.”

“What do you see there?”

“Nothing.”

He needs my light. “I’ll be right there.”

“Don’t rush,” he says. And I know he means it.

I climb carefully and steadily. *It’s almost over. I’m almost at the—*

BOOM! The most horrible sound I’ve ever heard rips into my ears, followed by a deafening banging. THUD. THUD. THUD. THUD ... The ladder shakes with each thud. Hard. It feels as if a giant is trying to yank the rungs from my grasp. Again and again.

It’s The War.

“Ten!” I shout. But surely he can’t hear me; I can’t hear my own voice over the banging.

My fingernails dig into my palms as my clammy fingers try desperately to maintain their grip on the ladder. I feel like, no matter how hard they try, it’s only a matter of time before they lose the battle. A jolt throws my feet from the rungs. My right elbow slams into the ladder, sending a tingling shock up to my hand, forcing my grip to release.

My left hand is the only thing that stops me from plummeting to certain death.

Heart pounding against my insides, I hang by one sweaty hand, as the shuddering wall smashes my body into the ladder again and again. Pain bangs into my knees and ribs. Anger rises inside me. Anger at the Decision Makers. Anger at being forced to live in a future without Ten and Six. Anger at the war that has torn our lives apart. But instead of making me weak, the anger makes me stronger.

I shake the numbness from my right hand and grab the ladder. Between the next two jolts, I wedge the toes of one shoe and then the other between

the ladder rungs and the wall to lock myself in position. I close my eyes and hold on.

I won't let go. I will never let go. No matter what.

“Seven?” Ten calls out. And I hear him.

There's a high-pitched humming in my aching ears, but the horrible sound of The War is gone. The ladder is still quivering, but only a little now. My arms and legs are shaking much more than the ladder.

“You okay?” Ten asks.

“I'm still alive,” I say. “You okay?”

“I'm good ... now.”

With unsteady arms and legs, I climb to Ten. When I reach the top of the ladder, I find myself standing on a vast flat surface. A floor. The floor goes on as far as my light enables me to see. I look up, straining to make out what's above us, but all I see is blackness in the silent space.

“We shouldn't have come up here,” Ten says, heading toward the ladder. “We need to go back down right now.”

“You don't want to explore?” I ask, surprised by Ten's lack of inquisitiveness.

He shakes his head. “Not anymore.”

“But we came all this way,” I say. “I nearly fell off that ladder and—”

“I know. I saw.” He stares at the floor and swallows hard. “I don't want to lose you.”

“You're going to lose me tomorrow.” I inhale, trying not to cry, but it's no use. Tears start down my cheeks.

Ten looks up at me and there are tears in his eyes. I've never seen him cry before, even when we were children. “I want you to live,” he says, “even if I—”

I can't bear to hear what he's about to say. I turn away and walk toward the edge of the floor—to where it ends in empty air. Just before I get to The Edge, Ten steps between me and it.

“I need to know what’s up here,” I say. “I can’t live the rest of my life not knowing ...” there’s more to say, but I’m not sure what.

Ten’s wet eyes stare hard into mine. “Okay,” he finally says.

I turn to the right and start walking. Ten stays on my left, between me and death. I aim my light down, focused on where we’re going. The floor is bare, except for a thin layer of a strange substance that shifts when we walk on it, leaving faint shoeprints wherever we step.

“What’s that stuff on the ground?” I ask.

“Paint?” Ten leans down and touches it. When he lifts his fingers, the tips are coated in gray. He rubs them together and the gray stuff dissolves into the air. “I guess not.”

We walk for over half an hour, encountering nothing. No walls. No objects. No stairs.

And then the floor ends.

“A corner,” I say. I shine my light into the blackness ahead, but I see nothing there.

“Do you want to head back?” Ten asks.

“No.”

I turn right and start walking again. Ten stays to my left.

After about forty-five minutes of walking in silence—other than the muted patter of our footsteps—the floor ahead of us ends again. As I stare at this *second* corner, anxiety rises in my chest, as if I’m trapped in a very small room from which there’s no escape. I search the darkness with my light, and then, finding nothing, I turn right and continue on.

“How long are you planning to keep exploring?” Ten asks.

“I don’t know,” I say, noticing that my breaths are coming faster than before.

“What are you hoping to find?”

“Anything that indicates that there’s something out there in the darkness,” I say. “A walkway. A rope. Anything at all. Because I’m starting

to feel like the darkness is all there is.”

“The darkness and The War,” Ten says.

“But where is The War?” I ask, frustrated. “Why can’t we see it?”

Ten shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

About an hour later, when the floor ends for the third time, Ten says what I’ve been desperately trying not to consider ever since we found that second corner: “We live in a box.” His voice quivers when he says it. He inhales and continues, “If we turn right and keep walking, there’ll be one more corner. And then, if we turn right again and continue walking, we’ll find the ladder.”

So much makes sense now. The plaza is surrounded on all four sides by mazes of rooms and hallways. Around the outside of all that are the restricted hallways. Branching off the restricted hallways are rooms. The far walls of those rooms have no doors or windows to indicate that there’s anything further. That’s because there isn’t; those walls make up the sides of a tremendous box. The sky is the top of the box, and the plaza is the bottom. How could I not have realized this before?

“Do you think there are other boxes like ours?” I ask.

Ten nods. “Ours can’t be the only one.”

Ten turns right, and I do too. Almost thirty minutes after we pass the fourth corner of the box, we meet up with the imprints of our feet in the gray stuff. Where our footsteps begin, is the ladder. I go down first, so Ten will have my light to follow. As I descend, the blue glow of the drone closet grows larger and larger, like a monster preparing to swallow me whole, just like the wolf did to Little Red Riding Hood.

I let the monster swallow me, because I can’t survive out here in the darkness.

Once I’m safely inside the drone closet, I slump down against the wall opposite the sleeping drone. Ten sits down next to me. His white jumpsuit, like mine, is covered with streaks of gray.

“Our families must be wondering where we are,” Ten says. Warriors are supposed to spend this afternoon surrounded by family, saying their final goodbyes. Our absences have no doubt been noticed.

I try to wipe the gray stuff from my jumpsuit, but the streaks smudge rather than disappear. “We can’t go back in unclean jumpsuits,” I say.

And then I remember a place that Ten and I discovered when we were young. A room—off the restricted hallways—where jumpsuits, bed sheets, towels, and table linens are cleaned. “Can you still get us into the laundry room?” I ask Ten.

“No,” he says. “But you can.” His gaze goes to my neck.

I’d forgotten that Ten gave me his tag. I pull it out from under my jumpsuit and look at it closely for the first time; Ten never let me get much of a look at it before. On it are words, numbers, and symbols: “Eric Matthews, 087-35-2772, O+, No preference.” The back matches the front.

“That tag belonged to my great grandfather,” Ten says as we reenter the restricted hallway. “He was an administrator. In his free time, he experimented.” Ten takes something from one of his pockets. The palm-sized device looks like an exceptionally-old tablet. The black coating on its thick edges has been mostly worn off, revealing dull silver metal underneath. The glass face is cracked and scratched.

“What is *that*?” I ask.

“It’s called a cellular.” Ten pushes a button that seems to activate the device. “The security code is two thousand seven,” he says as he types in the numbers.

“My name,” I say.

“Yeah.” He gives me a flushed-faced smile and looks back at the cellular as a bunch of labeled squares appear on its screen. “First, you tap the box that says ‘Clearance,’ then the button that says ‘Retrieve,’ and then you hold the cellular up to the door’s scanner.” He demonstrates this as he speaks. When he places the device next to the laundry room’s scanner, a

long string of numbers appears on the cellular's screen. "The cellular pulls off a copy of the most recent access code that was used to activate the scanner," Ten explains. "Now I need the tag."

I start to take his chain from around my neck.

Ten stops me. "Just hold it out."

I do, and Ten places the cellular against it. "There's a chip inside the tag," he explains. "It's like the ones in our arms, except it's programmable. When you press the 'Transfer' button on the cellular, the scanner's access code is downloaded onto the chip."

The words "Transfer Complete" appear on the cellular's screen.

"Why did you tell me all that?" I ask.

He holds out the cellular. "Because I want you to hold onto them for me."

I shake my head. "No, you should keep them."

"I can't. Any personal items that warriors bring to Warrior Departure are destroyed," he says. "Besides, they need to stay here, where they can be useful."

"But I won't be able to use them anymore." Now that I'm an adult, it would be too dangerous.

"My sister and your brother can. They're too young now, but when they're older, you can tell them what we discovered. Let them explore. If they pick up where we left off, maybe they'll find answers to the questions we're not supposed to ask."

Numbly, I slip Ten's cellular into my chest pocket. I use Ten's tag to open the laundry room door and scan it closed behind us.

The room is quiet. The laundry machines are empty. I'd thought we'd be able to change into something while we cleaned our jumpsuits, but there's nothing here to wear. Not even a tablecloth or a towel. I slip off my shoes and begin to unzip my jumpsuit.

Ten starts toward the door. "I'll wait outside."

“Don’t go,” I say.

Ten can’t get out; I have his tag. He stands facing the closed door. “You know what will happen if we’re caught undressed together.”

“They can’t do anything worse to us than what they’re going to do tomorrow,” I say.

Ten turns around. In his eyes, I see a reflection of my own pain. “You’re right.”

I slide my jumpsuit off my shoulders. The cold air hits my bare arms and seems to pass right through my undershirt. A few steps away from me, Ten begins to undress. His white undershirt is similar to mine. It fits him tightly, the way mine does me. He looks stronger now that I can see the definition in the muscles of his chest and arms. He slips his jumpsuit further down. Just a thin layer of underwear covers the bulge between his legs. I stare at it for a moment, and then, feeling embarrassed, I look away.

I remove my jumpsuit completely and drop it into a cleaning machine. Ten drops his jumpsuit beside mine, shuts the lid, and presses the start button.

“Scan access pass,” a female voice says.

I run Ten’s tag over the scanner.

“Wash cycle will be complete in eleven minutes,” the female voice announces.

Ten is standing so close to me that it makes my skin tingle. “What should we do while we wait?” I ask him, my eyes still focused on the machine.

“Whatever you want,” he says.

My heart speeds. “*Whatever* I want?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see him nod.

I want to touch Ten. Right now. Like this. Wearing only our underwear. Energy mixed with fear spreads through me. I turn toward him and say, “*Quiero tocarte.*”

Ten's face tenses. "*Está bien.*"

He raises his hands, palms facing me, ready for me to touch him the way we usually do. But I lay my hands against *his face*. Ten holds his breath. His body becomes very still.

I run my trembling fingers over his smooth forehead, his ever-so-slightly rough cheeks, his strong jaw. As I let my hands travel over the firm muscles of his chest, Ten reaches up and strokes my face with the tips of his fingers, as if any firmer touch might break me. His hesitant hands lightly move down my arms and then to my waist. To the spot where my undershirt ends. Heat grows deep inside me. I look again at the bulge between Ten's legs. I don't feel embarrassed anymore, just curious. I let my fingers touch him there.

Ten winces. I pull back my hand.

"Did I hurt you?" I ask.

"No," he breathes.

My curiosity rises. "What did it feel like?"

Without a word, Ten slips his hand between my legs, touching me there very lightly. My entire body lights up with heat. I place my hand back between Ten's legs. As we touch, his breaths grow shaky, like mine, as if he's struggling to remember how to breathe.

Suddenly, he pulls away. "We need to stop."

"Why?" I ask.

He stares at the floor. The swishing sounds of the cleaning machine fill the silence until he finally says, "This is dangerous."

"I don't care about danger anymore." I don't have enough energy to hold back what I want to say next, and so I say it, "I wish they'd made me a warrior too."

Ten closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. He doesn't open them when he says, "No, Seven, I want you to live."

My vision blurs with tears. "I only want to live with you."

Ten wraps his arms around me so tightly that I can barely breathe. I grab onto him with every ounce of strength that I have left. It's the way we held each other last night, only this time it is more desperate. Our bodies touch with only millimeters of cloth separating us. Closer than we've ever been, and as close as we will ever be. My chest aches with helplessness. I might go on living for days, months, or even years, but *this* is the only life I want. A life with Ten.

But that life that will end tomorrow.

And no matter what we do, we can't keep tomorrow from coming.

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SATURDAY, JUNE 13

1735

I want to crawl into my bedroom capsule, turn out the lights, and play my sleeping music loud enough that I can't hear myself think. But in just under an hour, I will have to join Nine for our first Pair Dinner. After that, we're required to report directly to our new home—the domicile we will share for the rest of our lives.

This is my last chance to say goodbye to Six.

I scan my arm at the entrance to my family's domicile.

A red light flashes on the scanner. *It should be green.*

I scan my arm again.

The red light flashes. The system must have already changed my access privileges. *I no longer belong in my family's domicile.*

I bang at the entrance with my fist until the door opens. My mom is standing on the other side. Her eyes are red from recent tears, as I'm sure mine are.

"Where have you been?" she asks me, her tone gentle rather than accusatory.

"With Ten," I answer.

She nods and leads me to our gathering room. The room is jam-packed with every relative we have: grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. All eyes are wet.

In the midst of it all is Six. Her eyes are open, but she isn't looking at anything in particular. I stand in front of her until her gaze finds mine, then I take her hand and lead her toward the bedroom capsules. People step out of our way, giving us a clear path. They seem to understand that we need some time alone together.

As I head toward my bedroom, I realize that it's gone. Bedroom capsules are removable. I figured mine would be taken away eventually, just not this soon.

"Let's go to my capsule," Six says, her voice hoarse.

She scans her arm at her capsule door. I crawl inside, and Six follows me. Once the door is closed, she lies down and stares at her blank ceiling. I lie down next to her.

"I'm going to be a warrior," she says, as if she still can't believe it.

My chest squeezes tight. *I can't believe it either.*

"It's such a great honor," she continues, repeating the words we've been told ever since we were young children.

"Yes," I say. Being a warrior *is* an honor, but it's an honor that I don't think anyone wishes for.

"What do you think it's like above the sky?" she asks me.

Six and I have never discussed Up There before. Until today, my answer to her question would have been different. I used to picture Up There as a blurry, bloody place of death, but now, after seeing what's outside our box, my image of Up There is darker, more ominous, more frightening. It hurts to imagine Six and Ten heading to either of those places. And so I make myself visualize a different Up There, a place of fairy tales.

"Maybe it's like the woods," I say. "With tall trees and colorful birds and flowers ..."

"And horrible monsters," Six adds.

"There are monsters even here," I say, thinking of Twelve.

“Not for long,” she says, as if she read my mind.

Tomorrow, Twelve will leave along with Six and Ten. But I don’t really care whether Twelve stays or goes. I would gladly be subjected to a hundred Twelves if I could keep Six and Ten here.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t with you this afternoon,” I blurt out.

“You needed to spend time with Ten.” Like my mom, Six doesn’t sound upset with me. “I should have spent some time with Three,” Six adds. “She’s been messaging me all afternoon, but I haven’t responded.”

“Why not?”

Six shakes her head. “I can’t say goodbye to her. Saying goodbye makes it real. I’m not ready for it to be real.”

I take Six’s hands. “It’s going to be real tomorrow. Whether you say goodbye or not.”

Six looks down at our clasped hands. “I’m not ready to say goodbye to you either,” she says, her voice weak.

“We don’t have to say it if you don’t want to.” Ten and I didn’t say goodbye. We held onto each other while our jumpsuits were cleaned and dried, then we got dressed and he walked me to my family’s domicile door, where we said goodnight the same way we always do.

“I don’t want to say goodbye,” Six whispers.

“Let’s just say goodnight then.” I bow my head and touch my forehead to hers, like our mom used to do with us every night until Six and I were about eight years old.

“Goodnight, Seven,” Six says with a tremulous voice.

“Goodnight, Six.” I try not to let the fact that we are saying our *last* goodnight enter my mind. But it does.

And that thought crushes every last shred of life left within me.

* * *

Six and I stay in her capsule, with our foreheads touching, until fifteen minutes before dinner, then I walk with her to Three's domicile. I leave the two of them together, so they can say goodbye. Or not. So they can at least have a few final moments together.

I go to Delhi Restaurant, where Ten will have dinner tonight with his family. I'm assigned to eat at a different restaurant, but there's something I need to tell him before he leaves forever. Something I've never told him.

I conceal myself behind the multicolored silk cloths that adorn the restaurant entrance to wait for Ten to arrive. Families are queued up at the reception desks. Some are the families of my classmates, but many of my classmates aren't with their families now. The only eighteen-year-olds who will eat with their parents tonight are the warriors.

Five minutes before dinnertime, Ten finally appears, flanked by his devastated mother and father. Their faces are dry, but their eyelids are red and swollen. Ten's little sister clutches Ten's hand; tears stain her cheeks. My heart hurts for all of them.

I can't take Ten from his family now. And so, instead, I whisper the dangerous words that I was going to say to him. Words that must only be said to family members or to the person one is paired with. Words that I've heard my parents say to each other, but only in private, when they thought no one else was listening.

Maybe I don't need to say these words to Ten.

Because he already knows.

"I love you, Ten."

* * *

I arrive at Venice Restaurant exactly on time for my Pair Dinner. Nine is already settled at our tiny table for two. His blond hair appears freshly combed and gelled. As I take my seat across from him, he offers a hesitant smile. "How are you feeling?" he asks.

I don't answer, because I don't think I can force any appropriate response from my lips.

Nine's face wrinkles with self-conscious discomfort. He takes a breath and continues, "This must be a challenging time for you. To have your sister selected as a warrior ... and Ten ... I know he's your best friend."

Ten is so much more than my best friend.

Nine swallows uncomfortably and goes on, "My older sister was a warrior. It was very difficult to see her leave. I don't expect you to be okay right away, but I want you to know that I'm here when you're ready to talk about—"

"I will *never* be okay, Nine," I say, my voice trembling. "When Six and Ten leave, my life will end. My heart might go on beating for days, months, or even years afterward, but tomorrow everything else inside me will die. Forever."

Nine's gaze falls to the white tablecloth and stays there until two smiling robots come and set our dinners out in front of us. "Enjoy your meals," they say before they turn and walk away.

I glare at the artfully-arranged towers of vegetables and beans in various sauces as if they are piles of foul-smelling excrement. I have absolutely no desire to eat anything whatsoever, but I'm required to ingest every bit of food served to me. And so I stuff bite after nauseating bite of food into my mouth, until my plate is bare. And then I stand.

"I'm going to our domicile now," I say to Nine.

I don't wait for a response.

I let my navigator direct me "home." As soon as I enter my new domicile, I walk into the sparkling-clean lavatory and vomit. Three times. The last time, nothing much comes out. Then I lie down on the couch, trying to make the awful knot in my stomach go away.

I'm not sure how much time has passed when the door clicks open.

As Nine enters the gathering room, the message screen on the wall comes to life.

A female robot appears on the monitor. “Welcome to your new home! You are about to embark on an exciting journey that is unlike anything you have ever experienced. That journey begins with the person to whom you have been paired. Your partner for life.”

I take a breath to keep myself from crying.

The robot continues, “To enhance your blossoming new relationship, we have developed pair bonding exercises. I will guide you through the first of these momentarily. These exercises will help you connect with your partner and prepare the two of you for mating.”

I’m not sure what mating is. I only know that it involves a man damaging a woman’s body, and that it is extraordinarily painful. Unfortunately, it is required of those who are paired because it’s what leads to pregnancy. Ever since Professor Adam taught our class about mating, I’ve been worried about having it happen to me someday. I used to comfort myself with the thought that, if I had to mate with Ten, no matter how excruciating it was, no matter what he had to do to me, I would be okay. That thought isn’t a source of comfort anymore. Now it only brings me pain.

The robot keeps going, “We will now proceed with the first bonding exercise. Go ahead and sit next to your partner.”

Nine sits down on the end of the couch, just about as far away from me as he can get.

The robot continues speaking, but her image is replaced by a graphic showing two cartoon people—a man and a woman—sitting on a couch. “Sit close together now. There should only be a few inches of space between you.”

I don’t move. Nine doesn’t either.

The robot keeps talking, “Now, the young woman should place her hand between the two of you, flat on the couch, palm down. The young man should place his hand on top of hers in the same manner.”

The cartoon people follow her instructions. We do not.

The robot goes on, “Enjoy the sensation of touching your partner. Appreciate your partner’s hand. Is it warm or cool? Still or trembling? All of these are completely normal—”

“Mute!” Nine shouts.

The images on the monitor continue to change, but now the room is silent.

Nine turns toward me. “I know you don’t want to be my partner.”

I feel a stab of shame break through the numbness of my heart. Nine isn’t responsible for what is happening to my life. At dinner, he was trying to be nice to me. He was offering to help me and I met his gentleness with anger. He certainly doesn’t want to be paired with me, especially since I’m sure he knows that I wanted to be paired with Ten instead of him.

I inhale, trying to fill myself with enough strength to continue. “I’ll try my best to make you happy, Nine.” *Even if I will never be.* “Let’s do the bonding exercise.” I move closer to him and place my hand on the couch, the way the cartoon woman did.

Nine shakes his head. “I don’t care about the foolish bonding exercises.”

“You don’t?”

“Touching seems unpleasant,” he says.

I withdraw my hand, and Nine’s shoulders relax.

“We could read instead,” he suggests. “The adult books should be on our tablets by now.”

“Okay,” I say.

As Nine pulls our tablets from the docking station, my navigator pings. The screen reads:

Message From: Two Thousand Six

I have to talk to you!

1927 Saturday, June 13

I jump to my feet. “My sister needs me.”

Nine drops the tablets on the couch and stands, his forehead furrowed.

“You’re not allowed to leave your partner on the first night.”

“I don’t care,” I say, starting toward the door.

Nine rushes past me and blocks my path with his body. “If they find out, you’ll be *isolated*.”

“Get out of my way, Nine,” I say in a low voice.

“Let me scan you out,” he says.

I stare at him, confused.

He continues, “After you leave, I’ll scan the door closed. Knock when you come back, and I’ll scan the door open for you. If the scanner is only activated from *inside* the domicile, it won’t appear that anyone left.”

It takes me a moment to process what he said. To realize that Nine is offering to do something forbidden. To break the rules. For me.

Before I can respond, he scans his arm, and the door opens.

“Take as much time as you need,” he says.

A bubble of gratitude wells up in my chest and constricts my throat so tightly that I can barely whisper, “Thank you.”

Nine nods.

And then I go.

* * *

At the entrance to my family’s domicile, I message Six. A moment later, she opens the door. She’s trembling uncontrollably and appears as if she might

collapse at any minute. I've never seen her this distressed before. My chest squeezes tight, leaving no room for the air that I breathe.

Six turns and walks away from me. I follow her through the empty gathering room and into her bedroom capsule. As soon as the door closes behind us, she lets out a piercing sob, so forceful that the mattress shudders beneath us. And then another one. And another one. I force back my own tears, trying desperately to stay in control.

Six manages to get out a few words between her sobs. "They're going ... to kill me ... Up There ..."

In my mind, I see Six standing in a dark, empty place. In her shaking hands is a weapon, like the ones we used in the war game. Hundreds of other weapons emerge from the blackness surrounding her, ready to destroy her. Without warning, bright white light erupts from the weapons and impacts Six's body with a flash. Her chest splits open, as if cut by a large knife. Agony crosses Six's face, but only for an instant, then her face goes slack and she falls to the ground. Dead. In a pool of bright-red blood.

Rage pulses through my arteries. *How could the Decision Makers have chosen Six to be a warrior?* As much as I don't want to admit it, Ten is a born warrior. He will be able to fight to protect us. But Six will die quickly. What good will that do?

I wish the Decision Makers had chosen me to be a warrior. I would probably die quickly too, but at least I would die the way I want to die. With Ten. Defending our families.

I want to fight. I want to go above the sky.

And then I realize something: *I can.*

I run my fingers over the tiny bump on the inside of my left forearm. "Let's switch chips."

Wide-eyed horror spreads across Six's face. "We can't—"

"You'll stay here and be a doctor," I say. "And I'll go with Ten and—"

“No.” Tears fill her eyes again. “The warriors *die*, Seven. Every single one of them dies.”

Strength builds inside me. “We don’t know that for sure.”

Six stares up at the blank ceiling of her capsule. “*I’m* the one who has to go to The War. *I’m* the one who has to die. The Decision Makers made their decision. We have to accept it.”

“Maybe some decisions shouldn’t be accepted.” An icy shiver runs through my body at hearing this forbidden thought become spoken words.

Six turns toward me. “But we *have to* accept it.” Her eyes insist that there is no other option.

I take her hands in mine and hold them more tightly than ever before. “No. We don’t.”

* * *

Emergency first aid kits are given to every doctor after they complete their basic training. I find my parents’ kits in the cabinet under the lavatory sink. Six and I take the kits into the shower room, lay out the contents, and sort what we think we’ll need into two matching rows. We’ve watched robots do surgeries in the hospital, but of course neither of us has ever performed a surgery ourselves.

With a quivering hand, Six pushes up the left sleeve of her jumpsuit. “Cut me first.”

I unwrap an antiseptic swab stick and paint the clear liquid onto Six’s forearm. Gathering my nerve, I unlock a slender silver box that contains a surgical knife and then press the button that retracts the protective cover of its sharp blade.

“Ready?” I ask.

Six squeezes her eyes shut and nods.

Using the knife, I make a tiny cut in Six’s skin. We need to ensure that our wounds are extremely small, so they aren’t noticeable. Especially mine.

If I die tomorrow, I won't have time to heal. I don't want anyone noticing evidence of our switch on my body.

I dab away Six's blood with a piece of gauze, then I spread the edges of the wound with my fingers and make careful slices through the fat—dabbing away blood as I go—until I hit something solid: Six's chip.

Six flinches as I slide the skinny tips of a pair of surgical tweezers into the wound, grasping for the tiny object that has been buried under her skin for eighteen years. Her jaw clenches.

“Sorry,” I say. “I'm trying to be gentle.”

“I know.”

After a few tries, I finally get hold of the chip. When I ease the tweezers out of the wound, a miniscule glass tube with gold, thread-like, coiled wires inside rests between the tips.

As Six presses a square of gauze against her wound to stop the bleeding, she stares at the object that I pulled from her body. “I expected something more impressive,” she says.

“Me too.” The chip looks more like a miniature version of a fourth grade science experiment than something that holds the power to switch our lives.

I rinse Six's chip with sterile water, then antiseptic, then sterile water again. Then I set it on a fresh piece of gauze and push up my sleeve.

Six silently swabs my arm with antiseptic. As it dries, she looks into my eyes. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I want to be a warrior,” I say, even though my words flush my skin with cold terror.

Pain sears into my arm as Six slices into me. With small, delicate, movements—almost as perfect as the ones the robot surgeons make—she works her way under my skin.

My thoughts are consumed by the sharpness of the knife. Cutting into me. Deeper and deeper. My pulse pounds in my neck. My cheeks feel hot.

My head feels empty.

Everything goes dark.

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SATURDAY, JUNE 13
2004

The last thing I remember was Six cutting into my arm. I don't recall lying down on the shower floor, but that's where I am now.

"I fainted?" I murmur.

"Yeah," Six says.

Through unfocused eyes, I see her closing a nearly-invisible wound on my forearm with a drop of surgical glue. I blink the daze from my brain and push myself up into a sitting position.

"Why don't you rest for a few minutes?" Six suggests.

I shake my head. *I can't rest until this is over.*

Six cleans the bloodied chip that she pulled from my body and places it on a fresh piece of gauze. Then she holds out her arm.

My mind still hazy, I pick up the chip with tweezers and push it deep into Six's wound, into the spot where her old chip once was. When I withdraw the tweezers, its jaws are empty. Only a little trail of blood on Six's arm betrays our secret. I press gauze against the wound until the bleeding stops, then I seal the incision with surgical glue.

It's done.

Six collects the used medical supplies and wraps them in a towel. "I'll take these to the hospital and replace them," she says, mostly to herself.

In silence, we exchange clothes, keeping our backs to each other. Our naked bodies are probably more or less the same, but seeing Six undressed would still feel awkward. Besides, I don't want her to see Ten's cellular or dog tag. I won't be giving them to her.

After we're dressed, we exchange navigators and necklaces. Six gets my pearl necklace and my doctor necklace. I get Six's warrior necklace and a necklace that once belonged to our maternal great grandmother. The charm is a silver bird—a dove, I think. Bits of white paint fill the ridges between its wings and its body; I assume it was once painted entirely white.

Six and I stash the medical kits and used medical supplies in the bottom of the lavatory cabinet, and then I walk her to the domicile door. Tears roll down her cheeks, but my eyes are dry. I need to be strong, for my family, and for myself. Tomorrow, I will leave home and go fight in The War. It will take every bit of strength that I have to face the unknown. But it would have taken even more strength for me to stay.

“When you get to your domicile, don't scan your arm,” I tell Six. “Knock on the door and Nine will let you in. He scanned me out, and if he scans you back in, then it won't look like I ... you ... ever left.” I force a small smile. “Nine came up with that idea. He's a kind person. I think he'll be good to you.”

I scan my arm, and the domicile door opens. Six enters the hallway and then turns to look at me, her face pained.

“Goodnight, Seven,” I say to her, trying to hold my voice steady.

“Goodnight, Six,” she says, her voice barely there.

I scan my arm again, and the door closes between us. I remain strong for a moment, but then, as I stand there, staring at the closed door, thinking about my future, weakness overtakes me. I sink to the floor and wrap my arms around my knees, fighting the tears that beg to come. There's no one to be strong for now except myself. And so I allow myself to surrender.

I cry noiseless sobs so forceful that they hurt my gut. As I release my tears, I let go of the pain over what I am about to leave behind. I let go of the fear of what I will face tomorrow. I let my tears make me strong enough to face what is next. And then I force all of my feelings deep inside me, rinse my face with cold water from the lavatory sink, and focus on my next task.

I go back to the gathering room and tap on my little brother's capsule door.

There's no answer.

I tap again.

The door retracts revealing a squinting, sleepy Forty-one, dressed in his pajamas.

"Six?" he croaks. "What's wrong?"

"I need you to come with me," I say.

He crawls out of his capsule. "Where are we going?"

"On an adventure."

Forty-one cocks his head uncertainly. "What kind of adventure?"

I continue, "Has there ever been a place you wanted to explore, but there was a locked door in your way?"

"Yes," he says.

"We're going to go open that door."

His eyes widen with excitement. For an instant, he reminds me of Ten. "How?" he asks.

I smile. "I'll show you."

I scan open our domicile, and Forty-one bolts into the main hallway. I race after him, down the stairs and through the maze of hallways on the third floor. He stops outside the door marked: "Aeroponics. Authorized Personnel Only."

"I want to see where they grow our food," he says. Forty-one has always had a passion for food. Sometimes I wonder if that's because he

isn't getting enough to eat, but he's growing properly; he must be getting what he needs.

I hand Ten's cellular to him. "This is called a cellular. It can collect an access code from any scanner and transfer the code to this tag." I place Ten's tag in his other hand.

Forty-one turns on the cellular and the security screen comes up. "What's the password?" he asks me.

"Two zero zero seven," I say.

Forty-one taps the appropriate numbers on the display and the home screen appears.

"Touch the box that says 'Clearance,'" I say.

Without further instructions, Forty-one collects a code, transfers the code to the tag, and uses the tag to open the door. Forty-one is such a smart child. He will accomplish great things in his life. I wish I could see the man that he will become.

"Good job," I tell him softly. I haven't said that to him in a long time, even though he has certainly deserved it.

On the other side of the door is a long corridor with expansive windows on each side. Beyond the windows are enormous rooms housing towers of white pipes with clumps of green leaves sprouting from them. The first time I came here—many years ago, with Ten—this place reminded me of a cross between the plaza garden and the hospital.

"Check out all that spinach!" Forty-one exclaims as he gazes through one of the windows. "I bet it's enough to feed *everyone* with spinach alone for weeks." He prances down the corridor, stopping at each window to identify the plants. "Peppers!" "Peas!" "Tomatoes!" "Peaches!" "Strawberries!" His enthusiasm is contagious. "Can we go in the strawberry room?" he asks me.

"Yes, we can," I say.

Forty-one scans Ten's tag, and the door slides open. The sweet aroma of hundreds of strawberries wafts from the room. "Can I eat one?" Forty-one asks me.

I smile. "Go ahead."

He zeros in on a bright-red berry. "This one is perfect." Carefully, he detaches it from the plant. He looks into my eyes with a mix of love and respect that makes my heart ache with loss. "It's for you," he says, and he hands me the strawberry.

"Thank you," I say.

Forty-one plucks another strawberry and drops it into his mouth whole.

I take a bite of my berry. It's sweeter than any strawberry I've ever tasted.

Forty-one licks his lips free of strawberry juice. "This is the best adventure ever, Six!"

I'm Seven, I almost say.

But, of course, I can't.

* * *

The sky is still dark and filled with stars and the plaza garden is deserted as Forty-one and I approach the fish tank. I lead him to the unmarked door beside the tank.

"Scan the tag here," I whisper to him.

Forty-one scans open the door. A grin spreads across his face as he eyes the snaking network of pipes that extend from the floor to the high ceiling.

"Oh wow!" he shouts. "I want to climb *that!*"

Forty-one gives me the tag and cellular and then runs forward without restraint. His childish bravery hasn't yet matured into adult cautiousness.

"Careful, Forty-one!" I call out.

"Don't worry, you know I'm a good climber," he calls back.

I *didn't* know that. But Forty-one seems to be correct about his climbing ability; he's scaling the pipes extremely well, despite the fact that the thick, slippery pipes are much trickier to climb than the ladders and ropes in the gymnasium. I start up after him, scaling the pipes just like I've done hundreds of times before.

Forty-one plops down in the same spot that Ten and I always settle into. He gazes at the fish, his face flushed with exertion.

"Great climbing!" I say as I sink down next to him.

"Thanks," he says. "You too."

I smile, but my heart fills with regret. Already tonight I've spent more time alone with Forty-one than I have in the last two years combined. I should have made more time for him. I always felt like I was too busy. Now I have so little time remaining.

I exhale. "I wish I'd been a better sister to you."

His forehead furrows. "What do you mean? You're an awesome sister."

I'm stunned ... until I remember that he thinks he's talking to Six.

"I don't want you to go," he adds, his eyes filling with tears.

I take a deep breath, willing myself not to cry in front of my little brother. "You'll still have Seven."

He shakes his head, and the tears start down his cheeks. "Seven is never around."

He's right. I was never around. I take another breath to keep my voice steady. "I have a feeling she's changed."

Before he can argue—I can't bear to hear him argue that—I hang Ten's chain around his neck. Then I place the cellular in his hand. Ten wanted me to give these things to my brother and his sister when the time was right. The time *isn't* right now. But tonight is all I have left.

"Those are for you," I say to Forty-one.

He stares at me with wet eyes.

I continue, “I want you to share them with Forty-seven. Use them to explore every forbidden place you can find. But you need to be very careful. Don’t let anyone see you. And don’t tell anyone else about them.”

“What about Mom and Dad?” he asks.

“Adults would get in grownup trouble if they got caught. Don’t tell Mom or Dad anything about the tag or the cellular or the places that you discover with them. Got it?”

“Got it,” he says, his expression subdued.

“Good,” I say. “Now, there’s one more thing I need to show you.”

* * *

Forty-one steps into the dim, blue-lighted space of the restricted hallways. “This place is cool!” he says, walking ahead of me. He looks so small. So vulnerable. I wonder whether I’m about to make a big mistake. What I am about to do is dangerous. Forty-one is just a little kid. I wish I could wait to do this until he’s older. But that isn’t an option.

“Come over here, Forty-one,” I say.

He bounds back to me.

I point to the wall. “Go ahead and scan the tag there.”

“But there’s no scanner,” he says.

“Do it anyway.”

Forty-one runs Ten’s tag over the wall, and a panel slides open, revealing an empty drone closet; the frightening drone that Ten and I saw here earlier today is now gone.

I walk to the back wall of the closet. I shouldn’t show Forty-one what is beyond it, but I need to show someone—someone who’s staying here—and I feel like, of all the people I’m leaving behind, Forty-one is the best choice.

“What you’re about to see is dangerous. Deadly,” I say to Forty-one. “Whatever you do, do not step forward.”

He stares at me with anxious eyes.

“Are you ready?” I ask him.

He nods without looking away from my face.

He might be ready for this or he might not be, but it’s too late to change my mind now.

“Scan the tag here,” I say, gesturing to the wall. Then I take his other hand.

Forty-one scans the tag, and the wall slides open. His jaw drops, but he doesn’t utter a sound. I tell him to sit, and he does.

After a few minutes of silently sitting on The Edge, staring into the darkness, Forty-one begins to whisper questions. I answer them as best I can. I tell him the truth. At least as much of the truth as I know.

Finally he says, with a shaky voice, “I want to go back home.”

“Okay,” I say.

Forty-one scans the wall closed. And we go home.

* * *

I awaken to the gentle vibration of the navigator on my wrist.

I open my eyes. I’m in Six’s bedroom capsule. Wearing her pajamas.

Her morning image is on the ceiling. An illustration from *Little Wizard*. It’s a picture of the wizard boy putting an end to The War with a bright orange burst of magic that surges from his fingertips. That image seems silly now. Magic doesn’t end wars.

I switch on the lights and pull up my left sleeve. There’s a tiny patch of dried surgical glue on my forearm. It’s barely noticeable. There’s hardly any bruising around it at all. *Good*.

My hand goes to the unfamiliar chains around my neck: Six’s bird necklace and her warrior necklace. I lift the warrior charm and examine it. Inside the silver ring are black shards of metal that appear sharp enough to cut, but when I cautiously run my finger over them, I find that their

knifelike edges dive into the smooth, green, glass-like substance beneath them, leaving the surface completely smooth. The green substance isn't uniform; tiny sparkles within it reflect the light in different directions, making the green almost seem alive. I grip the charm in my fist, imagining that it is infusing me with the courage to face what is about to come.

I'm about to scan open the capsule door when I see a folded paper tucked between the mattress and the wall. My name is scribbled on it—my real name—in Six's handwriting. I unfold it and read:

Dear Seven,

I've spent the past few hours trying to figure out why I was chosen to be a warrior. I'm still not sure of the answer. Whatever the reason, I can't help feeling that, by being chosen, I let you down.

You always talked about how we would grow old together. I wanted that too. You are the first person I ever met and the last person I ever wanted to leave. I am so sorry that I let you down.

Love,
Six

There is a knock on the capsule door. I grab a pen and add to the note:

You did not let me down.
Love,
Seven

I fold the paper, tuck it back between the mattress and the wall, and open the capsule door. My mom is standing just outside it. She stares at me. Her eyelids are swollen. I wonder if she was crying all night long.

“Hi, Mom,” I say, crawling out of the capsule, avoiding eye contact.

“Hi,” she says, her voice weak.

“Is anyone in the shower?” I ask.

She nods. “Your dad. He should be out soon.”

I walk through our gathering room and push the button to depacify the translucent window. Beyond the glass, the morning sky is pale blue and full of promise. Like something is beginning rather than ending. Drones zip through the air with their deliveries. I focus past them, to Ten’s family’s domicile window. It’s opaque.

I sit on the floor, and the coldness of it immediately seeps right through my clothes. My mom sits down next to me. In her reflection in the glass, I see tears pooling in her eyes. *She thinks she’s losing Six.* She and Six have a close relationship. They always have.

I unhook Six’s bird necklace from my neck and drop it into my mom’s hand. “You should have this. I can’t take it with me.”

She clasps her fingers around it.

We are silent until I can’t stand the silence any longer.

“What do you think it’s like above the sky?” I ask.

“I think,” she says, “there are beautiful gardens, hundreds of times the size of the plaza garden and millions of times more spectacular.” It surprises me how similar this description is to the one I gave Six yesterday—a fairy tale image that I created in order to comfort my sister, and to comfort myself.

“Where is The War in all that?” I ask.

My mom’s expression darkens. “The War is a disease that withers the plants and flowers. But once The War is over, everything will thrive. That’s why you’re going above the sky. To end The War.”

“What if it kills me first?”

“You need to fight,” she says, her voice trembling with intensity. I’ve heard my mom say those exact words to patients with terrible, incurable diseases. She told me back then that it was important to give them hope. Even when there was none.

“Do you think it’s possible to survive?” I whisper.

“If anyone can, you will.” She smiles with wet eyes. “You’re the strongest person I know, Seven.”

My skin chills at the sound of my real name. My mom must be extremely upset to reverse our names; she never does that. “I’m ... Six,” I correct her.

She shakes her head. “Don’t you think I know my own babies?”

My body freezes, except for my pounding heart. Suffocating fear rises through me.

“You switched chips,” she says. She doesn’t phrase it as a question.

Reluctantly, I nod.

“Let me see,” she says.

With shaky fingers, I pull up my left sleeve.

She examines my wound and then lowers my sleeve. “Are you *certain* this is what you want?”

“Yes.” I glance at my mom’s reflection in the window, and then I add, “And it’s what *you* want, isn’t it?”

She looks directly into my eyes with warmth I can almost feel. “No.”

I don’t believe her. “You want Six to go to The War instead of me?”

“I don’t want either of you to go,” she says. “But *you and I* share a special connection.”

“What connection? We barely speak to each other anymore.”

“You and I are extremely alike. Sometimes people who are alike don’t get along too well. Qualities that other people would respect, they take for granted in each other, and qualities that they wish they could curb in

themselves, seem magnified in the other person. It's like looking into a hypercritical mirror."

"What qualities do you wish you could curb?" I ask.

"The desire to question things, to rebel, to be stronger than we're supposed to be. Those qualities are dangerous here. Above the sky, they may serve you well." Her voice breaks, but she presses on, "I hope they serve you well ..."

My mother pulls me into her arms—just like she used to do when I was little—and holds me there so fiercely that I feel as if nothing can hurt me.

At least not until she lets me go.

* * *

Children wear white jumpsuits until after Assignment Day, when they switch to the dark-blue ones that the adults wear. Warriors never switch to the blue jumpsuits. They wear their white children's jumpsuits to Warrior Departure. And so all of us—the fourteen warriors, six girls and eight boys—are dressed in white.

In two rows of seven people each, we march through the packed, hushed plaza, past our weeping families and friends. I hear a whimper to my right. It might belong to Forty-one, but I don't look. We were instructed to stare straight ahead, not making eye contact with anyone during the departure ceremony. The time for goodbyes is over.

Ahead of us is the Transport Chamber. It is a small room with walls of thick glass. Three hundred sixty-four days out of the year, those walls are opacified, but right now, they are transparent, and the wall that faces the plaza has been retracted into the floor.

I take a shaky breath and follow my fellow warriors up the four stairs that lead to the chamber. Once each of us is standing on one of the green, lighted circles on the chamber floor, the circles turn red, and we turn to face

the plaza. Ten and I are at the front of the group now, closest to the grieving crowd.

Ten has no idea that it is *me* beside him instead of Six. I haven't told him yet that Six and I switched places. He said yesterday that he wants me to live. I couldn't risk that he might try to stop me from going to The War. And so I'm going to tell him who I am at the last possible moment. When it's too late for me to turn back.

The transparent front wall of the chamber rises out of the floor. And then I hear it lock. There's no turning back now. It's time to tell Ten my secret.

Outside the chamber, one of the administrators—a short, balding man a little older than my parents—is speaking, but strangely, I can't hear him. I've been attending Warrior Departures since before I knew what a warrior was. Every year, the speech is the same. But I always thought the warriors could hear it. I thought its purpose was to make the warriors feel honored and courageous, but inside the chamber it is deadly silent. *The speech isn't for us. It's for them.*

I had hoped that the distraction of the administrator's speech would give me an opportunity to tell Ten who I am. But it won't. I need to tell him my secret without revealing it to any of the other warriors. But there are no distractions now inside the Transport Chamber.

The administrator gestures toward the sky with both hands, nearing the end of his speech. After the speech concludes, the crowd will salute the warriors. The warriors will salute back. And then the walls of the chamber will opacify.

I don't know what will happen to us after that. The only thing I do know is that I will never see my family again. Furtively, I search the crowd for the faces of the people I want to see one more time before the walls opacify. *Forty-one.* He's right by the glass barricade nearest to me, his little body pressed up against it. He's crying. He doesn't know that I'm not

worthy of his tears. He thinks I'm Six. *Six*. She's standing next to Forty-one. She takes a deep, painful-looking breath. Nine is by her side. He'll help her get through this. I know he will. *Dad*. The proud smile he wore when we said goodbye is now a quivering frown. He opens his mouth as if to speak but then turns to look at my mom. *My mom*. Her gaze is fixed on my face. She says something. *What did she say?* She says it again, one word at a time, "I ... love ... you."

The crowd salutes.

I salute, but I look directly into my mom's distraught eyes and speak without a sound, "I love you too."

And then, in an instant, everything is gone. The walls surrounding me are now white. My heart thumps loudly in my ears. It is the only sound. My fellow warriors look around, frantically searching for a clue as to what is coming next.

"FACE THE WALL!" a disembodied voice says. The words are so perfectly monotone that the speaker can't possibly be human.

Shaking, I turn toward the nearest wall. Ten is next to me. I let him look into my eyes for the first time since Six and I switched places. His brow furrows.

"DISROBE!" the voice says.

No one moves.

"That's against the rules," a girl—Nineteen—protests.

"DISROBE NOW!" the voice repeats so powerfully that the sound reverberates in my chest.

I hear other people unzipping their jumpsuits, fast. I lean down and unfasten my shoes, slowly.

"PLACE EVERYTHING IN THE RECEPTACLES ON THE FLOOR!" The voice doesn't speak. It only shouts.

I drop my shoes, and then my socks, into a lighted opening that has appeared near my feet. I unzip my jumpsuit, yank it down over my body,

and watch it fall into the receptacle. Where it will be destroyed. I'm still wearing my underwear. I don't want to take it off here.

"What an excellent body!" someone whispers near my ear. It's Twelve. In my peripheral vision, I can see that he's completely naked.

"Look at the wall, Twelve," Ten growls.

"Now that you can't have Seven, I guess Six is the next best thing," Twelve says.

"TWO THOUSAND SIX! DISROBE NOW!" the voice commands.

I yank my undershirt over my head and release it into the receptacle. I pull off my underpants and throw them in too.

The receptacles vanish into the lines of the floor.

"EYES CLOSED!"

I close my eyes, feeling terrified and powerless. I'm considering stealing a glimpse, when a bright light hits my face. Brighter than the brightest light ever. I squeeze my eyes shut as tightly as I can, but the light burns through my eyelids. It feels as if someone is poking my eyeballs with needles.

And then the light fades.

"EYES OPEN!"

I open my eyes and stifle a scream.

There's a person standing next to me—or it might be a robot, I can't tell. It wears a black jumpsuit with shiny, silver streaks on it. There are thick, black gloves covering its hands and fingers. Completely surrounding its head is a mirrored, glass bubble. I see my own terrified expression reflected in its faceless "face" along with a room full of naked warriors and other black-garbed robot-people.

"GET DRESSED!" the disembodied voice demands.

The robot-person next to me holds out a folded, black jumpsuit, along with a pair of black socks and shoes. I slip the jumpsuit on without any

underwear underneath—because none is provided—and then quickly pull on the socks and shoes.

After I'm dressed, I look at Ten. He's staring at the wall, his face tense. He doesn't know that his best friend is standing right here beside him, ready to face whatever comes next with him. I need to tell Ten who I am, before it's too late.

I take a breath and whisper, "*Quiero tocarte.*"

Of course I can't touch Ten now, but I instantly see that my words have had the desired effect. Ten looks straight into my eyes, silently asking a question that doesn't really need to be asked. Because he already knows the answer. *Seven?*

I nod.

Suddenly, the lights in the room extinguish. A cloth is pulled over my head and tightened around my neck, so tight that I can barely breathe, leaving no doubt in mind as to what is about to happen.

I am going to die.

SUNDAY, JUNE 14

1109

Something grips my upper arm—a robot-person hand, I think. It's strong and devoid of emotion. My heart pounds uncontrollably in my chest, so hard that I can feel it in my entire body. Voices all around me command, "MOVE! MOVE! MOVE!" Lots of voices. Low and deep. Male and female. All of them shouting, "MOVE! MOVE! MOVE!"

The hand drags me forward. I feel the impact of other hands on my body. Warm, sweaty, frightened hands. The hands of the other warriors. I reach out and find their bodies stiff and trembling, like mine. We *touch* each other, not out of desire but desperation, searching for something, anything, to hold on to. We *touch* each other, but it doesn't matter. Our bodies aren't ours anymore. We belong to someone or something else, I just don't know who or what.

The hand on my arm yanks me away from the other warriors. I am forced to walk, but to where? My sense of sight has been stripped from me by the hood over my head. I use my remaining senses to note everything around me. The air feels heavy. It has a distinct odor that is vaguely familiar, but I can't place it. Other bodies brush against mine. They are walking too. Which one is Ten's? I want to touch him one last time. *Please*.

The hand spins me around and pushes me backward into a wall of rigid bodies. I'm pressed so close to them that I feel their quick, scared breaths.

And then everything starts shaking. The other people. The floor. *We must be getting closer to The War.* I try to prepare myself, but it's hard to prepare when you have no idea what to expect. *Why won't they tell us what is coming?*

Without warning, a blast of hot air knocks me backward. I don't fall because there are too many bodies around me. A deafening sound fills my ears, like a scream from some enormous thing that isn't human. The hand yanks me forward. Into air blowing so hard against the hood covering my face that I can't breathe. Toward the horrible noise. *They're going to take us into The War blindfolded.*

"NO!" I scream. Angry tears stream down my face. I want to see the threat ahead of me. If something is going to kill me, I want to look it in the eye. I want to fight it. *How are we supposed to fight if we can't see?*

I grab the bottom of the hood and try to wrench it loose from my neck. A thick hand stops me. Now there are two hands clamped onto me, one on each arm. The hands carry me forward. I kick. I scream. But I have a feeling that, no matter what I do, I won't win.

Suddenly, the sound becomes muted—not entirely, but enough that I can hear the word "DOWN!" shouted into my ear.

Before I can react, the hands that grip my arms pull me backward. I brace for the hard collision of my body against the ground, but almost immediately my bottom and back contact something solid—a chair maybe. The hands control my landing, and the impact is surprisingly gentle. It's as if the hands are trying to protect me from injury. But they're not done with me. Flat, slippery straps are pulled around my chest and waist and then tightened. I struggle to free myself. But it's no use.

"Rest!" a harsh voice whispers near my face.

I exhale and lean back, as if I'm following the instruction, but I remain tense and alert.

The air is still. There's a strange odor here, like the nauseating chemical smell of new furniture. I hear shaky breathing. And cries. No words. Just cries. From the other warriors, I assume. One of the cries comes from right next to me. From a boy. I'm not sure who it is. I can't recognize my classmates by their cries. I've never heard them cry before.

I close my eyes. Whether my eyes are open or closed, I see nothing but darkness, but closing them helps me focus. Oddly, I feel as if I'm moving even though I am sitting completely still. The sensation isn't anything like the shaking from The War; it's a strange, gentle, unsettling movement deep in my stomach. Maybe it's my body protesting the surges of adrenaline it has been subjected to all morning.

Some of the warriors gag and cough. I hear the sound of liquid evacuating from their throats. I feel the growing need to vomit too, but I take a deep breath, holding back that urge. I need to stay strong and prepared to fight.

Suddenly, there's a jolt. My eyes spring open, but they still see only darkness. The straps around me loosen, and a hand grabs my right arm. It pulls me to my feet and pushes me forward, forcing me to walk. Although my heart is beating hard and fast, I feel inexplicably calm. Focused. Ready.

I assume the other warriors are walking with us. I hear soft footsteps ahead of me and behind me, but otherwise it's quiet except for an intermittent muffled sound—like the faint noise of someone breathing. At first I think the source of the sound is getting closer, but then I notice that it seems far away. And then the sound disappears entirely.

The hand shoves me down. All the way to the ground. My impact is controlled though, and so I land gently. Then the hand releases me, leaving me alone. The floor beneath me is smooth and cold, like the floor of my family's gathering room, the floor where I sat with my mom just over an hour ago.

Someone yanks the hood off my head. I blink the haziness from my eyes and see a woman standing in front of me. She holds no obvious weapon. She is wearing the same type of jumpsuit worn by the robot-people in the Transport Chamber, but her head is exposed. Her golden-brown hair is pulled back behind her head, but hangs freely from there, as if her bun has come undone. Wisps of hair stick to her forehead and the sides of her pale face. She looks down at me with serious, bloodshot eyes. *She isn't a robot. She's human.*

The woman turns and walks toward a door, along with other black-jumpsuited men and women who, based on their gaits, I'm fairly sure are people rather than robots.

I quickly assess my surroundings. I am sitting in the center of a large room—like our gymnasium, except that each wall is decorated with stripes of dark-green and black. The other warriors are scattered around me, also sitting on the floor. Most of them appear as if they recently vomited or might do so at any moment.

I look for Ten, but see Twelve first. His eyelids are puffy, and his face is smudged with hastily-wiped-away tears. He is frantically glancing around, his brow furrowed, looking as if he might start crying again, but when he notices me, his forehead relaxes and he gives me a condescending smirk. I stare at him, trying to be unfazed, like Six would be. He rolls his eyes and turns away.

I continue searching the room for Ten and spot him about twenty feet away. His eyes are dry. He looks the way he usually does, completely in control. The only thing out of place is his hair, which is more tousled than I've ever seen it. He looks into my eyes and gives me the slightest hint of a smile. I feel the tension in my muscles ease.

Behind Ten, a portion of the wall noiselessly slides open and a hulking man marches into the gymnasium—the *same man* who ran our warrior test with the weapons. “ON YOUR FEET!” he bellows.

Strength that I didn't know I still had lifts me to my feet.

“LINE UP!” he shouts.

The other warriors and I assemble into a nearly-perfect line. Ten is next to me. Twelve ends up a few people away.

“Ladies and gentlemen of Warrior Class Alpha Two Zero Eight Six, I am Commander Marcus Duncan,” the man continues. His tone is urgent, but his voice is softer now, as if what he's saying is being told to us in confidence. “Your life prior to your arrival here is over. It must never be discussed, not even with each other. You have come to us weak and pathetic. Your instructors will make you tough. They will prepare you to defend your lives. Your survival depends on your prowess. Therefore, it behooves you to master every task. You will perform each task *beyond* what you perceive to be your utmost ability. In this room, you will not speak unless told to do so. You will not act unless told to act. Disobedience is not tolerated. Failure is unacceptable. Those who fail die.”

I fight to keep my trembling body still, as the commander continues, “Your training begins immediately.” He glances toward the black-jumpsuited people who flank the main door of the gymnasium. One of them—a tall, muscular man—walks toward us.

“I will demonstrate a proper push-up,” the man says. He drops to the floor, landing on his palms and the tips of his toes. He bends his elbows, lowering his body to the ground, lightly touches the floor with his chest, and then effortlessly lifts himself back into the starting position. “One,” he says. Even though his arms bulge with muscles, it is astonishing that they are strong enough to raise and lower his massive body so easily. I watch, riveted, as he counts out fifty push-ups. Then the man jumps to his feet.

“I will now demonstrate a proper pull-up,” he says, without even a hint of breathlessness. He strides over to a horizontal metallic bar that is slowly rising up from the floor in the center of the room. The man leaps into the air and grips the bar. His muscles contract as he pulls his body up—lifting his

chin over the top of the bar—and then lowers himself back down. Maintaining a steady, easy pace, he repeats this sixteen times, calling out the number of each pull-up. Then he releases his grip and drops back to the ground.

The commander turns back to us. “You will each perform twenty-five push-ups and eight pull-ups. Only *acceptable* push-ups and pull-ups will be counted. Those who complete this task successfully will receive a hot meal. Those who do not complete this task successfully will undergo ‘therapy.’ ‘Therapy’ is a task you must complete while experiencing unpleasant external stimuli. Believe me when I say that you do not want ‘therapy.’”

The black-jumpsuited people by the door start toward us as the commander goes on, “You will be supervised by your instructors. When they tell you to do something, you will do it. You will not question it. In the event that they tell you to speak, you will end every response to them with the word ‘sir’ for male instructors or ‘ma’am’ for female instructors.”

Each instructor stands facing one of us. The man who demonstrated the pull-ups and push-ups stands in front of Ten. The woman who pulled the hood from my head—possibly the same person who put it over my head as well—is in front of me. She is a few centimeters shorter than I am. Her eyes, although bloodshot, are otherwise robot-like. They stare at me with an emptiness that makes me feel as though she’s looking through, rather than at, me. The skin of her face is slightly wrinkled between the brows and around her eyes, but otherwise she looks about the same age as my parents. My parents don’t have any wrinkles yet. My chest aches at the thought that I will never see their wrinkles.

“ASSUME THE PUSH-UP POSITION!” my instructor shouts at me. Her eyes don’t reflect her words; they remain vacant.

I lie down on the ground with my palms flat on the floor and raise my body onto my toes.

“BEGIN!” my instructor bellows.

Bending my elbows, I lower my body all the way to the floor, then all the way up.

“ONE!” my instructor counts.

My first push-up was acceptable.

I drop down for another push-up and then bring myself up.

“ONE!” my instructor says.

My second push-up wasn't acceptable.

I lower myself down again. And then up.

“ONE!” my instructor sighs.

What am I doing wrong?

Around me I hear other instructors shouting out numbers. I hear twos, threes, and even a six.

I do another push-up.

“TWO!”

At this rate, I'm going to have to do *fifty* push-ups in order to have *twenty-five* “acceptable ones” counted. We usually do twenty push-ups at evening recreation. I'm fairly sure I can perform twenty-five push-ups, but fifty is unimaginable.

I attempt another push-up, ignoring the trembling in my arms.

“THREE!”

I do another one.

“THREE!”

Around me, I hear much higher numbers: “TEN,” “SIXTEEN,” “ELEVEN,” “TWENTY-FIVE.” *Twenty-five?* I glance up to see who already finished the task, and my stomach turns. It's Twelve.

“TIME FOR PULL-UPS,” a wiry, gray-haired male instructor says to Twelve.

Twelve gets to his feet and follows his instructor toward the unoccupied pull-up bar, as I finish another push-up.

“THREE!” my instructor shouts.

Twelve passes me and coughs out, “Pathetic.”

His instructor whips around to face him. “DID I TELL YOU TO SPEAK, TWO THOUSAND TWELVE?”

“No.” Twelve’s face stays neutral, but his eyes betray his fear.

“THE CORRECT RESPONSE WOULD HAVE BEEN, ‘NO, SIR!’”

Twelve and his instructor stare at each other.

I struggle through another push-up and get a “FOUR.”

Twelve’s instructor finally continues, “YOU WILL NOW PERFORM TWENTY-FIVE ADDITIONAL PUSH-UPS.”

“But ...” Twelve says, his eyes wide with outrage.

“FIFTY!” his instructor growls. “RIGHT HERE! DOWN ON THE FLOOR! NOW!”

Twelve drops to the ground and starts doing push-ups, as his instructor counts, “ONE, TWO, TWO, THREE ...”

Eventually, I get a “FIVE” and a “SIX,” but when I go down for an attempt at number seven, I can’t push myself back up. My arms shuddering, I collapse onto the ground. My cheek hits the hard floor, sending a painful sting deep into my head.

“BACK INTO POSITION!” It’s Twelve’s instructor who is speaking—or rather, shouting. I turn my head and see him glowering at Twelve, who is lying on the floor like I am.

“I can’t. I’m done,” Twelve mumbles. “Sir,” he adds.

I turn away and see Ten complete another push-up.

“Twenty,” Ten’s instructor says. He is the only instructor who isn’t shouting out the numbers. Instead he speaks in a quiet, low voice. He scares me.

“ARE YOU DONE, TWO THOUSAND SIX?” This time it’s my instructor who is speaking.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, defeated.

“YOU ARE SO WEAK AND PATHETIC THAT YOU CANNOT PERFORM TWENTY-FIVE ACCEPTABLE PUSH-UPS?” she shouts at me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say.

She leans close to my ear and speaks so softly that I can barely hear her, “You are so much stronger than you realize. Don’t let *anyone* ever tell you that you’re not. Not even you.” And then she returns to her original position, towering over me. I wonder whether I imagined her words; they feel like they’re so deep within my brain now that they might have originated there.

Ten’s arms shake as he lowers his body to the floor and then raises it back up.

“Twenty-one,” his instructor counts.

And then Ten slumps onto the ground.

“Is there a problem, Two Thousand Ten?” Ten’s instructor asks in an unmoved tone.

“I can’t complete the task, sir,” Ten says, his voice weak.

“Have you performed this task *beyond* what you perceive to be your utmost ability?” Ten’s instructor asks.

Ten stares into my eyes. “Yes, sir.”

That isn’t the truth. Ten is lying ... because of me.

I wrench my body from the ground and do another push-up, my arms shaking violently.

“SEVEN!” my instructor counts.

And another.

“EIGHT!”

And another.

“NINE!”

I feel like my arm muscles are ripping from my bones, but I don’t stop. I lower myself to the floor and then thrust myself up, gritting my teeth

against the pain.

“TEN!”

And then I collapse to the ground.

* * *

There are five warriors who didn't complete the push-ups and pull-ups: Thirteen, Twenty-seven, Twelve, Ten, and me. I'm sure Ten could have completed them if he'd wanted to. And Twelve probably would have completed them if he hadn't had to go back and perform additional push-ups. So, really, only three of us were too weak. But all five of us will do the “therapy” task.

The iciness of the small gymnasium that we are led into cuts right through my jumpsuit and makes me start shivering instantly.

“LINE UP!” the instructors command, almost in unison. Ten's instructor's lips move, but I can't hear his voice over the shouting. I should be watching my own instructor, but my attention keeps shifting to Ten's. Ten's instructor seems different from the others, more dangerous. Behind his controlled voice and unreadable expression, I feel like he's hiding some terrible secret.

We line up across from our instructors. Thirteen is first. She's at least ten centimeters taller than I am, and her body is strong and muscular. If I didn't know her so well, I would be surprised that she's among those who failed the first task, but Thirteen doesn't do well under pressure. Even the slightest bit of stress unravels her. Usually, her intelligence compensates for her lack of composure. Usually, but not always. Ten is next in line. Then me. Then Twelve. And, finally, Twenty-seven. Twenty-seven is as tall as Thirteen, but twice as muscled. I'm surprised that he failed the first task. He was consistently one of top performers in the physical fitness challenges at evening recreation. But here, it takes more than just strength to succeed.

My instructor steps forward and addresses all of us, “BECAUSE YOU DID NOT SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETE YOUR ASSIGNED TASK, YOU WILL NOW RECEIVE ‘THERAPY.’ I WILL DEMONSTRATE THE TASK YOU WILL PERFORM.” She drops to her hands and knees and bends her elbows, lowering her upper body to the ground, then she straightens her elbows, bringing herself back up. It looks like she’s doing a regular push-up, except that her knees rest on the floor. “THESE ARE CALLED ‘MODIFIED PUSH-UPS.’ YOU WILL NOW PERFORM TWENTY-FIVE ‘MODIFIED PUSH-UPS.’”

I feel a small sense of relief. I’m fairly certain that I can perform this task.

“ASSUME THE STARTING POSITION!” she shouts.

We quickly get on our hands and knees. I stare at the floor, waiting for my instructor to tell me to begin. And then I hear a strange whooshing sound. I can’t even begin to guess what it is, and so I look up.

The instructors are unreeling long, flat, black hoses. In an instant, the hoses fill, becoming pipes—nearly half a foot wide—that wiggle around on the floor, as if they have developed a life of their own. The instructors hold onto them, their arm muscles bulging as if the hoses are putting up a good fight.

In rapid succession, the instructors squeeze the triggers on their hoses, and water erupts from them. A powerful blast hits me, knocking me to the ground. I struggle back into position as water pounds against my body. It’s so cold that it burns.

“BEGIN!” I hear.

I lower myself to the ground, and water envelops my head and face. I close my eyes and mouth to keep it out, but it sucks inside my nostrils when I inhale. I sputter and cough as I push myself up.

“ONE!” my instructor shouts.

I take a gasp of air and go down again, holding my breath as the water surges over my face. I force myself back up and grab another breath.

“TWO!”

I do another push-up and recognize a pattern. When I’m down, the water hits me directly in the head, running over my face, making it hard to breathe. When I’m up, the water hits me between the shoulder blades and runs down my back, allowing me to take a breath. Is my instructor doing that on purpose? Is she intentionally giving me a break when I’m up? Are the other instructors doing that also? I consider checking, but I think that would be a mistake. If my instructor *is* offering me any assistance, that help would surely end if I start looking around.

By the time I finish push-up number twenty, my fingers have gone numb. My hands are pale, almost white. Like death. But of course I’m not dead. My body is shaking too violently to be dead.

I go down for what I hope is push-up twenty-one. This time, instead of the water rushing over my face, it pounds forcefully against my back. Pressing me against the floor. I grit my teeth and thrust myself back up.

“TWENTY-ONE!”

I lower myself down for another push-up, and the water hits my back again, pounding me toward the ground. The numbness in my fingers gives way to pain. I let out an agonizing groan and force my shuddering arms to push me up.

“TWENTY-TWO!”

Ten must be finished with the task by now. He’s probably watching me. Wishing he could help me. Knowing that he can’t.

I lower my body down and then shove myself away from the floor.

“TWENTY-THREE!”

I don’t feel my muscles trembling anymore, though I can’t imagine that the trembling has stopped. I lower myself down again and then force myself up.

“TWENTY-FOUR!”

The water blasts my back. Pressing me down. I push against the floor, as if I’m moving *it* instead of *me*.

“TWENTY-FIVE! TASK COMPLETE, TWO THOUSAND SIX.”

The water instantly stops pelting me, but I still hear it flowing. It spatters me a little, but it’s nothing compared to what I just experienced. I crumple onto the wet floor, wipe my eyes with my fingers, and look toward the sound of the still-flowing water. My mouth falls open.

Twelve hasn’t completed the task.

His face is obscured by a wall of water. He’s trembling. Coughing. Struggling to push himself up. Vomit erupts from his mouth and mixes with the water underneath him. I think I see a little blood in the vomit. I move away, repulsed, and almost bump into Ten.

Ten is shivering, like I am. He looks at me, his face serious. I wish I could touch him. Even though we’re both cold, I feel like, if we were to press our bodies together, we would be warm.

“EVERYONE ELSE HAS COMPLETED THE TASK, TWO THOUSAND TWELVE,” Twelve’s instructor shouts. “YOU ARE THE LAST ONE.”

Twelve winces and moans as he pushes himself up.

“TWENTY-FOUR!” The instructor keeps the water aimed at Twelve’s head at all times; he isn’t giving Twelve the break that my instructor gave to me.

Twelve lowers himself again and, gagging, tries unsuccessfully to force himself back up.

“I SHOULD JUST KILL YOU NOW, TWO THOUSAND TWELVE.”

I wrap my arms around my knees, remembering the blood-red light coming from Twelve’s chest after Six “killed” him in the warrior test. I wonder if I will see Twelve die for real.

“DO YOU WANT TO DIE, TWO THOUSAND TWELVE?” his instructor bellows.

Twelve shakes his head against the water flowing over it.

“THEN GET YOUR PATHETIC SELF OFF THE FLOOR AND PERFORM THE TASK!”

I despise Twelve. I truly do. But I don't want to see him die. I don't want to see anyone die. But I *will* see people die. And unless I want to die too, I will have to kill people, people who will be trying to kill me.

“TWENTY-FIVE!”

Twelve collapses into his own vomit. It makes me sick to my stomach.

“STAND UP, TWO THOUSAND TWELVE!”

Twelve groans and pushes himself to his knees. Agonizingly slowly, he rises to his feet and stands unsteadily. His eyes roll around in their sockets. Diluted blood streams from his nose and drips onto his black jumpsuit where it disappears.

“Stand still,” Twelve's instructor says. “I'm going to hose you off.” It's the first time I've heard the man speak without shouting. He actually sounds human.

Twelve covers his face with his hands as his instructor starts the water flow again—this time much less forcefully—and washes Twelve's body.

“Put your hands down,” Twelve's instructor says.

Twelve hesitates for a moment before he drops his hands to his sides. The instructor washes Twelve's face with water flowing even more gently. Then the instructor drops the hose and grabs a bright-white washcloth. He walks over to Twelve and hands it to him. “Sit against the wall and lean forward. Pinch your nose with this until I tell you to stop.”

Twelve takes the towel, goes to the nearest wall, and eases himself to the floor.

“THE REST OF YOU, IT'S TIME TO EAT,” my instructor shouts.
“SIT AGAINST THE FAR WALL.”

The four of us hurry to the wall furthest from the door. My instructor hands us each a small brown package with “MRE” printed on it in large black letters. There are smaller words below that: “MEAL, READY-TO-EAT, INDIVIDUAL.”

My instructor continues, “TEAR OPEN THE PACK AND SET ASIDE THE FOLLOWING ITEMS: WHEAT SNACK BREAD, CHUNKY PEANUT BUTTER, FRUIT MIX, SLOPPY JOE, SPOON. PLACE THE REST OF THE ITEMS BACK INTO THE PACK.”

I rip open the brown package. Inside it are white plastic packets labeled with black lettering. Working as fast as I can, I gather the items my instructor listed. As I stuff the remaining packets back into the brown package, I take note of the words on their wrappers: “Grape Jelly,” “Cinnamon Bun,” “Moist Towelette,” “Carbohydrate Electrolyte Beverage Powder – Orange,” “Iodized Salt,” and there’s a colorful packet that says “M&M” on it. *I wish I could see what’s inside the colorful packet.*

Just before my instructor collects my torn brown package, I read the words on it that encircle a small illustration of a bird: “Department of Defense: United States of America.” My instructor takes the package from my hands before I can read anything more, and she hands me a large plastic bottle filled with water.

“YOU HAVE TEN MINUTES TO INGEST THE FOOD CONTAINED IN THESE PACKAGES.”

She didn’t say that we are allowed to speak, so I don’t, even though Ten is sitting right next to me, and I want very badly to hear his voice.

Although my stomach feels so empty that it hurts, I’m hesitant about trying the food inside the packets; I’ve never eaten food that comes in a *package* before. Fruit Mix is the only thing that sounds even remotely like food, and so I start with that.

Water dribbles out of the Fruit Mix packet as I tear it open. The water contains little yellow-orange chunks of what I assume is some type of fruit.

I collect one of the chunks with my spoon and transfer it to my mouth. The flavor is vaguely reminiscent of a peach, but the texture is mushy and the taste is too sweet. I dislike it, but I shovel the “fruit” into my mouth anyway, then I drink the syrupy water that it was bathed in; there might be some nutrition in that too.

Ten is devouring the Sloppy Joe at such a rapid speed that I would think he found it delicious if it weren't for the repulsed expression on his face. He drains the packet into his mouth and then shakes his head, as if he's trying to lose the horrid memory of what he's just eaten. He makes eye contact with me, and then he looks at his Sloppy Joe packet and wrinkles his nose in disgust. I hold up my empty Fruit Mix packet and nod semi-approvingly. *It can't be as bad as the Sloppy Joe.*

Ten opens his Fruit Mix next. I rip open the little packet of Chunky Peanut Butter. A light-brown gooey substance oozes out. It smells strong and strange, but appetizing. I squeeze a tiny bit into my mouth. *Yum!* I squeeze out some more. Ten raises his eyebrows, as if to ask if it's good. I nod enthusiastically.

“TWO MINUTES UNTIL YOUR NEXT TASK,” Twelve's instructor announces.

Twelve is still seated apart from the rest of us. The bleeding from his nose has stopped, and the bloodied washcloth now rests in his lap. He is devouring his food much more eagerly than I would expect given the fact that he just expelled the contents of his stomach onto the gymnasium floor.

Across from him, the instructors are sitting on a long bench, eating what appear to be the same meals we are. Twelve's instructor opens one of the colorful “M&M” packets and spills green, brown, blue, and red little balls into his mouth. *If what's inside that packet is edible, why aren't we allowed to eat it?*

Ten is chewing on his Wheat Snack Bread. I look to him for his opinion on it, and he shrugs. I open mine and, with just one bite, I understand Ten's

reaction. It doesn't really have much flavor, but at least it doesn't taste bad. The Sloppy Joe, on the other hand, is foul. It is mushier than the fruit, smells like feces, and looks like red-brown vomit. I eat it all—even squeezing the last drops into my mouth—because it's the only food I have left. And I have a feeling that I'm going to need all of the sustenance I can get for whatever comes next.

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SUNDAY, JUNE 14

1258

Ten, Twelve, Twenty-seven, Thirteen, and I walk side-by-side with our instructors down the bare white hallway. The air here is warm—a sharp contrast to that of the frigid gymnasium we just exited. The hallway looks so similar to the ones back home that, for an instant, I imagine I'm back there. But my momentary feeling of comfort is quickly replaced by painful longing for my family and my old life, mixed with anxious dread over what is to come. We haven't been told where we're heading or what will happen there, but I'm certain that, whatever we're about to do, it won't be pleasant.

Ahead of us, a door opens. I march toward it. *Whatever is beyond that door, I need to let it make me stronger.* I have no idea how long it will be before we go to The War. Whatever they teach us before then, I must master it if I wish to have any chance to survive.

Sitting on the floor—in the center of yet another gymnasium—are the warriors who successfully completed the push-up and pull-up task. Their faces are clean and their hair appears freshly combed, but their bodies are tense and they glance about apprehensively. When they spot us, I see a small hint of relief, as if they'd been holding their breaths until now.

We join our fellow warriors on the floor, and our instructors exit the room. I feel unnerved by the strands of damp hair that have worked their way out of my bun and are now plastered against my face and neck. My

appearance would be completely unacceptable under normal circumstances. But things here are anything but normal.

Suddenly, I notice that everyone else is looking straight ahead. When I follow their gaze, I find myself staring at the commander, who is staring directly at me.

“Now that I have everyone’s attention, I will proceed,” he growls, and then he continues, “YOUR NEXT TASK IS A TIMED RUN. THERE IS A TRACK AROUND THE PERIMETER OF THE ROOM. YOU WILL RUN ONE LAP WITHIN SEVENTY-FIVE SECONDS.”

I steal a glance at the track. It doesn’t look much bigger than one that circles above our plaza. I usually take about sixty seconds to complete one lap on that track.

“UP TO FOUR WARRIORS WILL RUN AT A TIME. THOSE WHO ARE NOT RUNNING WILL BE GIVEN WEAPONS. THEY WILL USE THESE WEAPONS TO FIRE UPON THOSE WHO ARE RUNNING. THIS TASK WILL CONTINUE UNTIL EACH WARRIOR HAS SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED ONE RUN AND MADE FOUR KILLS ON A MOVING TARGET.”

The instructors come through the door, each holding a dark-green jumpsuit. My instructor helps me pull a green jumpsuit over my black one. The suit covers my hands and shoes, and it wraps over my head and neck, with just a small opening for my face. The fabric is somewhat stiff, like that of the jumpsuits we wore during the warrior test back home. I’m fairly certain that this jumpsuit’s purpose is the same: to inflict pain when we are hit by the white light of a weapon and paralyze us when we are “killed.”

Once we are all dressed in green, the commander shouts, “TWO THOUSAND SIX, STEP FORWARD.” He points to a spot next to him.

As I step into position beside him, the commander lifts the leg of his jumpsuit and grabs a weapon—which looks like a smaller version of the

ones we used during the warrior test—from a strap wrapped around his ankle.

“DURING YOUR WARRIOR EVALUATION TESTING, YOU WERE TOLD ABOUT A SINGLE VITAL AREA.” He draws an imaginary circle over my chest with the tip of his weapon. “A FEW OF YOU DISCOVERED THAT THERE IS A MATCHING VITAL AREA ON THE BACK.”

Twelve cocks his head and smirks.

“FROM THIS POINT ON, THERE WILL BE AN ADDITIONAL VITAL AREA: THE HEAD.” The commander points his weapon directly at my head. “YOU MUST PROTECT YOUR VITAL AREAS AT ALL TIMES. OTHERS WILL BE TAKING AIM AT THEM WITH THEIR WEAPONS, NOT ONLY DURING THIS TASK, WHICH IS PRACTICE, BUT IN THE FUTURE, WHICH IS REAL. HAVE I MADE MYSELF CLEAR?”

The room is silent.

His expression softens. “Have I made myself clear?” he repeats. This time, his voice is deep, but gentle. Almost compassionate.

“Yes, sir,” the warriors murmur.

The commander nods his approval. “All right then, let’s begin.”

I’m assigned to the first group of runners. Twelve is in my group, along with Thirteen and Twenty-seven. All four of us failed the morning task. Ten is the only “failure” not in our group. I wonder if this method of dividing us was purposeful or random. It doesn’t seem random.

My group waits at the track’s starting line while the other warriors are given weapons. Some of them immediately practice taking aim at us, appearing ready to start the kill task, eager even. I turn my attention to the track and try to figure out how I’m going to be able to run while protecting all of my vital areas. *I hope my fellow warriors’ aim isn’t very good.*

“READY, SET ...” the commander shouts. “GO!”

My heart pounding, I race away from the starting line. Almost immediately, I hear a scream behind me. Someone must have been hit. Or killed. *So much for my classmates having poor aim.* I don't look back to see who the victim is. I just concentrate on running as fast as I can. Heat courses through my muscles. It feels good to run, although it would feel much better if I wasn't painfully aware of the fact that my fellow warriors are currently trying to kill me.

Suddenly, intense burning rips into my right forearm. The pain is far worse than anything I experienced in the warrior test back home. A small area of my jumpsuit is lit up in red, but it seems to be much too small an area to account for so much pain. My head feels light and my body is shaky, but I'm still running. And I've reached the curved part of the track. I'm about one quarter of the way to the finish line. There are no runners ahead of me. I'm not sure how many people remain running behind me. All of them, I hope. I hope I'm not the sole remaining target.

Another pain—so strong that it overtakes every other sensation—shoots into my right shoulder. My right arm falls limply to my side, paralyzed and throbbing severely. My vision blurs with tears. I concentrate on sending all of my remaining energy to my legs. I instruct them to run. I aim my eyes straight ahead and will myself to get where I need to go. I tell myself that I can do this. That I won't fail. That I can't fail.

And then searing pain digs into my right thigh. My body drops to the ground in a pool of red light. I'm not dead, but I'm done. I can't run anymore. I'm not able to stand. Or even crawl.

I've failed. Again.

"WEAPONS DOWN!" the commander shouts.

My arm and leg instantly regain their function, but they ache and throb. I'm surprised that the commander ended the task without letting someone "kill" me. But the kill wouldn't have counted. He said that kills must be made on a *moving* target.

The three other runners in my group are scattered on the first quarter of the track. I made it more than halfway, and yet it doesn't matter. If this were The War, all four of us would be dead.

The commander calls out the names of the next runners. I limp over to the center of the room and collect a weapon from one of them. Ten is still part of the weapons group. He moves over next to me.

"You okay?" he breathes.

I nod.

"READY, SET, GO!"

I choose the nearest runner—Twenty-two—and try to shine the light of my weapon onto his chest, but there are so many weapon lights that I can't tell which is mine. I press the trigger, but Twenty-two continues running, uninjured.

To my right, I notice something blinking. Twelve's weapon. Twelve is smiling and looking at the first downed runner of the group. *Twelve just made his first kill of the task.* His weapon stops blinking and he takes aim again. I watch how he holds the weapon in line with his eye. He looks over the top of it and pulls the trigger. His weapon blinks again and Twenty-two is down, his chest glowing red.

I raise my weapon to eye level and aim my light at Seventeen. Before I press the trigger, Seventeen drops. I was too late. Twelve's weapon is blinking again. *His third kill.*

Only a single warrior is still running: One. I point my weapon toward One's back and press the trigger. One drops. But I didn't kill him. Ten's weapon is blinking.

"Good job, Ten," I whisper.

His face tenses and he looks down.

I swallow. "It's just pretend."

"For now." Ten stares at the ground. "But not for long."

* * *

My four “kills” finally come. But after five runs, I still haven’t made it more than three-quarters of the way around the track without getting “killed” or incapacitated. In between running trials, I sit on a bench and wait with the other warriors who have already successfully completed the weapons portion of the task.

Suddenly I realize something. There are four warriors on the track, four warriors in the center of the room with the weapons, and three other warriors sitting here with me. That’s *twelve* people. But there were *fourteen* warriors.

I check the faces of those with weapons: Eighteen, Twenty-four, Seventeen, and Twenty-two. And those on the track: Fifteen, One, Twenty-seven, and Nineteen. On the bench with me are Ten, Twelve, and Thirteen. *Where are Twenty-five and Eight?* I don’t recall seeing either of them during the push-up and pull-up task, but that doesn’t mean they weren’t there.

“TWO THOUSAND TEN AND TWO THOUSAND SIX.”

Ten and I stand as Twenty-four—who has just made his fourth kill—takes a seat on the bench with Twelve and Thirteen. One, Twenty-seven, and Nineteen head toward the bench as well, having successfully completed their runs. Fifteen hobbles over to the bench to await her next running trial.

Now there are only three people with weapons.

As Ten and I walk to the track, his hand brushes mine. “Good luck,” he mouths.

“You too,” I mouth back.

“READY, SET, GO!”

Ten and I race forward along the track. But he stays by my side.

“What are you doing?” I pant.

“I’m staying with you,” he says, remaining beside me.

I run faster. “I want you to complete the task.”

As Ten picks up his pace, red light engulfs his right upper arm. His face wrinkles in pain. “I will, eventually.”

“They’ll realize what you’re doing,” I say, frustrated with him. “They’ll punish you.”

Ten shakes his head. “I don’t care.”

I won’t let Ten sacrifice himself for me. It’s bad enough that he had to do the push-up ‘therapy.’ I won’t let him be hurt any further because of me.

I force myself to run harder and faster, pushing past the exhaustion that begs me to stop. Ten catches up to me and then passes me. I weave around and pass him. It’s a game now, just like we used to play in the restricted hallways back home. Ten overtakes me and then I overtake him. Running. Racing. Harder and faster—

Horrible burning seizes my right side, close to my vital area, but apparently not close enough to kill me. I cry out in pain, but keep running.

“You okay?” Ten asks, matching his pace to mine.

I grit my teeth and race ahead of him, adrenaline fueling my speed. I can see the finish line now. I sprint toward it. Ten overtakes me and crosses the finish line, red light streaming from his arm and flank. *He did it! He’s done!* I watch the finish line pass under my feet. *I’m done too!*

And then I see a blinding flash of white light. An overwhelming pain envelops my head, as if my skull has been crushed and the fragments are stabbing into my brain.

Everything goes dark.

* * *

I squint my eyes against the bright lights of the gymnasium ceiling. My head is pounding worse than the worst headache imaginable. *Someone must have “killed” me right after I crossed the finish line.*

Ten’s face moves into view, shielding me from the light. I focus my eyes on him and feel myself smile. He glances up, his eyes widen, and then

he pops out of view.

“STAND UP, TWO THOUSAND SIX!” my instructor shouts. Ten moves forward to help me, but my instructor raises her hand. “She needs to do it herself.”

Ten stays close as I struggle to my feet and then shakily walk to the bench. I take a seat and peel off the green jumpsuit. Without a word, my instructor collects the suit and takes it away.

With blurry eyes and an aching head, I focus my attention on the track. Fifteen collapses just a few feet from the finish line, her chest glowing red. The warrior who “killed” her—Seventeen—joins us on the bench, then Fifteen makes another attempt at the run. She finally succeeds in crossing the finish line, but—I assume because she was the last person to complete the running task—she is forced to run again and again until she is “killed” by Eighteen, and then by Twenty-two. And then the task is over. I feel a small sense of relief, but then I reconsider. When one task ends, another begins.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE WILL PROCEED TO OUR NEXT ORDER OF BUSINESS,” the commander shouts.

I close my eyes, trying to stop the hammering in my head. *I’m not ready for another task yet.*

“I WILL NOW ASSIGN YOUR NEW NAMES.”

My eyes pop open.

“TWO THOUSAND ONE, STEP FORWARD.”

One stands, and he walks to the commander. The commander rips the “2001” name tag from One’s jumpsuit and replaces it with a new tag that reads “Patel.”

“AARON PATEL, BACK TO YOUR SEAT.”

Aaron Patel is a strange name. It sounds a bit like a robot name, but robot names are only one word and are preceded by “Miss” or “Mr.” or “Professor.”

“TWO THOUSAND SIX, STEP FORWARD.”

I force myself to stand on my unsteady feet and stagger over to the commander. As soon as I am close, he tears my “2006” tag away and presses another one into its place.

“SARAH MURPHY, BACK TO YOUR SEAT.”

I say my “name” over and over in my head, trying to get used to it. *Sarah Murphy. Sarah Murphy. Sarah Murphy.*

“TWO THOUSAND TEN, STEP FORWARD.”

Ten’s nametag is pulled off and he is given a new one: “Hanson.”

“MICHAEL HANSON, BACK TO YOUR SEAT.”

Michael Hanson. Sarah Murphy. Michael Hanson. Sarah Murphy. I repeat those words—our names—over and over in my head until the ceremony is over.

“YOU NOW HAVE BOTH FIRST AND LAST NAMES. FIRST NAMES WILL BE USED INFREQUENTLY. LAST NAMES ARE TO BE USED WHENEVER YOU REFER TO ONE ANOTHER.” The commander takes a deep breath, and then continues slowly and deliberately, “Under no circumstances are you to use the prior names of yourselves or your classmates again.”

Those final words send a chill through my body.

I can’t imagine never saying the name “Ten” again.

SUNDAY, JUNE 14

1859

There is no sky and there are no clocks here—at least not that I’ve seen so far—but I assume that it is now evening, because they just served us dinner. Dinner was better than lunch. We were given broccoli and cauliflower, slices of something brown that might have been some kind of fish, and strawberries for dessert. It was difficult to eat the strawberries; I couldn’t help thinking of the last time I ate one.

Our instructors engage in hushed conversation at one of the two rectangular tables in the bare white dining room and we sit in silence at the other one until one of the instructors—a female—stands and says, “YOU WILL NOW REPORT TO EVENING RECREATION. TRAYS IN THE RECYCLE CHUTE AND LINE UP BY THE DOOR.”

I inhale, trying to muster some strength, drop my tray in the chute, and join the line of warriors by the dining room door. Then we trudge down the hallway, our instructors by our sides.

When we arrive at the end of the corridor, the same instructor who spoke a few moments ago gestures to the hallway that runs perpendicular to ours and says, “TO THE RIGHT ARE THE FEMALE SLEEPING QUARTERS. TO THE LEFT ARE THE MALE SLEEPING QUARTERS. YOUR INDIVIDUAL QUARTERS ARE LABELED WITH YOUR LAST NAME. AT THE COMPLETION OF EVENING RECREATION, YOU

WILL REPORT DIRECTLY TO YOUR QUARTERS.” Then she scans her arm at a door next to her. The door opens, and we file inside.

I was expecting another gymnasium, but this room clearly isn’t one. Plush purple couches face a black wall. Off to the side are a few small tables with chess sets on them. Near the door, there are six large clear canisters of bubbly water, the water in each canister a different color.

The same instructor addresses us again, “THE MOVIE WILL BEGIN IN TEN MINUTES. UTILIZE THIS TIME TO GET TO KNOW YOUR INSTRUCTORS.”

I am considering whether to ask my instructor what a movie is when she asks me, “Would you like a drink?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I’m not thirsty, but I feel like it’s the correct thing to say.

“You don’t need to do that here,” she says.

“Do what, ma’am?”

“Add ‘ma’am’ to the end of everything you say.” She walks over to the canisters of colored water and grabs a clear plastic cup. “Which one do you want?”

“The green one.” The color reminds me of the vines in the plaza garden.

“Good choice,” she says.

She pushes the cup into a little spot under the tank of green water. “You may only have one of these drinks per day. And only in the evening, after dinner.”

“Why?” I ask.

She hands me the cup. “This drink will make you weak.”

I stare at the green liquid—without drinking it—as my instructor collects a cup of red liquid. *Why would anyone want to drink something that weakens them?*

My instructor looks back at me and adds, “The weakness is only temporary. Go ahead, drink.”

I take a sip. It’s delicious, but very sweet. Strangely, it makes my throat feel warm even though the liquid is cool on my lips.

“Do you like it?” she asks.

“It’s good. It tastes a little like fruit.” I take another sip.

She drains the entire cup of red drink into her mouth, gulping loudly as she does, and then says, “All right then, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I thought we were supposed to get to know each other.”

She drops her cup into a recycle chute. “We already know everything we need to know.” Without waiting for my response, she goes to the door, scans her arm, and exits.

I exhale, deflated. I want to get to know my instructor. Not because she seems nice—she doesn’t—but there’s so much I wish she would explain.

All around the room, the other warriors are having what appear to be reasonably pleasant conversations with their instructors. I take a gulp of my drink, slosh the liquid around with my tongue, and then swallow it. Ten’s instructor meets my gaze and waves me over. I walk to the couch where he and Ten are leaning back, appearing so relaxed that it’s hard to believe that the rest of today ever happened.

“Would you like to join us?” Ten’s instructor asks me with a smile. He seems now to be the complete opposite of the person he was all day.

Feeling wary, I nod and say, “Yes, sir.”

“My name’s Lieutenant Commander Evan Ryan,” he says. “You can call me Ryan.”

“I’m Six,” I say semi-automatically.

Ryan raises his eyebrows. “Nice to meet you, *Murphy*. Have a seat.” He pats the couch next to him. As I sink down into the spongy cushion, he eyes the cup of green drink in my hand and shakes his head. “Don’t drink that.”

My heart accelerates. “Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“It’ll make you weak,” he says.

“That’s what my instructor said. But she told me the weakness is only temporary.”

He sighs. “Even temporary weakness can be dangerous.”

I put the drink on the narrow table in front of the couch.

Ryan launches right into his next thought, “So, based on what I’ve observed, I would say that the two of you have some aptitude when it comes to weapons. That you need to work on your upper body strength.” He looks directly at me when he says the second statement. “And that you are incredibly fast runners. You didn’t put out until that last run though. Why not?”

“I guess we got our second winds,” I lie.

Ryan looks into my eyes. “You can tell me the truth, you know.”

I stiffen. *No, I can’t. I can’t even tell you who I really am.*

“I know you’re scared,” he adds in a soft, reassuring whisper. For an instant, he reminds me of my dad.

Suddenly, the lights in the room dim. My heart rate quickens.

“It’s time for the movie!” Ryan says cheerfully.

“What’s a movie?” I ask hesitantly.

Ryan cocks his head back as if he’s trying to come up with the answer to a difficult question. “It’s kind of a cross between a picture book and a play.”

I try to imagine what he means, but everything I envision seems strange.

“See you two tomorrow,” Ryan says, standing up.

“You’re not going to stay for the movie?” Ten asks.

“I’ve seen it many times. It’s one of my favorites though. You’ll enjoy it.” Before he goes, Ryan pats Ten on the shoulder, then he takes hold of my forearm and gently squeezes it.

Non-family members must not touch, my brain shouts. But that's an old rule. The rules I've known since childhood don't apply anymore. There are different rules now. But it seems that they are only in effect when we're training. Not in this room. In this room, there seem to be no rules at all.

Without warning, the black wall in front of us comes alive with a picture of the starry night sky. And I hear happy music; a man is singing. Splotches of color appear in the sky, and then a blue and white ball. The ball gets bigger and bigger, as if it's moving closer to us. And then it transforms into an image of tall piles of boxes, many of them badly damaged. A small terrestrial drone comes speeding along a curvy path around the piles of boxes. He's damaged too.

All of these images on the wall in front of us are merely drawings, but it almost appears as if we are watching something *real* actually happen. I'm mesmerized by the little damaged drone. Unlike normal drones, he has a face, and he seems sentient.

I wonder if they have drones like that here—wherever *here* is. Ever since we arrived, I haven't seen a single drone or robot. I've encountered only people. But they are people who act like robots, rarely giving a hint of their humanness. Up until now, they've seemed to be trying to teach us to behave like them. To complete our assigned tasks without giving in to our human weaknesses.

But in this room, I think we're allowed to be human. And so maybe it's okay that, toward the end of the movie, when the little drone tenderly touches hands with another little drone—just like Ten and I sometimes do—for the first time since I started my training to be a warrior, I cry.

* * *

The wall in front of us is black again; the movie ended a few minutes ago. It is time to go to our sleeping quarters, but Ten and I wait until all of the other warriors have trickled out of the room before we stand.

Together, we go down the corridor leading to the girls' quarters. My last name is on the final door before the hallway ends. I scan my arm, and the door noiselessly slides open.

Without entering the room, I take it in. It has white walls, ceilings, and furnishings. It looks much like my family's domicile, but it is only about one-quarter the size. There's no separate bedroom capsule. Instead, the bed is elevated on a platform on one side of the room. There's an unenclosed toilet, shower, and sink near the door. At the far end of the room is a large window with opaque glass.

I step inside my quarters and turn to face Ten. I don't want him to leave. "Do you think we'd get punished if you come in here?" I whisper.

"They didn't give us any rules about that." Ten looks right and then left, and then he steps inside my quarters.

My heart pounding, I scan the door closed behind him. And we stand there, staring at each other, frozen in place. I wait for security sirens or some sort of sign that Ten entering my quarters is not permitted, but nothing happens.

Ten finally speaks, "How did you ...?"

I pull up my left sleeve and reveal the tiny glued incision on my forearm. After all my activity today, the skin around it is starting to bruise a little.

He shakes his head. "Why?"

"The training alone would have broken Six," I say. "I won't let it break me."

"The War will break us all," Ten says.

I look into his eyes. "I'd rather be broken than to live without you."

Ten pulls me against his chest and holds me there tightly. He seems so strong that it's hard to imagine he will ever lose that vigor. My heart pounds against my ribs with such force that it's hard to imagine it will ever stop

beating. It's hard to imagine that either of us will ever die. But we will. And our deaths may come as soon as tomorrow.

I have the sudden urge to feel Ten's body closer to mine. I move his right hand to the zipper of my jumpsuit. As his fingers pull it downward, the cool air hits my naked skin. I grasp Ten's zipper and slide it down, watching as his bare chest and then his abdomen are exposed. He slips his arms out of his jumpsuit, and it falls down to his waist. I slide my jumpsuit off my shoulders and press my body against his. His skin against mine. It feels soothing in a way no touch ever has. But I also feel a sense of heat. Of longing. Of the need for our bodies to be even closer together. I put my fingers back on Ten's zipper and ease it further down.

Ten pulls away.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

He stares at the floor. "I don't want to lose control."

My skin tingles with fear, but also, intense curiosity. "And do what?"

"Hurt you."

"How would you hurt me?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know."

My heart pounds with emotions that I can't properly express with words. I want Ten to do *something* to me. I have a feeling that losing control might be it. "We spent most of our lives being in control, and look where it got us. I *want* you to lose control with me. *Whatever* happens. I'm not afraid."

"I am."

I've never heard Ten express fear before. "Why are you afraid?" I ask.

"Because I love you, Seven."

My breath catches in my chest. *I love you*. They're the words I wanted to say to Ten last night. The words that may only be said to family members and to the person who one is paired with. Words that barely express how I

feel about Ten: the deep, intense feeling that my life is complete only when he is a part of it.

Tears pool in my eyes. “I love you, Ten,” I whisper. “And I love Michael Hanson. I love you whatever your name is.”

His smile fades. “They’re not going to send us off to die,” he says, as if he just now discovered it to be undeniably true.

He sounds so certain that, instead of rejecting his statement, I ask, “How do you know?”

“They gave us *new names* ... names *like theirs*.”

He’s right. It doesn’t make sense to name us and then send us off to be killed. And although my instructor doesn’t seem to care much about me, Ryan does seem to care about Ten. About both of us. Why would Ryan bond with us if we were as good as dead?

“Maybe not all of the warriors die in The War,” I say.

“Or maybe they think we can win it,” Ten adds.

My heart swells with happiness as I imagine us ending the war and going home. To our families. To a whole lifetime with Ten.

Now that is worth fighting for.

MONDAY, JUNE 15

0602

Last night, after Ten left my quarters, I tried to deopacify the window. There's a button on the wall next to it, but when I pressed the button, nothing happened. I pressed it a few times, just to be sure, but the window stayed exactly the same. I'll try again this morning once I've changed out of my pajamas and secured my hair. For all I know, my window might look out on a public area. I can't allow other people to see me like this.

I pull up my sleeve and check the wound on my forearm where Six cut out my chip and inserted her own. The surgical glue is starting to peel up at the edges, but the little wound isn't too obvious among yesterday's scrapes and bruises.

My sore muscles protest as I walk to the delivery hatch by the door to get my fresh clothes. Inside the delivery compartment is a plain black box containing black underwear and black socks. That's it. Just underwear and socks. No jumpsuit. There must have been some mistake. Maybe the robots—or whoever prepares our packages of clothing here—neglected to put my jumpsuit in my package. Or maybe it will be delivered separately. I decide to finish getting ready. I'll check the hatch again when I'm done.

By the time I'm finished brushing my teeth, rinsing my body, putting my hair into the neatest bun I can manage without any hair gel, and pulling on the underwear and socks, the delivery compartment doesn't hold anything new, and the message board above my door is blinking with a text

announcement that breakfast will be served in the dining room in one minute. My heart racing, I put on my shoes and scan open the door to my quarters. Keeping most of my body hidden, I peek into the hallway. It's empty, but only for a moment. Soon, other warriors begin to cautiously peer out from their doorways.

“Did anyone get a jumpsuit?” Nineteen calls out.

All of the other heads shake side to side.

Nineteen steps into the corridor, wearing underwear that matches mine. Her dark hair is secured into a quite-acceptable bun considering that she, no doubt, wasn't provided with hair gel either.

One by one, the other warriors and I join her in the hallway, everyone dressed only in their underwear, their arms and legs naked and exposed. Each of the girls has her hair secured in a bun. The boys' hair is neatly combed, but some of the boys have waves in their hair that I never knew existed. Ten's hair has soft, gentle waves. It seems strange that I've never seen his hair in what must be its natural state. I smile and feel my pulse quicken.

Together, we all walk to the dining room. Nineteen scans open the door. Both of the dining tables are unoccupied. Trays labeled with our last names are laid out in the serving area at the side of the room.

I'm not sure how much time has been allotted for our meal, and I have no doubt that, once this mealtime is over, there will not be another opportunity to eat until lunchtime. I grab my tray and sit down at one of the tables. The others join me, as I unwrap the palm-sized, light-brown package on my plate and pluck out bits of fluffy yellow stuff and firmer brown stuff covered in gooey orange paste. I drop the slimy—but tasty—food into my mouth with my fingers, wishing I had a fork.

“Why do you think we weren't given jumpsuits?” Nineteen asks as she swallows a mouthful of food.

“Maybe this is ‘therapy,’” Twelve suggests. His still-damp hair is wildly curly; I haven’t seen hair like that except in fairy tale illustrations. “Did someone break a rule last night?” He gives me a close-lipped smile, and my cheeks burn. Twelve couldn’t possibly know what Ten and I did, could he?

“They don’t care about covering our bodies here,” Thirteen says. The bun in her hair is already beginning to unravel a bit. Goosebumps pepper her arms. “You remember what happened in the Transport Chamber.”

I take a sip of water. “Speaking of the Transport Chamber, does anyone know what happened to Eight or Twenty-five?”

Twelve gets an anxious look on his face, like the one he had during our therapy yesterday. “They probably killed them to teach us a lesson.”

“If they wanted to teach us a lesson, they would have killed them in front of us,” Nineteen says.

“Then what do you think happened to them?” Thirteen asks, her eyes wide.

Before anyone can offer a hypothesis, the door opens, and the instructors—dressed in jumpsuits—file in. “TRAYS IN THE RECYCLE CHUTE. LINE UP AT THE DOOR. MOVE!” one of the male instructors shouts.

I stuff a bit more of my breakfast into my mouth, grab my tray, and scramble with the other warriors to the recycle chute. I nearly forget to feel self-conscious about the fact that the instructors are watching us run around in our underwear.

I join the line of people by the door, and we head out of the dining room. We walk down multiple hallways, each lined with opaque windows and closed doors, before we are led into a gymnasium. It smells strange here, like clean sweat, rather than the sanitizing-chemical smell of most gymnasiums. The lights in this room are so dim that the walls, floor, and ceiling appear to be black shadows. Once my eyes adjust somewhat to the

minimal light, I notice that, in the center of the room, is a strange glassy floor. It undulates a little. I've never seen a floor like that. The instructors lead us close to the boundary of the glassy floor

The commander strides into the room, walking around the perimeter rather than over the glassy floor, which would have been a much shorter distance to his destination.

“GOOD MORNING!” he shouts out.

“GOOD MORNING, SIR!” the instructors respond.

The commander gives a small smile, almost appearing friendly.

“Warriors, you may respond as well,” he says.

“Good morning, sir,” we mumble uncertainly.

The commander gives another smile before his expression transforms back to his usual emotionless one. And then, without any warning, he shoves Ryan forward. Ryan falls toward the glassy floor and then ... *through* it. The floor deforms around him with a strange sound—almost like glass breaking—and then swallows him whole.

Some of the warriors gasp. I look to my instructor for a clue as to what is happening, but her face remains as expressionless as a deactivated robot. Ten's eyes register concern.

And then, Ryan's head reappears. *Sticking out of the floor*. His hair is plastered down onto his scalp, wet. His hands move back and forth, just under the undulating floor.

It isn't a floor. It's a tank of water. Like the fish tank back home.

“FOR YOUR NEXT TASK, YOU WILL ENTER THE POOL,” the commander says. “FIRST, YOU WILL KEEP YOUR HEAD AFLOAT FOR FIVE MINUTES. THEN, YOU WILL FLOAT ON YOUR BACK FOR TWO MINUTES.”

Ryan tilts his head back and lifts his body partially out of the water; it looks as if he's lying on top of an extremely soft mattress.

The commander continues, “AFTER THAT, YOU WILL SWIM TO THE FAR WALL OF THE POOL.”

Ryan flips onto his belly and moves his arms and legs as if he’s crawling. He glides forward, *swimming*. I’ve been watching fish swim around the tank in the plaza garden ever since I was a small child, but I never imagined that *people* could swim.

“FINALLY, YOU WILL CLIMB OUT OF THE POOL WITHOUT ASSISTANCE,” the commander adds.

Ryan pulls himself out of the pool and walks back to Ten’s side.

“YOUR INSTRUCTORS WILL TEACH YOU THE SKILLS NECESSARY TO PERFORM THESE TASKS. YOU WILL STAY IN THE POOL UNTIL YOU COMPLETE THEM SUCCESSFULLY. AM I UNDERSTOOD?”

“Yes, sir,” the warriors say.

“WHEN YOUR HEAD IS UNDER THE WATER’S SURFACE, YOU MAY BREATHE OUT, BUT NOT IN. AM I UNDERSTOOD?”

“Yes, sir,” the warriors say.

“WARRIORS IN THE POOL. NOW!” he bellows.

Someone shoves me from behind, and I soar toward the pool. The water swallows me with a suffocating sound. I almost gasp, but then I remember the commander’s instructions: *When your head is under the water’s surface, you may breathe out, but not in.* I decide not to breathe in or out, because if I breathe out, it won’t be long before I’ll need to breathe in.

My feet hit a hard floor. *The bottom of the pool.* I push against it and, a moment later, there is cool air on my face. A bit of water enters my mouth; it has a strong, unpleasant flavor. I spit it out and wipe the water from my eyes, breathing hard.

My instructor is in the water next to me, only her head above the surface. “Relaxed breaths. Kick your legs,” she says. “Move your arms in

and out. Fingers together.”

I kick my legs and try to mimic her arm movements as my body sinks back down into the pool, my chin and lips falling under the water. My heart speeds. My arms flail. Water stings the inside of my nose. I cough and suck in a frantic breath.

“Easy movements,” my instructor says. “Calm breathing.”

I’m not sure how she expects me to stay calm when the water is threatening to swallow me, but I force myself to do as she says—the opposite of what my instincts tell me to do. I inhale slowly and deeply. I move my arms fluidly. I relax my body. The water begins to support me, although it doesn’t seem like water could possibly be strong enough to do so. It’s an odd and magnificent feeling. I float, as if I’m an aerial drone. As if I can fly.

“No, no, please! No!” someone cries from behind me.

I glance over and see Twelve desperately clutching the edge of the floor that surrounds the pool, as if letting go would mean agonizing death. His instructor is whispering something in his ear, but Twelve doesn’t seem to be paying any attention to him at all.

“Murphy, that doesn’t concern you,” my instructor says in a low voice.

I turn my attention back to her.

“Let’s see you float on your back now,” she says. “Deep breath. Arms out. Chest and belly up. Trust the water.”

Obedying her instructions, I lean back into the water and try to let my body float on top of it. I hold my breath as water engulfs my cheeks and my forehead, and the disconcerting, suffocating sound fills my ears. I calm myself by focusing on the gymnasium ceiling high above us; it reminds me of the night sky, except there are no stars. I exhale and my body sinks down into the pool. I quickly inhale and feel myself rise again. I try to make my breathing steady. Allowing my body to rise and fall with each breath.

And then hands grab mine and yank me upright; my instructor keeps hold of me as she says, “Swimming is the same as keeping your head above the water, except that you move forward. Reach out with your hands. Kick with your legs. Head in that direction.” She nods toward the furthest edge of the pool and lets go of me.

My head dips under the water. My heart racing, I crawl and kick until my face finds the air again. Then I creep forward through the thick water. My instructor stays by my side, swimming effortlessly, watching me closely, not speaking until I grab the edge of the pool, and she says, “Climb out.”

I launch myself up onto the floor around the pool, but get only half as far as I’d hoped before I fall back into the water.

“Kick your legs,” my instructor coaches.

I kick hard and try again. This time, my upper body flops gracelessly onto the cold, rough floor. I roll over and sit, facing the pool, catching my breath.

The other warriors are still doing the tasks. A few of them are struggling to keep their heads above the water. Ten is floating on his back. Twelve is still clutching the edge of the pool, his face contorted with fear. No one is swimming yet. I finished *first*.

“You’ve completed the tasks,” my instructor says. “You may have a seat on the bench to wait for your colleagues or you may spend additional time in the pool.”

I stare at the water. I enjoyed the feeling of being in it. “I would like wait in the pool, ma’am.” I say.

“Good choice.” I think I see her start to smile, but then the expression fades away, leaving me wondering if her smile only existed in my imagination.

My instructor and I spend the next hour in the pool. In addition to allowing me to practice the original tasks, my instructor teaches me skills

that weren't part of the commander's instructions. She shows me how to drop down to the floor of the pool and sit there in the darkness, blowing bubbles, before pushing off the floor and going back to the surface. And she teaches me to swim with my head inside the water, only coming to the surface to breathe.

Once Twelve has finally sputtered his way across the pool, I pull myself out of the water, still gracelessly, but much more confidently. My instructor tosses me a thick, white towel and takes another one for herself.

She wipes the towel over her face and then her jumpsuit. "Go back to your quarters. Shower, and dress in the clothing that has been sent there. Physical training will commence in thirty minutes."

I look up from drying myself, about to say, "Yes, ma'am," but she's already at the gymnasium door, too far away to hear me unless I shout. She tosses her towel into a chute, scans her arm, and leaves.

* * *

There's no conversation among the warriors during lunch—even though, at the table next to us, most of the instructors talk and even joke with one another in hushed tones as they eat their food; my instructor is the only one of them who remains quietly focused on her meal.

I quickly consume every bite of my food and then gaze at my empty plate, still hungry, probably because I left behind more than half of my breakfast and then spent over an hour in the pool and the past three hours doing push-ups, pull-ups, and various other exercises.

"TRAYS IN THE RECYCLE CHUTE. LINE UP AT THE DOOR. MOVE!" one of the instructors shouts.

I swallow the rest of my water, put my tray in the chute, and then join the line by the door.

The instructors lead us down the same hallways we traveled early this morning, but we stop at a different door. The room that lies beyond it is just

as dark as the pool room, if not darker. It has the same black walls and ceiling, but there's no pool in the center, instead there are twelve small circles of blue light on the floor.

The commander is standing beside a rack of weapons. Once we are assembled inside the room, he begins, "IN THIS TASK, YOU WILL PERFORM CHEST-KILLS AND HEAD-KILLS USING A WEAPON. THESE ARE YOUR TARGETS."

Doors on the back wall of the gymnasium open and men and women file into the room. Instead of the stiff green full-body jumpsuits we wore in the previous weapons task, they wear thin brown ordinary-looking ones. I suppose these jumpsuits could light up when they receive a weapon hit, but there is no head covering. *How will we know when we've "head-killed" someone?*

"WARRIORS, RETRIEVE YOUR WEAPONS AND STAND ON ONE OF THE LIGHTED CIRCLES."

I go to the rack and grab a weapon. It's different from the weapons we've used in the past. Much smaller and heavier. As soon as I step onto one of the blue circles, a thin path of white light on the floor connects my circle to a blue circle that appears under one of the targets: a man. When the other warriors step onto their circles, paths of light—each one a different color—connect each of them with a target.

There are many more targets than there are warriors. Only some of the targets stand on lit circles connected to a warrior. The others stand nearby. Waiting. *Why do we need so many targets?*

"WARRIORS, TAKE AIM," the commander says.

I raise my weapon and my light falls on my target's chest. On his jumpsuit. His plain, ordinary jumpsuit. *What will happen to this man when I fire my weapon at his chest? What will happen if I fire at his head?*

"WARRIORS, FIRE!"

I hold my weapon steady, its light fixed on my target, but I don't fire. None of my fellow warriors are firing either. All of the targets stand on their blue circles, staring—emotionless—at the warrior who has taken aim at them.

“HANSON, FIRE!” the commander orders.

Hanson ... that's Ten.

Ten's eyes are focused on his target: a female. The light from his weapon is right in the center of her chest. Unless she moves, it will be a sure kill if he presses the trigger. But, despite the commander's order, Ten doesn't press the trigger. He's violating the rules. And so are the rest of us. I wish they'd tell us what happens to the targets when we fire. Will we *actually kill them?*

“TARGET FIVE SIX FOUR, FIRE!”

With one quick move, Ten's target reaches to her waist, pulls out a weapon, and raises it toward Ten.

“NO!” I shout.

My instructor wraps her arms around me, forcefully holding me in place on my circle. I watch helplessly as Ten slams onto the ground. He clutches his left leg, his face tight with pain. He was injured, but not in a vital area.

“On your feet, Hanson,” I hear Ryan say.

Ryan stays close as Ten rises to his feet and steadies himself, then he steps away.

“TARGETS, RAISE YOUR WEAPONS,” the commander orders.

My target pulls out a weapon and points it directly at me. I aim my weapon at him, my hands trembling with anger. I'm sure Ten didn't press the trigger for the same reason we all didn't. Because we didn't know what would happen to our targets if we did.

I still don't know what will happen to my target if I fire at him. But I am confident that if I don't kill my target, my target will hurt, or even kill,

me.

“WARRIORS, FIRE!”

I hold my breath and press the trigger of my weapon. Instantly, my target collapses to the ground, lifeless. Redness oozes from his chest. But the redness isn't blood. It's dark red light coming from underneath his jumpsuit. From his skin. *He is a robot.*

A burst of white light on the floor travels from my circle to a blue circle surrounding the feet of another target. She aims her weapon at me and I fire at her. A dark red splotch of light appears on her chest and she falls to the ground, the splotch expanding.

I aim at the next target and fire. And then I fire at the next one. And the next one.

But only at their chests.

I need to try a head-kill.

My next target is a female. When I shine my light on her face, I feel an awful tightness in the center of my belly. *She's just a robot*, I tell myself. But then I think of Miss Teresa. I would never fire a weapon at—

White light flashes from my target's weapon. Sharp pain surges into my left shin. I fall to the floor, wondering if the flesh has somehow been torn from my leg while leaving my jumpsuit unblemished. This pain is far worse than that in any of the previous tasks; it is almost unbearable. I try to clear my mind, try to focus.

My target aims her weapon toward my position on the floor. *She's going to fire at me again.*

Hot anger grows in my chest. This robot is not like Miss Teresa, Miss Hiroe, Professor Adam, or any of the robots back home; none of them would ever intentionally hurt me.

I aim my light at the target's head and fire. Dark red “blood” spatters her face. It's a kill. I fire at the next target, but I miss him completely because my hands are shaking too much. I quickly steady my arms against

my good leg and fire. Kill. Next target. Kill. Next target. Kill. I crawl to my feet and fire at the next target. And the next one. And the next one. Straight at their foreheads. Trying not to feel unnerved by the bloody wounds that mar their faces afterward.

I fire and fire and fire.

Until I don't feel any hesitation at all.

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MONDAY, JUNE 15

1355

By the time the commander announces that the final portion of the weapons task is about to begin, I feel prepared. That is until I hear what it involves. The commander explains that, one at a time, each warrior will stand inside a fifteen-foot circle in the center of the room and perform twenty head-kills and twenty chest-kills as the targets advance toward them. If any of the targets is able to enter the warrior's circle before the required kills are made, the task is failed. He doesn't say what happens if the task is failed.

Over a hundred robot targets assemble at the perimeter of the gymnasium. Unlike the robots back home, they walk and move in a manner that is disturbingly indistinguishable from people. From this distance, they appear human.

“MORALES, YOU'RE UP FIRST.”

Thirteen walks to the circle almost as stiffly as the robots back home. She must still be in pain from injuries sustained during the first part of the task. My leg pain has dulled to an uncomfortable throb.

“WEAPONS READY!” the commander shouts.

As Thirteen aims at one of the targets, all of the targets surrounding her raise their own weapons and aim at her.

“MORALES, FIRE!”

Thirteen makes her first kill quickly. A chest-kill. Then a miss. Then a head-kill. She spins around and fires on the targets who are approaching her from the other side. A chest-kill. A miss. A miss. A head-kill.

I grit my teeth. *The targets are getting too close to her. Too many of them. Too fast. She'll never finish.*

Thirteen's hands begin to quiver. She misses a few times in a row as the targets close in on her. Then she makes a chest-kill. An arm wound. A chest-kill.

And then, one of the male targets enters the warrior circle, his weapon steadily fixed on Thirteen's chest.

"TASK FAILED. WEAPONS DOWN!"

Thirteen and her targets lower their weapons to their sides. Thirteen walks to the edge of the lighted circle, heading back toward the rest of us. The instant she begins to step out of the circle, all of the targets aim their weapons directly at her. Even the killed targets rise to their feet and aim their weapons.

"MORALES, DO NOT LEAVE THE CIRCLE!"

I cringe as Thirteen steps back into the circle.

"YOU HAVE FAILED TO DEMONSTRATE ACCEPTABLE PROFICIENCY WITH YOUR WEAPON. YOU WILL BE GIVEN ANOTHER CHANCE, HOWEVER THERE WILL BE A PRICE TO PAY."

He inhales. **"TARGET FIVE THREE SEVEN, FIRE!"**

The target who entered the warrior circle presses the trigger of his weapon. Thirteen squeals out in pain, and tucks her left forearm under her opposite arm, clutching it to her chest, breathing fast.

"TARGETS TO YOUR STARTING POSTIONS." The targets turn and go back to the perimeter of the room. As soon as they are in position, the commander shouts, **"WEAPONS READY!"**

The targets aim their weapons at Thirteen. She shakily raises her weapon, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“MORALES, FIRE!”

I can only bear to watch until it becomes clear that Thirteen will fail, then I look away. Ten is staring at the floor. The other warriors are watching the task, their foreheads wrinkled with concern—except for Twelve, whose face is unreadable.

When Thirteen fails again, she is wounded in her left leg. After each subsequent failed attempt, she receives another wounding until, with so many tears streaked over her cheeks that they reflect the blue light of the circle that surrounds her, she finally makes the required forty kills and she is allowed to leave the circle.

Thirteen returns to her original spot, a few feet away from me. Her entire body trembles. I wish I could put my arms around her. Comfort her. But to do so would likely result in punishment, not just for me, for both of us.

“MURPHY, TO THE CIRCLE,” the commander calls out.

My stomach tightens as I walk to the center of the room. With each step I take, the number of robots surrounding me seems to multiply, as if the doors to the room have burst open and more targets are descending on me by the second.

“WEAPONS READY!” the commander shouts as I take my place in the circle.

Weapons rise into position around me. I shine my light on one of the targets. And inhale.

“MURPHY, FIRE!”

I press the trigger.

Chest-kill. Head-kill. Chest-kill. Head-kill. Chest-kill ...

My hands are steady. My movements are automatic. Natural. If my parents could see me now, they would be sick to their stomachs. If Forty-one saw me now, I would be sick to mine. But if I don't hurt the targets, they will hurt me. I'm doing what I must to protect myself from harm. It is

what I will need to do in The War if I am to survive. I must do whatever it takes to survive.

“WEAPONS DOWN!”

I hold my weapon down at my side. My body shakes with adrenaline that I didn’t realize was flowing. Red light bathes the chest or head of all of the targets close to me. None of the targets entered my circle. I exhale without allowing myself to feel any relief.

“MURPHY, YOU HAVE SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED THE TASK. REJOIN YOUR CLASSMATES.”

As I step out of the circle, I notice the stares of the other warriors. Some are wide-eyed stares of astonishment, like the ones from Thirteen and Ten. But some are narrow stares, like the ones from Twelve and Nineteen. I look at my feet as I walk the rest of the way to my group. There, I glance up just enough to see the face of my instructor. She looks into my eyes and, for a very brief instant, she unmistakably smiles.

* * *

Most of my classmates required three or four attempts to successfully complete the killing task. Twelve and I were the only ones to complete it on our first try. Ten took two tries. I turned away when he failed; I couldn’t bear to watch him get punished. It made tears come to my eyes anyway, even though he didn’t make a sound.

Once everyone has completed the task, the targets leave the room and the instructors lay out several thick, black mats on the floor. Still standing in my assigned circle, I watch them work, not feeling ready to face another task. I glance at the other warriors and see the pain of their punishments still evident on most of their faces; only Ten and Twelve appear fully recovered.

“WARRIORS, HAVE A SEAT,” the commander says in probably the most inviting bellow he can muster.

We walk to the mats and crumple onto them. The instructors stand just outside the area where we are seated, as if they are forming a wall to lock us in place.

The commander studies us for a moment and then continues, “THERE MAY BE TIMES WHEN YOU NEED TO DEFEND YOURSELVES WITHOUT THE ASSISTANCE OF WEAPONS, USING ONLY YOUR BODIES. IN SUCH CASES, YOU WILL USE YOUR HANDS, FEET, KNEES, ELBOWS, AND HEAD TO STRIKE YOUR ATTACKER’S EYES, NOSE, EARS, NECK, KNEES, SHINS, FEET, AND GROIN.

“TODAY, YOU WILL PRACTICE WITH ONE ANOTHER. ALL PHYSICAL CONTACT MUST BE CAREFULLY CONTROLLED SO AS NOT TO INFLICT INJURY. YOU WILL BE GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEFEND YOURSELVES AT FULL FORCE IN THE NEAR FUTURE. INSTRUCTORS PAIR UP. WARRIORS STAY WITH YOUR INSTRUCTORS.”

My instructor walks with Twelve’s instructor to a nearby mat, and my chest constricts. *Twelve and I are now paired for this task.*

As I step onto the mat, Twelve stares hard into my eyes, as if he is about to destroy me. I stare back at him, trying to appear unaffected, the way Six would. He holds my gaze.

“Murphy, you’ll attack Howard first,” Twelve’s instructor says. “Go ahead and wrap your arms all the way around his back.”

I don’t want to touch Twelve, even if it is to attack him, but I swallow and put my arms around him. His body is stiff and tense.

“How would you defend yourself, Howard?” his instructor asks.

Twelve leans back and then suddenly dives towards me, the top of his head coming directly at my face. I release him and leap out of the way just before it strikes me at full force.

“Careful, Howard, you nearly bloodied her nose,” my instructor says.

Twelve looks back into my eyes. It's clear to me that bloodying my nose was exactly his intention.

"Let's switch," my instructor says. "Howard, take hold of Murphy's arm."

Twelve grips my left forearm. Tightly. So tightly that my fingers tingle.

"How would you respond, Murphy?" my instructor asks.

With my free hand, I go for Twelve's face. He grabs that arm too, in a vise-like grip. As I struggle to pull my arms from his grasp, Twelve digs his fingernails into me. It feels as if he's cutting me with tiny knives. The harder I fight, the harder he presses. Incensed, I stamp on his foot, not as hard as I can, but harder than I should.

"Ow!" Twelve shouts. He falls to the ground, clutching his foot.

"Are you injured, Howard?" Twelve's instructor asks.

My heart races. I couldn't possibly have injured Twelve, but if he reports that I did, I will be punished. The rules were not to inflict any injury.

"No, sir," Twelve says, looking at me, his eyes narrowed.

His instructor gives an exasperated sigh. "Then stand up."

Twelve slowly rises to his feet, then he grabs both my arms again—his grip even tighter than before. He pulls me close to him, pressing his body against mine. Instinctively, I jab my knee toward Twelve's groin, stopping at the very last moment before I make contact. He's so caught off guard that I'm able to twist myself from his grasp. Twelve tries to grab hold of me again and misses. He seethes, his face bright red, and I jump back, victorious.

Twelve spends the remainder of the task torturing me. He is careful to make all of his moves appear gentle, and I refuse to let on that he is hurting me, so our instructors allow the abuse to continue. By the time the task is over, my entire body feels battered. My muscles are sore from being squeezed by Twelve's rough hands and my joints ache from being twisted in ways they weren't meant to go.

I wish I could go back to my quarters and rest, but after dinner, the instructors lead us to the recreation room. Once we are inside, silence gives way to conversation. I even hear some laughs.

“Can I get you a drink?” my instructor asks me.

I consider declining her offer, but I still want to try to bond with her, and so I say, “Okay.”

“Which one?”

“Red.” That’s the color she chose last night.

She dispenses some red drink into a cup, hands it to me, and then gets a red drink of her own. Some of the other instructors and warriors are also having these drinks tonight. *Maybe the drinks really aren’t so bad.*

My instructor gulps down her drink and then lets out a loud burp. “See you in the morning, Murphy,” she adds, tossing her cup into the recycle chute and starting toward the door.

And then I realize that, like last night, my instructor won’t be staying to talk with me. I’d hoped that—after doing well today—I’d earned her respect. That maybe she’d let me get to know her.

“What’s your name?” I blurt out.

She turns toward me, eyebrows raised.

I continue, unsure if I should, “I mean ... when we’re not training ... what should I call you?”

Her expression clouds. “You should call me ‘Ma’am,’” she says. And then she turns and leaves.

My question was a mistake. It was asked too soon.

I sigh and collapse into a red velvet chair next to a table with a chess set laid out on it. I put my untouched drink beside the board and stare at the chess pieces. Pawns. Knights. Bishops. Rooks. Kings. Queens. The black ones facing the white ones. I imagine the pieces moving across the board. Following the rules. My mom taught me to play chess when I was little. We used to play all the time. *I wish I could play chess with her now.*

“Goodnight, Murphy,” Ryan says.

I look up and see him standing next to me. He glances at my drink.

“I wasn’t going to drink it,” I say quickly.

“It’s your choice,” he says.

“Do the drinks really make people weak?”

“They do.”

“Then why are so many people drinking them?”

“Sometimes it feels good to be weak.” He pats me on the shoulder, and then he continues on his way out the door.

I take my drink over to the recycle chute. But instead of dumping it, I lift it to my lips and drink it. Every last sweet, fruity drop. Almost as fast as Ma’am drank hers. Then I toss the empty cup into the chute and join Ten on the couch, just as the lights in the room begin to dim.

* * *

It’s difficult to pay attention to tonight’s movie because of the strange muddled feeling in my head—from the red drink, I think. The movie is about a woman who falls in love with a monster. Her love magically transforms the monster into a handsome man. At the very end of the movie, after the monster becomes a man, the woman does something very odd; she presses her lips against his. I can’t help wondering what it might feel like to do that with Ten.

After the movie is over, Ten and I wait for the recreation room to empty, then we head down the hallway to the girls’ quarters. I scan open my door and, without a word, Ten follows me inside. As soon as I close the door behind us, he says, “Ryan said something strange tonight.”

My mind snaps to fuzzy attention. “What did he say?”

“I was asking him about this place. How big it is, and what’s here that we haven’t seen yet. And he mentioned something about how I’m used to being able to open any door I want. When I asked what he meant, he

completely shut down.” He pauses. “He had to have been referring to my great grandfather’s tag.”

“He might have been speaking figuratively,” I offer.

Ten shakes his head. “Then why would he shut down?”

“There must be lots of things the instructors aren’t allowed to tell us. This place probably has just as many secrets as back home.”

“Maybe more.” Ten inhales. “What’d you do with my tag by the way?”

“I gave it to Forty-one ... along with the cellular. I told him to share them with your sister. I know it was too soon ... they’re just little kids—”

“They’ll be okay,” Ten says.

I swallow my worry. “I know they will. Forty-one is so strong and brave. He reminds me of you.”

Ten almost smiles. “Forty-seven always reminded me of you. Strong and smart ...” He gives a slight exhale. “I figured our future kids would be a lot like them.”

“You imagined us having kids together?”

“I wanted that more than anything.”

“Me too.” A flush of warmth spreads down my chest, followed by a wave of sadness over what will never be.

I sit down on my bed, and Ten sits beside me. In our reflection in the opacified window, we look much younger than I feel. Like we are still children.

“Does your window deopacify?” I ask Ten.

“No,” he says. “Does yours?”

“No.”

Curiosity illuminates his face. “I wonder what’s out there,” he says. “There wouldn’t be a window unless there was something on the other side to look at.”

As I gaze into Ten’s eyes, I remember a time when life was full of exploration and adventure. When it felt as if our lives would go on

indefinitely. Now, every day feels like it could be our last. Tonight could be our final night together. Our last chance ...

I lean toward Ten and touch my lips to his, just like the woman did to the man in the movie tonight. Ten's lips are soft and warm. I breathe in his heat, feeling it build inside me, certain that it's building inside of him too.

Ten's fingers go to the zipper of my jumpsuit, and he eases it down. Trembling with curiosity and fear, I peel his jumpsuit from his muscled body, as my own jumpsuit slips away. I shiver and lift my undershirt over my head. Ten removes his too. I lower my underwear. I want to touch Ten, without anything at all between us. Ten lowers his underwear and lies down on my bed, taking me with him.

We press, push, force our bodies together so vigorously that the pleasure of touching is mixed with pain. My heart pounds—not in my chest, where it should be, but in the center of my body. I can't think anymore; I can only feel. I feel Ten. His heat. His energy. I feel as if our bodies are connected together.

And then Ten shudders against me, and a deep, fantastic pain happens inside me that isn't really a pain at all. The sensation threatens to overtake me, but then, as quickly as it came, it goes, leaving my skin tingling. Every muscle in my body seems to be completely relaxed, as if I'm asleep, but I am more awake than I've ever been.

"Are you okay?" Ten asks me, his voice shaky.

"I guess so," I say, trying to catch my breath. "Are you?"

"I think so," he says, and then he adds, "I think we just lost control."

"I think so too," I say.

I suddenly become intensely aware of the fact that I am completely naked. I grab my clothes and pull them back on. Ten dresses too. Then we stand, facing each other. My legs feel unsteady, and my body quivers. Ten puts his arms around me, steadying me even though he's trembling too.

"I should get to my quarters," he says.

I nod even though I don't want him to go.

When Ten leaves, I feel more alone than I've ever felt.

I take a long shower, dress in my pajamas, and then fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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SATURDAY, AUGUST 29

1902

It has been nearly three exhausting months since we arrived here, and *here* is finally starting to feel ever so slightly like home, even though I know little more about this place than I did when we arrived. The part of this place that we've seen isn't very big, just a few gymnasiums, our quarters, the recreation room, and the dining room. But leading away from the areas we've seen are hallways with doors at the ends. The instructors exit through those doorways every night, and they won't tell us where they go. I've tried asking questions, mostly to Ryan, but occasionally to Ma'am, and although they offer responses, they never provide any real answers.

With the help of countless tasks and lots of "therapy," our instructors have prepared us for The War. I'm not sure if I'm truly ready yet, but I will have to be. Tomorrow is our Final Challenge. We were told not to attempt any preparation for the Final Challenge because there's no way to prepare for it other than the training we've already undergone.

Tonight, for the first time since we arrived, there's no evening movie. We are told to go to our individual quarters and rest. As usual, Ten and I don't follow the instructions. But we aren't the only ones.

During our second week here, I began to notice other warriors furtively slipping in and out of one another's quarters, sometimes spending entire nights in quarters other than their own. Once it became clear that there was no punishment for this behavior, visits became less secretive. People don't

discuss what happens during these private meetings. Maybe most people just talk, like Thirteen, Nineteen, and I do when we get together. But I imagine that at least some of the other warriors have lost control.

As the other warriors disappear into various rooms, Ten and I go into mine. I scan my door closed behind us and, in one quick move, spin around and pin Ten against the wall, using an attack move we learned in training.

“You’re getting good, Murphy,” he says. And then he wraps his leg around my knee and drops me to the ground. He grabs hold of my hand and controls my fall, so I land gently.

“So are you, Hanson,” I laugh.

Ten tugs on my hand, pulling me back to standing. Then he presses his lips against mine. It feels comforting to have his lips there. But the security I feel reminds me of how uncertain our lives are about to become.

Quietly, we remove our clothing and we lose control, as we have every night since our second night as warriors. Afterward, I rest my head against his bare chest, listening to his strong heartbeat. “When do you think they’ll send us to The War?” I murmur.

Ten inhales. “I guess after the Final Challenge.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Or the next day.”

“I wish I could have been paired with you.” The words escape my lips before I realize I’ve spoken.

“We *are* paired, Seven.” Ten looks into my eyes. “More strongly than any pair I’ve ever known.”

“You’re right.” I press my ear back against his chest, feeling content and disappointed at the same time.

I’d wanted to raise children with Ten. And that will never be. But, at some point, Ten and I *did* become a pair. It might have happened on that first night we lost control, or when we took off our jumpsuits in the laundry room back home and explored each other’s bodies, or when we pressed our

hands together in our preschool classroom, or when we saw each other through the windows of our families' domiciles for the first time. Without rings or a ceremony, with no one's permission but our own, Ten and I became a pair. And nothing, not even The War, can ever change that.

* * *

In the morning, as usual, the instructors don't join us for breakfast. Once all of the warriors are seated, Thirteen inhales deeply, looking at her untouched food, and says, "They haven't told us what happens to the warriors who fail the Final Challenge."

"There's probably some sort of therapy if we fail." Nineteen sounds as if she's trying to reassure a young child.

"Maybe some of us won't be sent to The War," One offers.

Twelve shakes his head. "The commander told us early on in our training that there was no way to avoid going to The War. So, when we do go, I suppose the weakest warriors are expected to die first."

Thirteen stares hard at her food, taking slow, deep breaths, using a lifetime of training to stifle her tears. So far she's received therapy after nearly every task. I always thought that—like Six—Thirteen was a strange choice for warrior. Thirteen is intelligent, compassionate, and gentle; she isn't strong or brave. I have no idea why the Decision Makers chose her to be a warrior.

Once we finish breakfast, Ten walks with me to my quarters. We were told to report to our individual quarters after breakfast and wait there for our instructors, and so we must separate.

"See you soon," I say to Ten as we arrive at my door. I try to appear confident, but I know he can see right through my act.

"See you soon," he says with a tense smile.

I scan open my door, and Ten heads off to his quarters.

Just before I scan my door closed, Thirteen calls out to me, “Good luck today, Murphy.”

I turn and see her standing in her open doorway, tears pooled in her eyes. I go to her and put my arms around her. We’ve never done this before, but instead of tensing, Thirteen’s stiff body relaxes. Over the past few months, we’ve been forced to touch others in order to practice defending ourselves, and so touching a non-family member is no longer as awkward as it once was. But, right now, it doesn’t feel awkward at all. It feels good to touch like this. For comfort. It seems a shame that, for our first eighteen years of life, it was forbidden.

“Good luck, Morales,” I whisper.

I hope, by some miracle, Thirteen survives The War.

I hope we all do.

* * *

About an hour after I’ve entered to my quarters, the buzzer of my message system announces that I have a visitor. The hallway image shows that Ma’am is standing outside my door. Otherwise the hallway is empty. None of the other instructors are at the other warriors’ doors.

I rise from my bed, smooth my bun, and straighten my jumpsuit. Then I go to the door and scan it open. I stand face to face with Ma’am and wait for her to speak.

“Come with me,” she finally says.

I join her in the hallway, and she turns and marches off. Usually, we walk side-by-side, but this time, Ma’am seems intent on leading the way, and so I let her. She stops in front of the door to a room I’ve never entered, pulls a weapon from her waist, and hands it to me. The weapon is the smallest, lightest one I’ve used yet.

Ma’am moves to the side of the door, leaving me alone in front of it. “When the door opens, you will step forward,” she says.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say with the strongest voice I can muster.

She scans her forearm and the door slides open. Past the doorway, I see nothing but darkness. On shaky legs, I step forward, and Ma’am scans the door closed behind me. As she does, she whispers something. But I only catch the last word of it: “survive.”

Every ounce of courage drains from my body as I face the inky blackness. I hold my weapon out in front of me—the way we learned to do when facing an unknown threat—wishing my eyes would adjust more quickly to the darkness, but feeling like they never will. My pulse pounds in my ears. I try to silence the deafening sound so I can listen for clues as to what lies ahead of me.

I remain motionless. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

Until my eyes finally adjust to the dim light.

And I see that I’m not alone.

I’m surrounded by people—or robots—who I didn’t see coming. They form a forty-foot semicircle, trapping me against the closed door. All at once, they raise their weapons, aiming directly at my face.

I fire again and again and again, pressing the trigger as fast as I can, sweeping my weapon across the attackers as I run forward. Some attackers fall. Some fire at me; I know because horrible, sharp pain surges through my left upper arm and my right shin, but improbably, I am not killed. Through tear-filled eyes, I notice that the semicircle has broken; I now have an opportunity to escape. But into what?

The current threat is definite and the threat ahead is merely probable. And so I keep running, dodging the “dead” bodies in my path. I’m still not sure whether they’re human or robot. Unlike in our prior weapons tasks, there’s no red light indicating when targets are killed or injured. When they die, they just slump to the ground, making their deaths seem disconcertingly real.

Because the room is so dimly illuminated, I nearly run into the wall ahead of me. It's tall and extends to my right and left as far as I can see. There's a darker area to my left that might be an opening. I dash to it and discover that it isn't an opening, but rather a bumpy, recessed area that rises less steeply than the rest of the wall. I glance back and see my attackers getting closer, but strangely, none of them are firing at me. And so I tuck my weapon into my waist strap and start climbing the wall as fast as I can.

I am about fifteen feet from the ground when the attackers arrive at the base of the wall and start climbing up. I grab my weapon, spin around, and fire at my nearest attacker. As he falls, I hope he will knock those below him off the wall, buying me time to escape. But as my victim slips downward, another attacker leaps over his lifeless body and grabs my leg. I slide down the wall on my belly, his weight dragging me back the way I came. With my free hand, I grasp at the bumps in the wall, trying to stop my descent, but the attacker holding my leg is too heavy; I can't support my weight and his. In desperation, I kick at him. My heel slams into his face, and he recoils. I turn and, one hand gripping the wall, fire my weapon. His body goes limp and he falls to the ground.

And then I notice that all of my other attackers have disappeared from view. Rather than relieve me, it makes my heart pound harder. I tuck my weapon into my waist strap and start climbing again.

When I reach the top of the wall, I survey my surroundings. Behind me, I see only empty, black space. On the other side of the wall, way down below, bathed in dim light, are trees, bushes, and rocks. An immense garden. Past the garden is an enormous black box, big enough to fit several rooms inside.

I look for movement that could indicate attackers below me, but I see no signs of life. Cautiously, I climb down the bumpy wall, heading toward the garden, remaining vigilant for attackers, but by the time I reach the ground, none have presented themselves. I pull out my weapon and, holding

it ready, stay in the shadows of the trees as I pick my way toward the box that I assume is my final destination.

Suddenly, something grabs me from behind and throws me to the ground. Hard. My weapon flies from my hand. In an instant, I'm trapped beneath the weight of a man's body, my arms pinned to my sides. I struggle to free myself, but it's no use.

I look into my attacker's eyes. Even in this low light, I can tell that they are human. With my eyes, I tell him that I give up. He's won. I've failed. *I've failed.*

"What now?" I ask him.

The man doesn't answer. In my peripheral vision, I see other attackers heading toward us. He sees them too, and in that brief instant where his attention is drawn away from me, I suck in my ribs, pull my right arm from my side, and jam my fist into the man's groin. He curls forward and I jab his throat with my other hand, sending his body backward. I grab my weapon, point it toward the oncoming attackers, and fire, sending them scattering behind trees and rocks. Some of my attackers fall to the ground, lifeless. A surge of pain in my right hand tells me that I've been wounded.

With the intense throbbing in my fingers, it's all I can do to keep hold of my weapon. My right hand won't be able to operate it until the pain lessens, and so I move the weapon to my left hand. I practiced firing weapons with my non-dominant hand during training, and so I know how. But I also know that I will not be nearly as successful in hitting my targets. And so I run, weaving among the rocks and trees, stopping every once in a while behind an obstacle to fire at those pursuing me.

Up ahead, I see a clearing. In the center of the clearing, a body lies on the ground. A woman. As I get closer, I see her face.

It's Ma'am.

Her eyes are closed, but she's breathing. *She's alive.*

The attackers are approaching us fast. I duck behind a rock and fire at them. Less indiscriminately now. I am firing to kill. I need to eliminate as much threat as possible while I figure out what I'm going to do next.

Return fire hits my left hand, rendering it useless. I move my weapon back into my right hand; it hasn't yet recovered, but it's stronger than my left one now. I stabilize my shaky right hand with my throbbing left one and aim as if my life depends on hitting my target every time I press the trigger.

Target after target falls. One after the other. After the other. I fire and fire and fire. Until they all lie lifeless on the ground.

I stay silent. Listening. Waiting for new attackers to take the place of the dead ones. But none come. The threat has been eliminated—at least for the moment.

I race to Ma'am, grab her under the arms, and drag her behind a tree at the edge of the clearing. "Are you okay, ma'am?" I ask her, uncertain whether she is actually injured or just pretending.

Her eyes remain closed. She doesn't respond at all.

"I'll be back, ma'am," I whisper.

I need to find safety before I take Ma'am with me. I can't risk bringing her until I'm sure I won't have to fight anymore. I creep through the unsettlingly-deserted landscape, heading toward the enormous black box. Once I'm close, I see that there are multiple doors on the box, all of them closed. What's behind them? More attackers? Safety? And how do I open the doors?

And then I have an idea. I hold my left forearm at chest level and try to scan it at each door, one by one, over the area where a concealed scanner might be.

Nothing happens at the first door. Or the second. Or the third.

But when I scan my arm at the fourth door, it opens.

Inside is just one person: the commander. Past him is a brightly-lit hallway.

The commander smiles at me. It's the first time I've seen him actually smile. "Murphy, you have successfully completed the Final Challenge," he says in a soft monotone.

I shake my head. "Not yet, sir."

He opens his mouth as if to speak as I scan the door closed.

I run back to the tree where Ma'am lies, grab her under the arms, and drag her toward the box. It's slow going. Ma'am is much heavier than she looks, especially after a few minutes of dragging, but eventually, we arrive at the fourth door. I lift my arm to the concealed scanner and feel an explosive pain rip into my scalp. The worst pain I've ever felt in my life.

As I fall backward, I catch a glimpse of my attacker: a man. He tilts his weapon down from me and aims it at Ma'am.

And he fires one more time.

* * *

Ma'am and I have walked almost all the way back to my quarters, when she finally speaks in a bitter voice, "You failed the Final Challenge."

"Yes, ma'am," I say, upset with her for stating what is obvious, and upset with myself for my failure.

"You failed because you tried to protect me," she says as if it is an accusation. "*I* am expendable. *You* are not. Don't you ever forget that."

How dare Ma'am be angry with me for trying to save her life? I treated the Final Challenge as if it were real. In part, because I wasn't absolutely certain that it wasn't. "So, if this had been The War, you would have wanted me to leave you behind, ma'am?"

"Yes." Her face tells me that she is serious.

"That isn't right, ma'am."

She glances at me out of the corner of her eye. "War isn't about what's right."

Frustration tightens my throat. I step out in front of her. She stops and stares at me with her always-bloodshot eyes.

“Well, the Final Challenge was just a stupid game,” I say. “I only failed because I tried to save *you*, and *you* won’t be going to The War with me, ma’am.”

She looks me in the eyes, unblinking. “Yes, I will.”

And then she turns and walks away, leaving my mind spinning with so many questions that I can’t put any of them into words.

* * *

It takes about an hour of lying on my bed, with my eyes shut, before questions start to properly come together in my head: Why will Ma’am be going to The War with me? Will all of the instructors be going to The War? Why hasn’t anyone mentioned this before? And what did Ma’am mean when she said that she’s expendable and I’m not? Why would my life be more valuable than hers? Despite all the skills I’ve learned and the fact that I’m many times stronger than I was when I arrived, in many ways, I still feel weak and pathetic. Especially compared to the instructors. Ma’am is so much stronger than I will probably ever be. Why shouldn’t *my* life be the expendable one? Why am I so important?

When the message system alerts me to report to lunch, I’m not the least bit hungry, but I know better than to skip a meal.

In the dining room, we eat in complete silence. The warriors sit at one table, and the instructors at the other. We’re not allowed to discuss our experiences in the Final Challenge, and I’m positive that what Ma’am said to me in the hallway is off-limits as well, and so even if people were talking right now, I’m not sure I’d participate in the conversation.

We’re given ample time to finish our meals, and therefore, plenty of time to look at one another’s faces, trying to read their expressions. Ten’s face is extremely tense. I wonder if his challenge went poorly. Thirteen’s

forehead is creased and the skin around her eyes is reddened, as if she's been crying. The other faces show a bit of tension hiding beneath stoic expressions—except for Twelve's; his expression is completely vacant.

“WARRIORS, LINE UP WITH YOUR INSTRUCTORS,” Nineteen's instructor commands.

We toss our empty trays into the recycle chute and line up. Ma'am is closest to the door, and so I'm the first warrior in line.

We leave the dining room and walk through familiar hallways, heading toward the gymnasiums. But then we turn down a long, bright hallway leading to three doors that I've never seen opened. My stomach tightens.

When we arrive at the doors, Ma'am scans the center one open. On the other side is an empty white room with walls made of opacified glass. It reminds me of the Transport Chamber back home. Ten and I trade anxious glances. The Final Challenge is over. The next thing on our agenda is *The War*. *Are we going to The War now?*

As we file into the room, my chest throbs with each beat of my heart. I look to Ryan for reassurance. Ten doesn't trust him, but for some reason, I do, at least a little. When I catch Ryan's gaze, he gives me a barely-perceptible smile, so small that I'm not sure what it means.

Something drops into my hand.

“Place those over your eyes,” Ma'am says to me.

In my hand, are two small brown glass cups attached to a band of thick black elastic. I look around and see that the other warriors and the instructors are putting cups like these over their eyes, with the elastic band encircling their heads. I do the same and the room instantly takes on a golden hue.

And then, a second door—the one opposite the door we entered—noiselessly opens.

Immediately, I hear a sound I've heard once before. A sound that rises and falls, like breathing. I heard it on the day we first arrived here, with

hoods over our heads. Now it's much louder and clearer.

I move past the other warriors and find myself gazing out at a place hundreds of times the size of our plaza back home. The soaring, distant walls appear to be made of rock. The floor is bumpy and tan in color. And the sky is incredibly vast and unbelievably blue. Warmth seems to radiate from the sky to my face, heating it for a moment before gentle blasts of cooler air blow the heat away. A strong scent that reminds me of the pool room tickles my nose.

Ma'am starts down the ramp that leads to the tan floor. I march forward, staying by her side. "What is this place, ma'am?" I ask.

"It's called Outside," she says.

The tan floor is softer than I thought it would be, but firm enough to walk on. Once I've taken a few tentative steps, I turn to look back at where we came from. And my jaw drops.

An undulating pool—thousands of times the size of the one in the pool room—extends as far as I can see. The water seems to be moving toward us. As it gets close, it rises up above the surface, as if it's preparing to attack. But then it collapses with a hard splash and retreats. It advances again. Only to collapse once more.

Partially sunken into the water are tremendous black boxes with slanted tops and dark windows. They are connected to the ramp that we just descended—and to one another—via large tubes that must be hallways. Based on the sizes, shapes, and locations of the boxes, I can figure out what's inside a few of them: the gymnasiums, our quarters ... but past the gymnasiums are more boxes, boxes we've never entered, hundreds of gymnasium-sized boxes.

High above our heads, I notice a group of white aerial drones advancing toward us. But then they get closer, and I see that they aren't drones at all. They look familiar though; I recognize them from the movies we've watched as warriors and the fairy tales I read as a child.

“Are those *birds*?” I ask.

“Yes,” Ryan says.

Excitement bubbles through me. “Like in movies and fairy tales? Sentient creatures?”

“Yes,” Ryan says.

The birds soar through the sky, perfectly spaced from one another. Their wings moving gracefully, elegantly. “They’re amazing,” I breathe.

Ryan gives an amused laugh. “Yes, they are.”

Far away in the pool, I see a splash. Something gray arches from the water and then vanishes. “What was that?” I ask, gesturing to the area where the gray thing disappeared.

“A dolphin,” Ma’am says. “Dolphins live in the ocean, along with fish —”

“There are fish in there?” Ten asks, his eyes wide.

“Why don’t you take a look for yourself?” Ryan suggests, and then he heads toward the water.

Ten races after Ryan. I hold Ma’am’s gaze just long enough to see that she isn’t going to stop me, and then I follow Ryan and Ten into the ocean. The water feels like ice on my hands, but where my jumpsuit covers my body, I barely feel the chill.

Ahead of me, the water begins to rise up from its surface again, threatening to swallow me.

“Dive under the wave,” Ryan calls out, and then he drops underwater.

I submerge myself and open my eyes. And I see fish. Hundreds of them. Tiny ones and ones bigger than my forearm. Most of them are various shades of gray or brown, but a group of bright orange fish with bulging foreheads circle underneath me. Below them, little brown creatures that look like rocks with feet—crabs, I think—walk among swaying green plants. It reminds me of the fish tank back home, except that this tank goes on forever.

And then, less than twenty feet away, I spot a black drone—about the size of a young child—slowly moving through the water. It has fins and a tail like a fish, but along its side are eerie green lights. When I scan the water, I notice that there are many such drones. My heart thumps against my ribs. I quickly surface and look for Ma'am. But I don't have to look far. She's treading water right beside me.

"There are drones in the water," I say to her.

"Yes," she responds in a tone that tells me that this information doesn't surprise her.

"Why are they here?" I ask.

"To protect us."

"Protect us from what?"

"You'll find out soon enough," she says, and then she dives under the water's surface.

* * *

There was no movie again tonight. We were instructed to go directly to bed because we are going to have an early day tomorrow. But when Ten and I arrive at the door to my quarters, I scan it open and pull him inside.

And then I notice that the room looks extraordinarily different than it did the last time I saw it. But only one thing has changed. Now, instead of opacified glass, my window offers a view of the ocean. I go to the window and gaze out at the water. It's absolutely mesmerizing.

"It's almost cruel for them to show us all this beauty and then send us to The War," I say.

"I guess they want us to see what we're fighting for," Ten says.

I shake my head. "I already have enough to fight for."

Ten comes from behind me and wraps his arms around me, holding me tight against his chest. "I do too."

I look at his reflection in the glass. “I found out today that Ma’am’s going to The War with us.”

Ten’s forehead creases. “Who told you that?”

“She did,” I say. “She also said that she’s expendable and I’m not.”

“Ryan said the same thing. After the Final Challenge.”

“Ma’am was in my challenge,” I say. “Was Ryan in yours?”

Ten nods.

“Did you try to save him?” I ask, already certain of the answer.

“Yeah,” he says. “Did you try to save Ma’am?”

“I failed.”

He clenches his jaw. “I failed too.”

That night, as Ten and I lose control, the sky transforms from blue to orange to red. It’s the most beautiful sunset I’ve ever seen.

MONDAY, AUGUST 31

0500

As promised, the messaging system in my quarters wakes me very early in the morning, an hour earlier than our usual wake time. I roll out of bed and wash up, then I go to the hatch to get my clothes.

The small black box waiting for me in the delivery compartment looks exactly like the one I receive every day, but inside it there's no jumpsuit. Instead, I find flesh-colored underwear, brown pants, and a white shirt with ruffled sleeves. The clothes remind me of the ones worn by fairy tale characters. I've never seen real people wear anything like them, except as costumes for shows, like our Senior Performance. But shows don't seem like something they would do here.

I put on the costume and meet up with the other warriors in the dining room. They are dressed in costumes too, each one a bit different. Ten wears a light-blue shirt and gray pants. My cheeks flush with warmth as I smile at him. He smiles back.

We've just finished eating breakfast when the instructors arrive, wearing costumes similar to ours. I nearly laugh when I see Ma'am in pink pants along with a lavender shirt that has drawings of little red birds all over it. Fortunately, I catch myself and make my face serious before Ma'am starts heading toward me. She conveys the same detached manner as always, appearing completely unaffected by the fact that she is wearing ridiculous clothes.

When she is a few feet away from me, Ma'am stops walking and says, "Come."

I get to my feet and follow her to the recreation room. The other female warriors and instructors join us inside the room, and then the door is scanned closed.

Ma'am leads me to the couch. "Sit and take down your hair," she instructs.

I hesitantly untwist my bun, and Ma'am pulls something small from her chest pocket: a comb. Without a word, she begins brushing my hair with long, gentle strokes, like my mom used to do when I was young. As the comb moves through my hair, memories make my chest ache with so much sadness that I want to beg Ma'am to stop, but, in a small way, her tenderness also comforts me.

Ma'am finally slips the comb back into her pocket. "Let's go," she says.

I look down at the waves of golden hair cascading over my shoulders. *Hair must be secured in a proper bun at all times when in public*, my brain warns. But that rule doesn't apply anymore.

"You look nice, Murphy," Ma'am adds softly.

I glance around the room. No one's hair is in a bun anymore. Nineteen's dark hair is pulled back into an elastic band, but beyond that it hangs loose. Thirteen's auburn hair is completely unsecured, like mine. As we are lead to the door, they both give me an uncertain shrug.

When we rejoin the boys and their instructors in the hallway, the boys' hair is no longer parted. Ten's hair looks neat and mussed at the same time. He stares at my hair, appearing captivated. And then I realize that he's never seen me like this. Even on those many nights when he's stayed with me in my quarters, I never took my hair from its bun.

The instructors walk us down the same hallway that we used yesterday when we went Outside. But this time, at the end of the hallway, a different

door is scanned open, revealing a stairway that only leads down. It's the first time I've seen a stairway here.

At the bottom of the stairs, we pass through a doorway and enter a magnificent room nearly half the size of our plaza back home. At least a hundred black chairs fill the center of the space, making it look a bit like a classroom. But that's where the classroom similarities end. The walls of this room are expansive windows that look out *into* the ocean. It's as if we're surrounded on all sides by a tremendous fish tank. Instead of taking a seat immediately—as we were taught to do from the time we were very young whenever we entered a classroom—we go to the windows and watch the fish dart among underwater vines.

And then I hear a raspy throat being cleared. I turn and see the commander standing in the spot usually reserved for a professor. He gestures to the first row of chairs. The other warriors and I quickly go to them and sit down.

“Ladies and gentlemen of Warrior Class Alpha Two Zero Eight Six,” the commander begins in an almost-humanlike tone. “Your initial training is now complete.”

My pulse quickens as the commander continues, “These past few months, you have prepared to defend yourselves from physical harm. You have readied yourselves to fight in a war. However, it is our intention that you *never* utilize this training.”

Questions spring to my mind. I silence them as the commander goes on, “You were brought here to fight in a different type of war, one where your minds are your weapons. ‘The Warrior Project’ is the code name for an elite government think tank. Many years ago, the United States Government selected your grandparents as having exceptional potential to produce highly-intelligent offspring. Your grandparents were children back then, and the world was a much more dangerous place than it is today. Their parents accepted safety in exchange for certain freedoms. You are the successful

products of that arrangement. You will use your minds to develop solutions to the world's greatest problems. What questions do you have?"

Everyone is silent and still, appearing frozen in their seats.

"There are no questions?" the commander asks.

I have so many questions. I raise my hand, the way we did in school.

The commander nods at me. "Go ahead, Murphy."

"Why did you bring us here?" I ask. "We could have tried to help you solve your problems from our home, sir."

"They aren't *my* problems; they're *our* problems. In order to solve them, it's important for you to see them for yourselves," the commander says, and then he acknowledges Twelve's raised hand.

"If we're not going to fight in The War, why have you been training us, sir?" Twelve asks.

"There will be occasions when you will leave the security of this compound," the commander explains. "Outside the compound, there are people who will attempt to capture you."

"We'll have to fight them, sir?" Nineteen asks.

"No," the commander says. "You will be well protected."

"Then why did you train us to fight, sir?" Ten asks, his voice firm. It's the same question Twelve asked, but I'm glad that Ten is asking it again, because it was not properly answered.

"Long ago, warriors did not undergo the rigorous military training you received. The name 'warrior' was quite ironic back then. But twenty years ago, there was an attack, The Great Warrior Massacre. We lost nearly an entire class of warriors. There was just one survivor." The commander draws a long, slow breath, and then he continues, "The remaining classes added a provision that all current and future warriors would be trained to defend themselves, however, as I said, we anticipate that you will never utilize this training. Whenever you leave our compound, you will have a full security entourage. Nearly as much protection as our leader, the

President of the United States.” He exhales. “The world still holds danger. But you are safe.”

“Why didn’t you tell us all this at the beginning, sir?” Nineteen asks, her voice shaky.

The commander looks down for a moment, and then his gaze returns to Nineteen. “Would you have trained as hard if you had known the truth?”

After a few more questions, but very little in the way of new information, we are each given a booklet with our name—the name we go by here—on the front.

“These documents,” the commander tells us, “contain your backstories. They tell a tale of how you came to be where you are today. The information contained in these documents is fabricated, but you will treat it as though it is fact. Outside the walls of this compound, you will use this information, and only this information, in any and all conversations. You will not discuss anything regarding your true selves or the warrior program.” And then the commander leaves us alone so that we can study our booklets, a collection of lies that we must tell about ourselves as though they are truths.

According to my booklet, I have a sister and a brother, but both of my fictional siblings are older than me. My brother is twenty-two and my sister is twenty-five. My parents are “divorced.” That means that they were once “married”—which is like being paired—but then they decided to live their lives apart. My pretend father now resides in a compound called San Diego 21 and my mother is far away in a compound called Norfolk 27. I am a student at Los Angeles University, and I’m studying psychology, which is the science of human behavior.

I reread my booklet over and over again until our instructors come to retrieve us. My stomach tells me that it’s lunchtime, a fact that is confirmed when we are led to the dining room and given our meals.

After lunch, the instructors take us down the hallway that leads toward the gymnasiums. This time, however, they scan open an unfamiliar door that leads to an unfamiliar hallway.

“Where are we going, ma’am?” I ask, emboldened by the commander allowing questions during our meeting today.

“On your first mission,” she says matter-of-factly, and then she turns away, probably hoping to deflect any further questions.

Another door is scanned open, and we enter an enormous chamber that contains six massive, black, boxlike terrestrial drones, each one larger than my family’s entire domicile back home. The room is swarming with men and women who wear thick black jumpsuits that cover their entire bodies; only their heads are exposed. Some of them turn to look at us. Although these people appear about my age, the seriousness of their expressions tells me that they are older.

I follow Ma’am to a rack of jumpsuits that match the ones the other people in the room are wearing. “These go over your clothes,” she says, handing me a jumpsuit. As I pull it on and zip it up, Ma’am slides a sheathed knife into one of my pockets and slips a weapon—that looks just like the one I used in the Final Challenge—into a strap on my waist.

Next to me, Ryan secures a weapon to Ten’s jumpsuit. “This weapon operates exactly like the ones you used in training,” he tells Ten, “but if you fire this thing at someone’s vital area, they’ll be incapacitated for a long time.”

Ma’am fastens a navigator to my wrist. Other than the fact that it is black, it looks the same as the navigators we had back home.

“Time to head out!” one of the black-jumpsuited men calls out.

The people who are scattered about the room begin to walk toward the drones. One woman scans her arm along the side of the first drone and a hidden door opens. She climbs *into* the drone followed by Thirteen, Twelve,

and their instructors. Ma'am gestures for me to follow them. Ten, Ryan, and some black-jumpsuited strangers join us.

The drone contains four rows of chairs. "Sit," Ma'am says to me, tapping one of the chairs.

I sit, and she hands me a helmet, like the ones the robot-people wore in the Transport Chamber, except that the front of this helmet is translucent, rather than mirrored. I place it on my lap—the way the other people in the drone have done with their helmets—as she pulls straps over my chest and waist, locking me in place. I run my fingers over the slippery straps; they feel just like the ones that were secured around me by the robot-people who took us from our home.

It seems as if we're about to leave the warrior compound. The commander said we would be well protected when we did. But if that's true, then why all this? The helmets. The thick jumpsuits. The knives. The weapons that can incapacitate someone "for a long time." Why isn't anyone telling us what is about to happen? What is this "mission" about?

"You're safe," Ryan says softly from the seat beside me. I turn to him and he gives me the same barely-perceptible smile that he gave just before we went Outside yesterday. But yesterday, we wore only our regular jumpsuits. We had no knives. No weapons. What we're doing today must be different.

Suddenly, the drone windows and ceiling deopacify, and the drone is flooded with light.

"Helmets on!" someone shouts.

I pull my helmet over my head, as our drone moves through a large doorway. Ma'am dons her helmet, and then she leans her head back and clasps her hands together in her lap, the way my dad does when he rests on the couch.

We travel down a wide ramp and onto the sandy floor of Outside. The distant wall of rock appears to grow as we approach it. Once we're a few

feet away from the soaring wall, a concealed door drops open at its base and our drone enters an oversized hallway. The door closes behind us, and the hallway plunges into darkness. The only illumination comes from tiny white lights on the hallway walls and ceiling—like stars.

After a few minutes of traveling forward, bright light becomes visible up ahead. My eyes adjust as we emerge onto a broad pathway that is flanked by scraggly plants. People—or robots—in dark-green helmets and jumpsuits, with weapons hanging over their shoulders that are many times larger than the one strapped to my waist, dot the barren landscape. The towering walls encircling the area are plain gray.

Apparently, the green-jumpsuited robot-people aren't a threat; no one inside the drone seems fazed by their presence—although Ma'am might be asleep. I feel certain that Ryan would never sleep in the presence of potential danger. I lean forward enough that I can see his face. His eyes are open, scanning our surroundings.

“Are those robots or people, sir?” I whisper to him.

“People,” Ryan says. His voice seems to be transmitted directly to my ears. There must be some kind of sound system in the helmets.

“Who are they, sir?” Ten asks.

“They're soldiers here to protect us,” Ryan says, his voice hushed.

“Quiet now,” Ma'am says. “Essential conversation only.”

I wonder if we woke her up.

We pass through doorway after doorway and move through similar-appearing areas occupied by similar-appearing soldiers. But when we pass through the fourth doorway, the area that we enter is distinctly different; there are no gray walls surrounding it and there are no people. Ahead of us is a rock wall so tall that I can't see the top. At the base of the wall is a wide black path that runs right and left. Our drone travels to the black pathway and then turns left.

“Warriors, keep your eyes open. Absorb your surroundings,” Ryan says.

“Yes, sir,” the warriors murmur.

I’m not sure what we’re supposed to be absorbing. On either side of our drone, I see only tall walls of rock. But then the black path ascends. As we rise up, stunning views of a sprawling beach and a sparkling blue-green ocean appear on the left. Between the beach and us are structures that vaguely resemble the warrior compound, except they are white or tan or brown in color. Unlike the warrior compound, these structures are severely damaged. Their windows are shattered, their walls are crumbling, and their doorways lack doors. They aren’t fit for anyone to live in. Maybe they once were, but not anymore.

For nearly half an hour, we pass many broken compounds, but not a single unbroken one, and so when an enormous intact compound comes into view, it instantly captures my attention. It has no windows, but there’s a massive door that slides open when we approach. Our drone takes us through the open doorway and enters a large room that is empty aside from dozens of orange-jumpsuited soldiers who have weapons almost as large as the ones the green-jumpsuited soldiers had. Past them is another door that opens and then closes behind us. It is then that I realize that the drones carrying the other warriors are no longer following us. They must have gone somewhere else.

Ma’am releases the straps over her body. Ryan does the same. I attempt to release my straps, but Ma’am puts her hand over mine, stopping me.

“The red button will release your harness, but don’t do that yet. Do not exit this vehicle until an instructor tells you to do so.” The firmness with which she gives that command makes my skin tingle with apprehension. *We aren’t safe here.*

“Yes, ma’am,” I say.

Some of the black-jumpsuited soldiers exit our drone and take up positions at the doors of the room that our drone now inhabits. Then one of them raises a thumb.

“Warriors, wait here,” Ryan says.

Ma’am and Ryan exit the drone, leaving the row that I occupy empty except for Ten and me. Without a word, I slide my hand across the seat between us. Ten does the same. Our fingers touch and then interlock. Our hands press together—

“Warriors, remove your helmets and jumpsuits,” Ryan’s voice says in my ears. “Leave everything on your seats, including all weapons. Join us.”

We remove our gear and meet up with our instructors outside the drone. Wearing only my costume, standing in this unfamiliar place along with a dozen black-jumpsuited soldiers, I feel exposed and vulnerable. Ryan said that the soldiers are here to protect us. But protect us from what?

“You are about to enter a typical public housing compound,” Ma’am says. She isn’t wearing her helmet anymore. Her face is tense. “You will notice similarities to your current and former homes, but there are also significant differences. Your goal is to study the differences.

“You will be assigned a liaison who will accompany you today. Your liaison’s primary concern is for your safety and security.” Ma’am gestures to four soldiers—two men and two women—who are now removing their black jumpsuits and gear. Underneath, they wear costumes similar to ours, however when one of the women adjusts the leg of her pants, I notice that she has a small weapon strapped to her ankle. It isn’t visible once her pants leg falls back into place.

Ma’am continues, “Once inside this compound, you will not speak unless directly spoken to. If you are unsure of what to say, say nothing and your liaison will speak for you. If you have any questions during your time at the compound, you will not ask them aloud, no matter how inconsequential they seem. You may message your questions to your liaison

using your navigator. If the question is appropriate for discussion here, he or she will assist you in promptly obtaining an answer. If not, your question will be recorded and answered once we return to our compound. We ask that you focus your attention on listening and observing, rather than asking questions.

“Liaisons, please step forward and introduce yourselves to the warriors.”

The woman with the weapon strapped to her ankle comes to me. As she gets close, I see that there are tiny brown spots dotting her olive skin. Her dark hair is woven to form two pretty ropes down her back. Somehow, I feel certain that she isn't a robot.

“Sarah, I'm Lieutenant Jackie Davis,” she says.

“It's nice to meet you, ma'am,” I say.

She smiles. “Just call me Jackie. No need to use ‘sir’ or ‘ma'am’ here.” She hangs a blue-and-red cord with a plastic card hanging from it around my neck, and she puts a matching necklace around her own neck. “While we're visiting the compound, you'll need to wear this,” she says. “Before we go in, let's test out your navigator. Go ahead and send me a text message. I should be in your directory.”

I press the voice button on my navigator and say, “Message Lieutenant Jackie Davis.”

Her name appears on the screen. And then I type:

How old are you?

An instant later, I see a response:

23.

I'm surprised she answered me. I type another question:

Where did you come from?

A new message appears:

Valencia 16. Where are you from?

I'm from a box. I don't know where it is or what it's called, but that box is where I'm from. Of course, I'm not allowed to talk about that, and so instead I recall the backstory from my booklet and type:

Anaheim 42.

Jackie's response is instant:

Good girl!

She knows I'm lying. I wonder if she knows the whole truth.

"This way, everyone," Jackie says, leading the warriors and the other liaisons toward an unmarked door.

I look back at Ma'am, and she nods, giving me permission to go. Her feet are planted in place. *She isn't coming with us.*

A black-jumpsuited soldier scans open the door ahead of us and we pass into a hallway, leaving our instructors and our drone and the soldiers behind. The hallway feels reminiscent of some of the ones back home. But not the bright, white public hallways. This hallway reminds me of the dark, black restricted hallways that people are never supposed to enter.

At the end of the hallway, Jackie pushes a button.

"Please scan your credentials," a monotone voice says through an intercom.

Jackie passes the card that is hanging from her necklace under a scanner. The other liaisons do the same and gesture for us to follow suit. Once our cards have all been scanned, the door slides open.

My body tenses, until I see what's on the other side: a boy, who can't be more than thirteen years old, wearing a costume similar to the ones Ten and Twelve are wearing. The boy's entire body is puffy. His belly bulges out, stretching his shirt and pants. His stubby arms and legs are at least twice the circumference of the commander's. His cheeks are full and round. He reminds me of the people in the very first movie we watched when we arrived at the warrior compound. But those "people" were just cartoon drawings. I'd thought puffy people were make-believe. But this boy appears real.

The boy is sitting on a bench, his concentration fixed on screens that float in the air above his navigator. The fingers of his right hand move speedily over text and images that grow and shrink at his fingers' command. I wonder if the navigator on my wrist has these features as well. Until now, I'd assumed that the navigator I was given today functioned just like the ones back home, offering messaging, time telling, alarms, and navigation assistance only.

The boy acknowledges us with a quick glance before returning his gaze to the screens above his wrist. "Are you here for the tour?" he asks. He speaks with an odd lack of inflection, a bit like a robot with a nearly-drained power supply.

"Yes," Ten's liaison says.

"I'm Tommy," the boy says. "What are your names?"

He doesn't look at us as we each recite our names: "Jackie," "Adam," "Bill," "Nicole," "Sarah," "Michael," "Howard," "Adriana."

Even though Tommy didn't appear to be paying any attention at all, apparently he was, because when we're through giving our names, he

recites them back, glancing at the corresponding person for a split second as he says each name. *Maybe he is a robot.*

We follow Tommy down a bright white hallway and enter an area filled with tall trees and colorful flowers. The garden is quite spectacular, much grander in size and variety than the one back home. Strangely, aside from us, there are no people here enjoying it. According to my navigator, it's just after three o'clock. The children are probably still in school and the adults at work. Back home, this is the time of day when the older people—those who are no longer required to work—are usually out in the plaza. *Where are the old people?*

“This is our self-sustaining garden,” Tommy says, his gaze directed at his navigator. “The garden requires no human or drone intervention at all. It occupies a lot of space though.” He shrugs. “There’s quite a bit of wasted space in our compound.”

I can't believe that this boy is referring to a garden as “wasted space.” I wonder if the other people who live here feel that way.

Tommy walks on and we follow. He shows us a desolate gymnasium filled with gleaming workout equipment, a deserted room with plush couches facing a large empty space, and a sparkling-blue pool with no swimmers. All of these areas are pristine, as if they've never been touched by humans.

I type a message into my navigator for Jackie:

Where is everyone?

Jackie doesn't type a response, but she lifts her head and asks Tommy, “How often do people utilize the public spaces, like the gym, movie theater, and pool?”

“Never really,” Tommy says. “Those areas are supposed to be for entertainment, but we have all the entertainment we need in our individual

living quarters.”

“How would you suggest the public spaces be utilized instead?” Ten’s liaison asks a minute later. I assume his question is based on whatever Ten was typing into his navigator seconds ago.

“They should enlarge the areas we *do* use,” Tommy says. “Like our living quarters. And the restaurants. And ...” He stops and thinks for a moment. “I guess that’s it.”

Tommy leads us into an elevator, much like the ones that we have in the plaza back home—for those who are too old or ill to use the stairs. My pulse speeds with excitement. I’ve always been curious about what it’s like to ride in an elevator.

Tommy presses a button and the doors close, sealing us inside the little space. And then the walls and the floor begin to tremble in a way that feels eerily familiar; it reminds me of the shaking from The War. Jackie and the other liaisons seem completely unfazed, but all of the warriors hold their bodies tense. When the elevator doors open, I breathe a sigh of relief.

After a short walk, we enter a room that has *people* inside it. They all wear costumes like ours, and almost all of the people are puffy, like Tommy. There is loads of food here, piled high in transparent containers that move up and down along the walls when people touch the sensors beside them. There are colorful fruits and vegetables inside a few of the containers, but most of the food is brown or white and rather indistinguishable in appearance.

The room is cramped and stuffy, and the aroma is like body odor mixed with flatulence, but this seems to be the most popular place in the compound. In the center of the room are tables and chairs, but there aren’t enough seats for all of the people who are packed in here. Strangely, the people don’t interact with one another at all. They occupy themselves with the screens of their navigators. And with their free hand, they eat.

I type into my navigator:

Why are all the people puffy?

Jackie types a response:

I will answer later.

Remembering Ma'am's instructions to focus on observing rather than asking questions, I try to observe. But the more I quietly observe, the more questions come. It isn't dinnertime yet and lunchtime has passed. *What meal are these people eating?* The people in this room represent all ages, from toddlers through gray-haired older people. *Why aren't the children in school and the adults working?*

"Can I offer you a beverage or snack?" Tommy asks us.

We shake our heads in unison. My stomach wouldn't mind some food right now, but I'd have to skip a few meals before I would be hungry enough to eat anything inside this foul-smelling room.

"Excuse me for a second," Tommy says. He walks to one of the transparent containers and grabs something round and brown and as big as his hand. He eats it fast before returning to us.

He didn't scan his arm before he got his food. It looked like he just took whatever he wanted. And then I realize that everyone else is doing the same thing. *Are the people in this compound allowed to eat whatever food they want?*

After we leave the restaurant, Tommy takes us to another restaurant, and then another, and then another. Each one is full of people and smells similarly unpleasant inside. Tommy devours some food in each one. Then we visit the hospital, which seems very much like our hospital back home, except that it is about ten times the size and all of the workers are human. In

fact, although this compound has delivery and cleaning drones, there don't seem to be any robots here at all.

The final stop on our tour is The Roof, a glass-walled space on the fourteenth floor. From here, we can see the ocean on one side and, on the other side, majestic green-brown *mountains* that extend so high that the tops disappear into the clouds. I nearly gasp when I catch a glimpse of the mountains, but I stop myself because the liaisons appear completely unimpressed with them. The Roof is extraordinary, but like the garden, there's no one here enjoying it but us.

Tommy points to dark tiles that cover most of the floor. "Those panels collect energy from the sun. They provide the majority of the electricity needed to power our compound." He points to troughs along the edges of the walkways. "That system was supposed to collect rainwater to help maintain our water supply, but due to the drought, most of our water is harvested from the ocean."

As we leave The Roof, Tommy tells us that he's going to drop us off in pairs for an hour-long visit to "typical family living quarters." Jackie and I will be visiting Tommy's family's quarters. After Tommy drops off each warrior/liaison pair except for Jackie and me, we head to his quarters in awkward silence. His gaze remains fixed on his navigator, as it has been nearly the entire time we've spent with him.

When Tommy arrives at his door, it automatically slides open, revealing an entry hallway twice the size of the one in my family's domicile back home. The space is quiet, but alive with movies silently playing on the walls, movies of places that look like they were plucked from fairy tales—a butterfly flitting about over a flower, a bear leading her cubs through a verdant garden, a frog sitting on a rock as water flows past—but the images in these movies don't look like drawings, they appear real.

Suddenly, a creature barrels down the entryway. A blur of hair. Heading directly at me.

I jump behind a chair. “What is that?”

“Riley, sit!” Tommy commands.

The creature stops and sits on the floor near Tommy’s feet.

Tommy turns to me, making more eye contact than he’s made with anyone all afternoon. “Haven’t you ever seen a dog before?”

I feel my cheeks redden. I just broke one of Ma’am’s rules. We’re not supposed to speak unless spoken to. And worse, what I’ve said seems to have puzzled Tommy. As I look to Jackie for help, my navigator vibrates with an incoming message. From her. In quotes. I read it aloud, as if it’s a line from a play, “I meant, what kind of dog is it?”

“Oh.” Tommy’s face relaxes. “He’s a German shepherd, Labrador retriever, poodle mix.” Kneeling down, Tommy cuddles the creature as if it is a young child. Then he stands and his gaze bounces back to his navigator. “You can pet him if you want,” he says to us casually.

Jackie leans down and runs her hand over the dog’s hair. The animal waves his tail back and forth, and he looks at me, his pink tongue protruding from his mouth. He seems safe to approach, and so I swallow my apprehension, step closer, and move my hand over his hair the way Jackie is doing. His hair feels soft, like a child’s.

And then, without warning, Riley’s mouth goes to my hand. I start to pull away, but Jackie grabs my arm and holds it in place. The dog extends his tongue and uses it to cover my hand in slime. Then he does the same to Jackie’s hand.

Tommy laughs. “He likes you guys!”

“He’s adorable!” Jackie says, grinning.

I force a smile. I feel ridiculous for being afraid of this creature who, based on Jackie’s behavior, is not a threat at all.

“Come on. I’ll show you the rest of our quarters,” Tommy says.

We round a corner and find a woman reclined in a bed-like pod. Like Tommy, she is puffy. In front of her are two puffy people seated at a table, a

man and a woman. The woman at the table is crying and telling the man how much she loves him. It seems strange that she would say such a private thing with so many people in the room, then again, no one in the room seems to have noticed that we've arrived.

"Mom, I'm doing a student tour," Tommy says to the woman in the pod.

As she glances toward us, the man and woman in front of her freeze in place. *They aren't real.*

"Welcome to our home," Tommy's mom says to us with a smile. Her almost-too-pleasant tone reminds me of that of the receptionists at our medical center back home.

"Thank you," Jackie says.

I nod my agreement with Jackie's response.

"Would you like a glass of water?" Tommy's mom asks us.

"Yes, please," Jackie says.

Tommy's mom swipes her hand through the air. The frozen woman and man and their table vanish and her bed-pod tilts up. Tommy's mom gets to her feet and the naked, puffy legs sticking out from below her ruffled dress carry her to a drink dispenser. A moment later, she hands us each a glass of crystal clear water. After what Tommy told us about their water coming from the ocean, I expect it to be unpleasant—like the water that splashed into my mouth yesterday during my swim—but this water tastes like any other water. Like the water at the warrior compound. Like the water back home. It tastes like nothing.

Tommy's mom engages Jackie and me in conversation, but her gaze primarily stays on her navigator. She tells us that Tommy's dad is in the next room and that she's sure he'd love to meet us, but right now he is occupied with watching the playoffs.

"I'm sure my boyfriend is watching them right now too," Jackie responds.

I'll have to ask Jackie later what "playoffs" and "boyfriends" are.

The happy squeal of a delighted child interrupts our conversation.

Tommy's mom strolls toward the sound and gestures for Jackie and me to follow. We enter a smaller room where a puffy little girl is stretched out in a diminutive pod, using her fingers to manipulate dolls that float in the air above her, making them dance. The dolls freeze when the child looks at us.

"Who are you?" the little girl asks Jackie and me.

"I'm Jackie, and this is Sarah," Jackie answers.

"My name is Alyssa," the girl says. "I'm Tommy's sister. I'm four years old. I like to play with dolls and watch movies about princesses." Like Tommy and his mother, her speech is stilted. It's the same manner of speaking that, at first, made me wonder if Tommy was a robot.

Tommy isn't a robot, and surely neither is his mother or little sister, but *why do they act so robot-like?* I type that question into my navigator, and an instant later I see Jackie's response:

We'll talk about this later.

* * *

Once the warriors, instructors, liaisons, and soldiers are back inside our drone, with our thick black jumpsuits covering our costumes, heading to the warrior compound, Ten, Thirteen, Twelve, and I begin firing off questions.

I learn that, at Tommy's compound, children do not go to school. All of their education is provided via their navigators, which, unlike the navigators of my past, are incredible little devices that interact with their owners in such a way that it's like having a tiny person strapped to your wrist. Most adults carry out their jobs remotely, from their homes. They are only required to leave their quarters in order to eat.

"Why are the people swollen?" Twelve asks

"They have excessive storage of fat in their body tissues, a condition where the body takes in more energy, in the form of food, than it releases in

the form of physical activity and other energy expenditures,” Jackie explains. “It’s called ‘overweight.’”

“Why don’t they receive individualized meals with appropriate levels of nutrients? And have recreation?” Twelve asks.

“The government tried that,” Thirteen’s liaison says. “But the people —”

BOOM!

Our drone lurches back violently, lifting a few feet into the air before smashing back to the ground. The windows opacify with an odd gray color. Then all becomes deathly still.

My heart pounds in my throat. Ten’s face is tense, a mirror of Ryan’s.

“Warriors, don’t move,” Ma’am says. Although her voice is calm, it is obvious from the sudden frenzy of activity inside the drone that something terrible has just happened.

As the windows deopacify somewhat, I see that, instead of the black path that was ahead of us just moments ago, there is a tremendous hole in the ground.

“Vehicle, reverse direction,” Ryan says above the din. His tone is cool and controlled, like Ma’am’s. The drone begins to move back the way we came. I feel a small sense of relief until Ryan speaks again, “Castle, this is Whiskey Foxtrot. We’re under attack. Road’s blown out south of us. Requesting backup.”

“Roger, Whiskey Foxtrot.” It’s a man’s voice. It sounds like the commander’s. “We have a visual on the—”

BOOM!

The drone pitches forward forcefully, then it comes to a shaky rest. Because the windows are opacified again, I can’t see what has happened outside the drone, but my instincts tell me that there is now a gaping hole in the path behind us.

I hold Ten's gaze. Even though he appears more concerned than I've ever seen him, looking into his eyes is somehow reassuring.

Ryan speaks again, "Castle, this is Whiskey Foxtrot. Second explosion. We need air support for immediate extraction." I hear urgency in his voice now, but it's nothing close to the panic that would be in mine if I were to speak.

"Roger that, Whiskey Foxtrot," the commander's impossibly-composed voice says. "We're on our—"

BOOM!

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MONDAY, AUGUST 31

1543

There is a high-pitched ringing in my ears. It is the only sound. Gray air fills the drone, making it hard to see more than a few inches in front of me, and even that is blurry. The heavy air burns my throat and forces me to cough. My helmet tugs at my chin, threatening to slide off. I'm upside down, I think.

Black-helmeted people come into view. They're upside down—or more likely, they're right-side up. They press their hands against my body, holding me against my seat, then they release my harness and lower me to the ground.

“Davis, you're on Murphy,” I hear through the ringing. It's Ryan's voice.

“Copy,” Jackie responds.

Ahead of me, Ryan leads someone—a helmeted man who is bent over and coughing hard—through the upside-down drone door.

“Ten? Ten!” My lips move, but no sound comes out.

Jackie is pushing me forward. “Murphy, let's go.”

“Where's Ma'am?” I yell. I turn back toward the row where I was sitting—it's now suspended above my head—and I see her, still strapped into her seat, her neck extended unnaturally. “Ma'am!” I scream.

“MURPHY, MOVE!” Jackie grabs the back of my jumpsuit and shoves me toward the door. Either she's much stronger than I thought she was or I'm weaker than I feel, because I involuntarily begin to move forward.

Anger wells up inside me. I whip around and slam my helmet against Jackie's, so we are eye-to-eye. She doesn't even flinch. "Not without Ma'am!" I shout.

Jackie takes my arm and twists it behind my back. It hurts so badly that my body acquiesces, but my spirit remains undeterred. "We need to help Ma'am!" I shout.

"We'll take care of her," Jackie says into my ear. "I promise."

As she says that, soldiers grab me from all sides and drag me from the drone. Frustration boils inside my chest. I want to fight my way back into the drone, but if I do so, I'll be distracting our team from defending us against our attackers. I know what Ma'am would want me to do in this situation. She made her wishes abundantly clear after the Final Challenge. And so, I force back the wave of nauseating guilt rising in my throat, and I leave Ma'am behind.

Jackie pushes me up against the outside of the drone. The air is still thick and gray here. The grayness irritates my lungs and forces me to continuously cough. The muffled sounds of people shouting fill my ears.

"WE HAVE SIX AMBULATORY WOUNDED. THREE NON-AMBULATORY WOUNDED. ONE DEAD," a woman calls out.

Dead? Who's dead?

"MARTINEZ, CHECK THE CLIFFSIDE," Ryan commands.

Black-jumpsuited soldiers swarm around me, passing in and out of the grayness. A few of them have a person in a black jumpsuit slung over one shoulder. I check the faces of the wounded; none of them is Ma'am.

"SHARP DROP-OFF ON THE CLIFFSIDE," a man yells out.

"COPY," Ryan shouts. "MOVING THE PRINCIPALS TO THE MOUNTAIN BASE. COVER US."

I reach for my weapon.

Jackie shoves my hand away from my waist. "No weapon. I've got you."

“I know how to fight,” I shout. “I can help.”

“Just keep your head down.” Jackie pushes me forward as she fires her weapon upward, into the grayness, toward the sky. Soon, she has me pressed against a wall of rock.

I feel a hand touch mine, palm to palm. I grab hold of it before I look to see whose it is, because I already know it’s Ten’s. As I turn toward him, relief floods my body.

“You okay?” Ten asks me with just the movement of his lips.

I shake my head. “Ma’am’s hurt.”

Ten’s face darkens with concern. “Where is she?”

“HEAD NORTH,” Ryan orders. “At least we have some idea of what’s there.”

“MOVE!” someone else shouts.

Ryan takes hold of Ten’s arm and pulls him into the grayness.

“Ten!” I scream. I start after them, but Jackie grabs my wrist and yanks me backward.

As I stumble toward her, something plummets from the sky—narrowly missing me—and lands with a horrible thud. And then I see what it is. Lying on the ground is a boy, who appears about my age, wearing a tattered brown shirt and pants. He isn’t puffy, like the people at Tommy’s compound. In fact, his body is just the opposite—muscled, but much too thin. A dented helmet covers the top of his head. Bright-red blood streams from his left ear. His eyes are open, but there is no life in them. He’s dead. Just like Mr. Fifty-three.

“GET DOWN!” Jackie yells, shoving me beneath her.

And then all of her weight falls on top of me. Her muscles go limp. My stomach twists with dread. I shove her flaccid body from my back and kneel beside her. Her chest is slowly moving up and down, but her eyes are closed and her jaw is slack.

“Jackie!” I shout, trying to rouse her.

Sharp pain surges into my left hand, sending me sprawling onto the ground. I'm fairly certain that the pain was caused by a weapon hit, but it hurts so much worse than any weapon hit I've ever experienced. It is agonizing and all-consuming. And then, unimaginable pain grips my left shoulder, forcing me to let out an involuntary scream. My brain begins to spiral into shock.

I can't let myself bow to the pain. Jackie and I are being fired upon. I need to defend us. I need to fight.

I pull my weapon from my waist and aim it up at the sky, the way I saw Jackie do. I press the trigger over and over. Chunks of rock strike my helmet and jumpsuit. One of them slices into my right hand, sending a sickening stream of blood down my arm, making my vision falter, but I keep firing my weapon toward the sky.

Another body plummets down from above and hits the black path with a crunch. It's a woman who wears the same type of tattered clothing as the boy. Like him, she is unusually thin. Dark red blood oozes from her crushed nose. The woman lifts her head and aims her weapon directly at me. I point my weapon at her, but before I press the trigger, another weapon comes up beside me—aimed at the woman—and fires. The woman's head falls back to the ground, lifeless.

I turn and see her shooter: Twelve's liaison, Bill. He's carrying a man in a black jumpsuit over his shoulder.

"You all right?" Bill asks me.

"Jackie's unconscious," I tell him, as I aim my weapon back up at the sky.

"Put your weapon away. I've got you now," he says. "Let's go."

I holster my weapon and struggle to heave Jackie's body over my shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Bill yells, as he fires into the sky.

"I'm taking Jackie with us," I shout back.

“MURPHY, MOVE RIGHT NOW!” Bill orders. “RUN!”

I look up at him and—

BOOM!

An invisible force shoves me to the trembling ground. For an instant, the sky lights up as if it is midday rather than late afternoon, but still I see nothing but gray. Hard bits of rock tumble down on us. And I feel heat. Intense heat from above.

Dozens of brown-clothed bodies now lie lifeless on the ground all around us. Yellow-orange light rises from them, dissolving their clothing and the flesh underneath. Bill brushes a bit of light from my jumpsuit with his forearm.

“What is that stuff?” I ask, anxious.

“It’s called fire. Stay away from it,” Bill says. And then he bellows, “GET UP RIGHT NOW! MOVE!”

I yank Jackie onto my back before I let Bill shove me forward.

“FASTER!” he commands.

Suddenly, the air pushes me backward. Tiny rocks on the ground become airborne. They hit my jumpsuit and helmet and sting my hands as an enormous black aerial drone descends from the sky. As it lands, its door springs open and black-jumpsuited soldiers rush out.

Bill grabs my arm and says to one of the soldiers, “THIS IS WARRIOR SARAH MURPHY.”

“GOT HER,” the soldier says as he takes hold of my arm.

Another soldier lifts Jackie from my back and rushes her into the drone.

“Where’s Michael Hanson?” I ask the soldier who has taken hold of me.

“The other warriors are onboard.”

The soldier propels me up the ramp that leads into the drone. I try to pull away, but I can’t break free of his powerful grip.

I point in the direction of our terrestrial drone. “My instructor ... She’s injured. She needs help.”

“Murphy,” he says, “we’ve got everything under control.” He thrusts me into the drone. I’m pushed into a seat, and a harness is secured over me. The soldier remains by my side until the drone door closes, then he orders me, “Stay here.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, but as soon as he is out of sight, I release my harness and head into the chaos around me. I need to find Ten, and Ryan, and Ma’am.

I search the dozens of helmeted faces, looking for familiar ones, but the only one I find is Twelve’s. Twelve is harnessed into a seat. His mouth hangs open. His gaze is fixed straight ahead. He seems completely unaware of my presence.

Behind him, through the transparent drone walls, I see that we are rising up into a sky filled with aerial drones just like this one. Some fly close to us. Others hover near the place where we were just moments ago.

Our flipped terrestrial drone rests beside an endless wall of rock. On either side of the drone is a gaping black hole. At the top of the rock wall is an expansive flat area dotted with patches of brilliant orange light—fire. There are bodies up there too. At least a hundred of them. Lying on the ground. Motionless. Dead. They wear brown clothes, just like the bodies that fell from the sky. These were our attackers.

My attention is drawn back to our damaged drone as two black-jumpsuited soldiers carry out a lifeless body and place it on a gurney. They cover the gurney with a white sheet and wheel it toward a waiting aerial drone. Guilt overwhelms me. *I wonder if that body is Ma’am’s.*

I turn away from the view and approach a man who I don’t recognize. If I don’t recognize him, he probably won’t recognize me. If he doesn’t recognize me, it’s less likely that he will escort me back to my seat and strap me down.

I put on an authoritative voice and ask, “Where are the casualties?”

“Sick bay’s below,” the man responds without looking at me.

I go in the direction that he points, down a skinny ramp and into a low-ceilinged room. Bloodied people lie on narrow beds. Their black jumpsuits have been cut away from their bodies. Other black-jumpsuited people—doctors and nurses, I assume—tend to the casualties, inserting tubes, injecting medications, scanning chests and abdomens with handheld scanners.

I search the injured.

Jackie. A plastic mask is strapped to her face.

Thirteen. There is a thick tube in her mouth. A machine at her bedside is breathing for her.

A male soldier who I recognize from today’s mission—but whose name I don’t know—lies on the next bed—

“Murphy!” someone shouts. I recognize the voice instantly. I turn and see Ten racing toward me, ignored by everyone in the room, because everybody is busy caring for the wounded. He grabs me by the shoulders, and I fall into his arms.

“Where’s Ryan and Ma’am?” I ask him.

He glances behind himself. And I see Ryan, standing next to an occupied bed.

And then I see the unconscious face of the person on the gurney.

Ma’am.

* * *

Before this evening, I didn’t know that the warrior compound had a hospital. Despite the injuries that my fellow warriors and I sustained in training, no one was ever hurt bad enough to come here.

Ma’am’s hospital room looks very much like the rooms in the hospital back home, so much so that this room feels familiar. But what I see in the bed is unlike anything I have seen before. Ma’am barely looks like herself.

Her face is swollen and pale purple. Her head is bandaged tightly in white gauze. The inside of the thick transparent tube in Ma'am's mouth mists every few seconds as the ventilator machine breathes for her. Yellow-tinged fluids drip into tubing attached to numerous transparent IV bags suspended from the ceiling.

Almost two hours ago, the doctors performed emergency surgery to stop the bleeding around Ma'am's brain. Ryan is with the doctors now, getting an update on Ma'am's condition. He's been gone for over thirty minutes, much longer than updates normally require.

As I focus on one of Ma'am's puffy hands, I notice a silver patient identification band around her wrist, the writing facing her blanket. Ma'am's name must be on that band. Her real name. The name she has refused to tell me. I'd thought she might share it with me after the Final Challenge, but she was so busy scolding me about trying to save her that I didn't ask. I feel like not knowing her name is a wall between us. A wall I wish would come down. Especially now. But I don't rotate the band. Until Ma'am tells me her name, I don't want to know it.

Ten stirs in the chair next to mine. He fell asleep about twenty minutes ago, and I didn't wake him. The doctor said we should get some rest so our brains and bodies can heal from the trauma we experienced today. I don't want to sleep, because I know that when I do, my dreams will be nightmares.

Ten opens his eyes and looks around the room as if he's trying to remember how he got here. Then he inhales and looks at Ma'am. Her body. Her monitors. Her pumps.

"Any changes?" he asks me.

I shake my head.

Ten rubs the sleep from his eyes and checks the time on his navigator.

"Where's Ryan?"

"He hasn't come back yet," I say softly.

Ten's forehead furrows. "He can't still be with the doctors, can he?"
"Where else would he be?"

Ten must see the concern in my eyes, because his face instantly reflects it.

I turn back toward Ma'am and continue my vigil.

About fifteen minutes later, Ryan trudges into the room. Ten rises, offering Ryan his chair, and Ryan sits down heavily, as if he's been on his feet for days.

"What did the doctors say?" I ask him.

"The post-operative scan didn't show any new bleeding, but there's a lot of swelling," he says in a low voice. He takes Ma'am's hand so easily that it strikes me as strange. Until I realize what it means. This is how people act when they think their time with someone is about to be cut short. Barriers fall away. People show emotions they never dared to express before.

My eyes well up with tears. "But she's going to be okay, right?" I whisper.

"It's too soon to tell," Ryan says, his voice breaking.

My chest tightens at Ryan's words. I'm fairly certain that they belong to Ma'am's doctors. "It's too soon to tell" is something my mom and dad say when discussing very sick patients, those who they think might not survive. But almost everyone who died back home was very old. Younger people who got ill or injured were treated and recovered. Then again, aside from Mr. Fifty-three, Ma'am is the only seriously-injured patient I've ever seen.

Quietly, I push my chair back from Ma'am's bed and go to the window. The view is similar to the one from my quarters. A view of the ocean. Moonlight illuminates the rolling waves.

"You said we were safe," I mutter to Ryan without looking at him.
"You lied."

“I thought you *were* safe. I was wrong.” Ryan inhales. “But you should know that every single person on that transport would have willingly died to protect you.”

“I’m not worried about *me*.” I grit my teeth, trying to stop the tears that are already streaming down my cheeks. “I don’t want anyone to die to protect me.”

“That isn’t your choice to make,” Ryan says.

I turn and stare at Ma’am. She looks so much sicker from this distance, when I take in everything all at once. It was easier to focus on just her monitors. Just her breathing tube. Just her hand.

I start walking. Heading toward the door.

“Murphy, stop,” Ryan says.

But I don’t stop. I walk right out of the room.

Past the nurses’ station.

Out the ICU doors.

And then ... I run.

* * *

I burst through the door to my quarters and smash my body onto my bed. My face is a mess of wetness. Little high-pitched sounds are coming from my throat, and I can’t make them stop. My chest aches with each breath I take. *It’s my fault that Ma’am got hurt. She was in that drone specifically to protect me. Now she’s in a hospital bed fighting for her life.*

I pound my bandaged fist into my mattress. Sharp pain surges through my hand. I strike the mattress over and over again, forcing myself to experience the pain, until my message system’s buzzer indicates that there’s someone at my door.

There’s only one person who I would open my door to right now. I check the hallway monitor image, and then I go scan open the door.

Ten takes me into his arms, and my tears begin to fall again. “I don’t want ... Ma’am ... to die,” I finally get out. Saying my deepest fear aloud makes the tears come harder.

“The doctors and nurses are doing everything they can,” Ten says.

“But what if it isn’t enough to ...?”

I don’t finish my question, and Ten doesn’t attempt an answer. Instead, he sits with me on my bed and holds me tightly. After a while, I unzip Ten’s jumpsuit and he unzips mine, and we lose control. It isn’t at all like the other times we’ve lost control. It isn’t exciting, energizing, or pleasurable. But it’s what I need so desperately. After experiencing so much ugliness today, I need to know that there is still beauty.

When we’re through, I close my eyes and press my ear to Ten’s chest, listening to his steady heartbeat. I trust it to ward off nightmares. And I let myself succumb to sleep.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1
0712

According to the message system in my quarters, all formal activities are cancelled today and we are supposed to spend our time studying the first chapter in *The Book of Challenges*, a book that provides background information regarding the problems we will attempt to solve as warriors. Right now, I don't have the energy to think about solving problems. I barely have enough energy to think at all.

Quietly, I open my delivery hatch, trying not to wake Ten, who is still asleep in my bed. Inside the compartment, I find a shiny new tablet—I assume it contains *The Book of Challenges*—along with a fresh jumpsuit and underwear. There's also a sealed bowl of brown gooey stuff labeled "fortified oatmeal" and a bottle of thick liquid labeled "fruit smoothie." A sticker on the bowl states that the dining room is closed and that meals will be delivered to our quarters at the appropriate times. The goop and drink must be for breakfast.

After forcing down my tasteless meal, I wash up and get dressed. Ten is still fast asleep, and I don't make any attempt to wake him. I leave him a note on my message screen, then I scan open the door to my quarters and enter the deserted hallways of the warrior compound. I retrace my route from last night, heading back to the hospital.

When I scan my arm at the intensive care unit door, a red light flashes.

“Hello, Sarah,” a woman’s voice says through the speaker. “Come on in.”

The light turns green and the door slides open. Ma’am’s nurse is looking at me from her seat at the nurses’ station. I met Nurse Marie yesterday when I arrived, and she was still here when I left. I’m sure she works twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, just like the robot nurses back home. I nod at her and proceed to Ma’am’s room.

Ryan is at Ma’am’s bedside, holding her hand. His other arm is draped across the bedrail and his forehead rests against it. Ma’am appears exactly as she did last night. Her blankets are still perfectly arranged, flat and neat. I hope that’s because Nurse Marie recently straightened them, but I’m pretty sure it’s because Ma’am hasn’t moved at all since the last time I saw her.

Ryan raises his head when I enter the room. His eyelids are red and puffy. He seems so strong that I can’t imagine him ever crying, but it’s clear that he recently did.

I sit down in the chair next to him. “How’s she doing?”

“About the same.” His voice is tired and weak.

“How are *you* doing?” I ask.

“I’m fine,” he says, but of course he’s not fine.

I swallow. “I was wrong to be angry with you last night—”

“It’s okay, Murphy,” he says, without lifting his gaze from Ma’am.

“It’s just that ... you and Ma’am ... The thought of losing one of you ...” I inhale, holding back tears. In my first few weeks at the warrior compound, I was their student and they were my teachers, but somewhere along the way, our relationship changed. We became so much more.

“You’re like my family.”

“We feel the same way.” His words surprise me, even though maybe they shouldn’t.

“If you want to go rest, I can stay with her,” I offer.

“I need to be here,” he says.

I shouldn't push him, but he so looks exhausted that I try again, "I'm sure Ma'am would understand if—"

"I'm her husband." Ryan says this so firmly that I feel as if it should explain everything.

"I don't know what that means," I say, hesitantly.

He strokes Ma'am's swollen, pale fingers, and his expression softens. "It's like being paired, but we *chose* each other."

All of a sudden, my mind makes connections that it hadn't before. Ryan and Ma'am always sat side by side in the dining room. They were usually in close proximity to each other, especially in times of danger. They often seemed to communicate without words. And now I know why. *They love each other.*

Ryan lays his arm on Ma'am's bed and rests his head on it. After a while, his carefully-controlled breathing changes to the rhythmic breathing of sleep.

A few minutes later, Ten appears at the door and gestures for me to join him outside the room. As soon as the door closes behind me, he asks, "How's Ma'am?"

"About the same," I say.

Ten leans closer. "Twelve's instructor died in the attack yesterday."

"I'm sorry ..." I force out before my throat constricts tight with sadness.

Ten nods. "I am too."

Twelve's instructor earned my respect on my very first day here, when recognized that Twelve was a bully. He never accepted that behavior. Never tolerated it. In his own quiet way, he stood up for me. I inhale, forcing myself to stay composed.

"I need to check on Thirteen and Jackie," I tell Ten. When I tried to visit them yesterday, I was told that the doctors and nurses were working on

them and so they couldn't have any visitors. "Will you stay with Ryan and Ma'am?"

Ten nods. "Of course."

I decide to check on Thirteen first. I go to the nurses' station and ask Nurse Marie, "Do you know where I can find a patient named Adriana Morales?"

"They're performing a procedure on her right now," she says. "She can't have any visitors."

That's the same thing they said yesterday. "What's her condition?" I ask, frustrated.

"I'm sorry, only the commander is privy to medical updates regarding this patient," she responds.

"Her procedure should be over soon. I'll let you know as soon as you can see her," another woman adds. I look over at her. She wears a black jumpsuit with a white cross at the collar; she's a nurse. The compassion in her deep-brown eyes and the wrinkles lining her face tell me that she's human. Back home, there are both human and robot nurses. It must be the same here. "What's your name?" the nurse asks me.

"Sarah Murphy," I say.

"I'm Joyce," she says with a kind smile.

"Thank you," I say, returning her smile, and then I add, "My liaison was also injured. Her name is Jackie Davis."

"She's in Room L," Nurse Joyce says. "You're welcome to visit her." She nods toward a wall of glass doors and windows to the left.

As I approach the door to Room L, I see Jackie sitting up in bed, reading something on a tablet. She doesn't look like she belongs in a hospital, especially not in an intensive care unit. Aside from the single IV attached to her, she doesn't appear ill at all. Relief surges through me.

Jackie glances up from the tablet, and her face lights with recognition. "Murphy! Come on in," she says. Her voice is remarkably strong.

“How are you feeling?” I ask as I enter the room.

“I’m fine. I just got hit by a stunner. Once the stun wears off, it’s usually smooth sailing as long as there are no other injuries. Doctor says there are no other injuries. Bill tells me that’s because of you. So ... thank you, Murphy.”

“I only did what you were doing for me,” I say.

“Yeah, well, that’s not your job,” she says.

“I’m sorry they made you risk your life for me,” I blurt out.

She shakes her head. “They don’t *make* me do anything. I volunteered for this. I’ve wanted this job ever since I was a kid.”

“Why?” I ask, incredulous.

“Because I believe in the warrior program. It’s worth fighting for. Worth dying for.”

“But *why*?”

She bites her lower lip. “They haven’t told you much yet, have they?”

I shake my head.

Jackie inhales slowly, and then she speaks quietly, “The warrior program has saved *billions* of lives. It has ended wars. It has stopped diseases from decimating the populations of entire countries, including our own. It has prevented us all from succumbing to countless threats.”

I don’t fully understand what she’s just said. But the first part echoes in my brain: *The warrior program has saved **billions** of lives*. Could that possibly be true? If it is, that would explain why the people in our drone were willing to die for us. It would explain why Ma’am said that she’s expendable and I’m not.

I’m still lost in my thoughts, when Jackie asks, “How’s Anna?”

“Who?” I ask.

“Your instructor,” she says, looking puzzled, “Lieutenant Commander Kitay.”

Anna Kitay.

Ma'am's name is Anna Kitay.

“There was bleeding around her brain.” I say, emotion seeping into my voice. “The doctors had to do surgery ...” I stop, unable to continue. But rather than sadness, I feel anger, boiling up to the surface. Anger at those who hurt her. “Who attacked us?” I ask Jackie.

“I’m not supposed to discuss that with you.” Jackie sighs. “But you risked your butt for me.” She leans close to me and speaks in a hushed voice, “The people who ambushed us are called Outsiders. They refuse to live in government-provided housing, like the compound we visited yesterday. They were attempting to capture you. They want to use you to manipulate the government. Aside from one attack, nineteen years ago, we’ve always been able to easily thwart them. Yesterday’s ambush was their most sophisticated attack to date. By far. We didn’t think they were capable of—”

The glass door to Jackie’s room slides open. I look up as Nurse Joyce enters.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” she says, “but Adriana is ready for visitors now. She’s sedated, so she won’t be able to respond, but go ahead and talk to her. She will be able to hear you. She’s in Room G.”

“Thank you for letting me know,” I say.

Nurse Joyce nods and then she leaves.

Jackie takes my hand. “I know what I said is probably confusing, but they’ll explain everything to you soon. Go see your friend.”

I pause, torn between wanting to check on Thirteen and wanting to get more information from Jackie. But Thirteen’s condition is more urgent right now.

“Okay.” I start to leave, but Jackie keeps hold of my hand.

I turn back toward her and she looks into my eyes, unblinking.

“Murphy, if you ever need *anything at all* ... you let me know.”

I shake my head. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“Yes, I do. I owe you my life,” she says.
And then she lets me go.

* * *

With soft footsteps, I enter Room G. Thirteen lies in the hospital bed. When I see her, my body goes weak. She looks even sicker than Ma’am. Her face is swollen and bruised. Blood substitute and ten different medicines flow into the skinny tubes sticking out of her arms and chest.

I sit down in one of the chairs at her bedside and cover Thirteen’s cold hand with mine. “Hi, Morales,” I say, forcing myself to sound untroubled. “It’s me ... Murphy.”

Suddenly, the room door opens and Nineteen enters. “Murphy, you’re okay!” she says, exhaling with relief. Then she looks at Thirteen and her face goes pale. She sinks into the chair next to me and sits there for a few minutes, staring at Thirteen’s broken body, before she finally whispers, “Howard said there was an attack on your drone. Is that true?”

I force myself to recount the ambush for Nineteen, telling her just enough to satisfy her.

“How is Hanson?” she asks.

“He’s fine,” I answer. “But Howard’s instructor is dead.”

“Well, at least it wasn’t one of us who died,” she says.

I whip toward her. “What do you mean ‘one of *us*’?”

“One of the warriors,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Our instructors ... and those soldiers ...” I think of Ma’am, hanging upside down inside our flipped drone, unconscious. “They are *not* expendable.”

“Those people took us from our families,” Nineteen says, her fists tight. “They put us in danger. And for what? To solve some stupid problems.”

I think of what Jackie told me just now. “I’m sure they’ll explain everything soon,” I say.

“I don’t care what they *explain* to us,” Nineteen says. “Those people are my enemies. And they should be yours too.”

Maybe Nineteen is right. But I hope with everything inside me that she’s wrong.

It’s difficult to believe what Jackie told me. To believe that the warriors have saved billions of lives. But I want to believe that more than anything. I *need* to believe it.

Because it is the only way that I have anymore to justify why we’re here.

* * *

I spend the rest of the day with Ma’am, Ryan, and Ten. Ryan and I sit by Ma’am’s bed, and Ten sits by the window, occupying himself with his navigator.

At almost midnight, Ryan turns to Ten and me and says, “Go to your quarters and get some sleep.”

I consider protesting, but I don’t because Ryan looks completely exhausted, and I don’t want to stress him any further. Ten and I leave Ryan at Ma’am’s bedside.

When we arrive at the door to my quarters, Ten steps up to the scanner.

“Here, let me,” he says.

Even though that doesn’t make sense at all, I am too drained to argue. With bleary eyes, I watch Ten run his navigator over the scanner, tap the navigator to his warrior necklace, and then touch his necklace to the scanner.

The light on the scanner turns from red to green, and my door slides open.

I pull Ten inside my quarters and quickly scan the door closed. “There are chips in our warrior necklaces?” I ask him.

“Just this one.” Ten holds his necklace up to the light, and I see a tiny gold rectangle wedged into the silver ring of the charm. “When my great grandfather gave me his tag, he also gave me an extra chip. I slipped it into my warrior charm, just in case. So far, the chip has been useless here, because I didn’t have anything that could pull security codes, but these new navigators are a lot more advanced than the ones back home.” He smiles. “Now we can open any door.”

I sit down on my bed and stare at the ground. “I don’t want to open any forbidden doors.”

Ten sits next to me. “Why not?”

“I just want us to be safe.” My eyes plead with his. “Can we please just try to be safe?”

Ten exhales. “Okay.”

I close my eyes and feel the comforting touch of his lips, and then, quietly, we lose control. In those moments, everything seems right and certain. Afterward, I whisper what Jackie told me in her hospital room, about the billions of lives that the warrior program has saved, and about the Outsiders who attacked us. Unlike Nineteen, Ten feels that Jackie might be telling the truth. This comforts me, even though only time will give us the true answer.

I fall asleep in Ten’s arms, knowing that my nightmares will be banished.

Only to return when I awaken.

* * *

I wake at five in the morning. Because I have to pee. After disentangling myself from a sleeping Ten, I walk to the toilet. I pee for what feels like a long time, and then I wipe myself.

Just before I drop the tissue into the toilet, I notice that the tissue is streaked with blood. I gasp.

I wipe myself again.

More blood.

“What’s wrong?” Ten asks, looking at me with sleepy eyes.

I sit there on the toilet, naked, holding the bloody tissue in my hand. “I’m bleeding.”

Ten gets to his feet and taps on the light. “From where?”

“Between my legs.” I’m trembling now.

“Maybe it’s because of the accident.” Ten starts pulling on his clothes. “I’ll take you to the hospital, so they can check you out again.”

“What if this has to do with us losing control?” I ask.

“Has this happened before?” Ten asks.

I shake my head. “No.”

Ten pauses for a moment, as if deep in thought, and then he says, “There are no rules about losing control.”

“Maybe not,” I say, “but we should talk to Ryan first.”

“All right.”

I didn’t expect him to agree to that so easily. “You trust him now?” I ask.

“Of all the instructors, I trust him the most.”

I use some toilet tissue as makeshift wound dressing, then I pull on yesterday’s underwear and jumpsuit and walk with Ten to the hospital.

When we arrive at the intensive care unit, a security officer stops us at the door. “Visiting hours begin at zero seven hundred,” he says.

He’s right. Visitors are not typically allowed in the ICU overnight. But before Nurse Joyce left at the end of her shift, she told Nurse Marie that Ten and I had permission to stay at Ma’am’s bedside around the clock. Sometimes my mom and dad allowed that when patients were very ill.

“Could you ask Nurse Marie if—?” I start.

“Visiting hours begin at zero seven hundred,” he repeats.

And then I take a closer look at him. The skin of his bald head reflects the overhead lights ever-so-slightly more than human skin would. *He’s a robot.*

“Okay, thank you,” I say to the robot.

I lead Ten away. Once we round the corner, I whisper, “There’s probably another entrance.” Back home, every hospital ward had both a visitor entrance and a separate entrance for the doctors and nurses. I nod in the direction of a door labeled “Hospital staff only.” “You think you can open that door?” I ask Ten.

His brow furrows, but he nods. He swipes his navigator over the scanner, taps it to his warrior necklace, and then scans the door open.

“It’s probably better if I go in alone,” I say. “We don’t want to call attention to ourselves.”

Without a word, Ten drops his necklace into my hand.

My heart races as I step through the doorway and scan the door closed behind me. I stroll into the intensive care unit in plain sight, but no one seems to notice me. I’ve been walking the wards of a hospital ever since I was very young. I guess I fit here.

I find Ryan sitting by Ma’am’s bedside. Both of his hands embrace one of hers. His eyes are fixed on her expressionless, swollen face.

“Is it morning already?” he asks me, looking as exhausted as when I left him.

“Almost.” I sit in the chair that’s next to him. “How’s Ma’am?”

“Her brain pressures are better,” he says.

“That’s good,” I say.

Seeing Ma’am, who appears just as sick as she did the last time I saw her, I feel horribly guilty about burdening Ryan with my problem. But I don’t know where else to turn.

“I’m bleeding from between my legs,” I say in a quiet voice.

Ryan turns to me, his eyes instantly alert. “How much blood?”

“Only a little,” I say. “Could it have something to do with the accident?”

“It could,” he says, his forehead creased.

I inhale, and then I ask, “Is it possible that someone touching me there could cause that?”

Ryan frowns. “Touching you how?”

“Gently.”

His face tightens. “Did a man put his body against yours ... without clothes on?”

I nod hesitantly. “Yes.”

“You mated,” he says.

“No.” *Mating is extraordinarily painful.* “He didn’t hurt me.”

Ryan exhales. “Mating doesn’t hurt nearly as much as you were told.”

I think back to the first time that Ten and I lost control. It *did* hurt, a little.

Ten and I mated.

Hundreds of thoughts flood my brain all at once, and one terrifying question. “Could I be pregnant?”

“No, that’s not possible,” Ryan says. “You get an injection at every medical evaluation to prevent that.”

“They didn’t give me any injections at my last evaluation,” I say, and then my tired mind realizes *why*. And my heart nearly stops. *I didn’t receive an injection because I was going to be paired.* “Maybe the robot made a mistake,” I add quickly.

Ryan’s eyes narrow. “Robots don’t make mistakes like that.”

Before I can respond, Ryan grabs me by the arm and lifts me to my feet. He pulls me into Ma’am’s toilet room, closes the door behind us, and stands between me and the door.

“Pull up your left sleeve,” he says in a low voice.

My pulse throbs in my neck as I lift the sleeve of my jumpsuit.

Ryan's gaze goes to the thick pink scar where Six extracted my chip and replaced it with hers. The wound didn't heal well after the trauma it received during my first days as a warrior. "You're Two Thousand Seven," he breathes.

I swallow against the lump in my throat. "Yes, sir."

Ryan inhales as if he's trying to find the strength to continue. "You and your sister have committed an act of treason."

I look into his eyes, feeling completely defenseless. "Are you going to take me to the commander now?"

Ryan shakes his head. "No."

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WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2

0614

I wait until Ten and I are back inside my quarters before I tell him what happened with Ryan. “He told me to go to my quarters and wait for him there,” I finish.

“Why?” Ten asks.

“He wouldn’t say.” Feeling suddenly lightheaded, I lie down on top of my rumpled bed sheets. “You should probably go to your own quarters. Distance yourself from me.”

Ten lies down next to me and pulls me into his arms. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I shut my eyes and try to let Ten’s closeness comfort me. But it doesn’t. My life and Six’s life are in jeopardy, and the closer he is to me, the more Ten’s is too.

The worries churning in my head fade into a nightmare where I’m running through the restricted hallways back home, trying to escape the big black terrestrial drone that Ten and I saw come through an opening in the wall. The drone races after me, moving at many times its natural speed. The closer it gets, the heavier my legs feel, as if they’re filling with water. Fear rises into my chest as the drone closes in. Two muscled, humanlike arms emerge from the front of the drone and reach toward me. They are about to grab hold of me when a buzzer startles me awake.

I open my eyes. On the hallway monitor, I see Ryan standing outside my door. He is alone. I feel a split second of relief that he hasn't brought a collection of soldiers to carry me off to be punished, but my relief is quickly squelched by dread. I straighten my jumpsuit and go to the door. Ten rouses himself and catches up with me.

As soon as I open my door, Ryan silently enters my quarters. After I scan the door closed, he unzips a pocket of his jumpsuit and pulls out a slim plastic box labeled "Urine Pregnancy Test."

"The instructions are inside," Ryan says hoarsely. "Once you're done, place everything back into the case and bring it to me. I'll be waiting for you in the recreation room."

"You should go back to the hospital to be with Ma'am," I say. "I can bring it to you there."

He lowers his head. "Ma'am passed away this morning."

For a single moment, I feel excruciating pain. The pain of his loss. And my loss. And then I feel nothing at all. I cling to Ryan. But I don't feel his touch. My body is sobbing, but it isn't mine. It's the body of a person who I once was. A person who I will never be again.

I shake my head, desperate to believe that this is all just a nightmare from which I will awaken. *Ma'am can't be dead.* The day before yesterday, she was with me in the recreation room, brushing my hair, taking care of me. From the moment that I left my old compound, Ma'am cared for me. She made me strong. Strong enough to defend myself. Stronger than I ever dreamed I could be. But not strong enough to handle losing her.

Emotions shatter my numbness and careen through me, carelessly destroying everything in their path. Helplessness. Agony. Rage.

Life is fragile and fleeting.

And cruel.

* * *

My body is drained of feeling when I open the plastic case that Ryan brought. Inside is a skinny white stick, about the size of a pen. I hold the stick between my legs and pee. When I wipe myself, there are no signs of blood, but I don't feel even a hint of relief.

With trembling hands, I place the stick into the sink basin. Ten and I stare at it as little blue numbers on the side count down: 00:09, 00:08, 00:07, 00:06, 00:05, 00:04, 00:03, 00:02...

And then the timer disappears.

And words appear: "Pregnant. Five weeks. Fetal Gender: Female."

* * *

The recreation room is deserted except for Ryan, who sits facing the dark, empty movie screen. Ten and I join him on the couch, and I pass the little plastic case—in which I resealed the pregnancy test stick—from my hand to his. Ryan surreptitiously tucks it into his pocket and then looks into my eyes, reading them. My heart hammers against my ribs.

Ryan sighs. "How many weeks?"

"Five." *I'm five weeks pregnant.*

"Are you still bleeding?" Ryan asks me.

"No."

He rises to his feet. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?" Ten asks.

"Someplace where we can talk," Ryan says.

He leads us down the hallway and scans open a door that I've never seen opened before. Ryan taps on the light on the other side, revealing a room that is half the size of my quarters. Everything within it is black: the walls, floor, ceiling, two chairs, desk, sink, and toilet.

Ryan gestures for Ten and me to sit on the chairs, then he leans against the desk and looks only at me. "If your true identity is revealed, your life as you know it will end. Permanently. Yours. And your twin's." He looks at

Ten. “And anyone who knew of this.” Ryan opens his chest pocket and removes a tiny red pill. He hands it to me. “This medication will cause your body to release the developing fetus now.”

My breath catches in my chest. “It would kill the baby?”

“Your next medical evaluation is in one week,” he says. “If you do nothing, they will discover your pregnancy during your scan.”

“What would they do to the baby?” I ask him.

“I’m not sure. This has never happened before. I think the most likely scenario is that they would terminate your pregnancy.” He presses his lips together and then he continues, “Afterward, they would send you away.”

“Away where?” I ask.

“There’s a special compound for those who are culled from the population. It’s where they send the people from your old compound who go off to ‘isolation’ but never return,” Ryan says. “They also transfer some eighteen-year-olds there on Assignment Day—individuals who are deemed unsuitable to become productive members of adult society for whatever reason.”

My mind flashes to the two missing people from our warrior class. “That’s where they sent Eight and Twenty-five?”

“Yes,” Ryan says.

“What happens to the people there?” I ask.

“They live out the rest of their lives in individual domiciles, without any human contact.”

My insides shudder in horror. I can’t imagine a life without people. It would be worse than death.

“What would they do to Six and Ten?” I ask.

“Everyone who knew your secret would be sent away,” he says.

“What about you?” I ask Ryan.

“If my involvement is revealed, my punishment will be identical,” he says. “Unless I divulge your secret immediately. Which I will not.”

If it were only me at risk, I would insist that Ryan disclose my secret, and I would accept the consequences. But it isn't just my life at stake here. It's my sister's. Ten's. And the life of a baby who, deep down inside, I've wanted with all my heart, ever since the very first moment that I quietly, privately considered the possibility that Ten and I could be paired.

I stare at the little red pill in my hand. "You want me to take this pill?" I ask Ryan.

"I want you to make your own choice." He puts his hand on my shoulder. "Let me know what you decide."

I zip the pill into my chest pocket, and Ten and I follow Ryan out of the room.

Ryan tells us to go back to our quarters. Ten comes with me to mine, and we fall into each other's arms, holding onto one another fiercely.

According to the message system, all activities are cancelled again today, however in forty minutes, there will be a meeting to discuss the "recent incident." I don't want to go to that meeting. The attack is in the past. Its outcome can't be changed. Lives have been lost. And there is nothing that can be said or done to change that.

And now even more lives are in danger because of decisions I made. Decisions I can't undo. The damage has yet to come, but I don't see any way to prevent it. Protecting everyone seems impossible.

"We could try to escape," Ten whispers.

I shake my head. "We'd never get past all those soldiers guarding the exit. And even if we did, we'd be living among the Outsiders. That would be like trying to live in a war."

"What do you think we should do?" he asks.

Wrapped in Ten's arms, I struggle to come up with a better solution, but my thoughts become so jumbled that they tie up in thick knots.

By the time the message system notifies us to report to the meeting, Ten's idea and the little red pill are our only options.

* * *

Over a hundred black-jumpsuited soldiers line the hallway and stairs that lead to the underwater classroom. They stand as stiff as deactivated robots as Ten and I walk past them.

Once we're inside the classroom, we are directed to sit in the first row of chairs, where the other warriors—with the exception of Thirteen—are already seated. As we take our seats, some of the warriors acknowledge Ten and me with a hint of relief on their anxious faces. *They must know that Ten and I were in the drone that was attacked.* Twelve glances at me and then Ten, but his expression is blank.

A door on the opposite side of the classroom slides open. Soldiers stream through the doorway and head up the aisles. As I take in their solemn faces, my mouth falls open in shock. *I recognize them. From years ago.* I once watched every one of them enter the Transport Chamber back home, back when I thought that doing so meant going off to die. *These people are our former warriors.*

Two days ago, when the commander told us that we weren't going to be sacrificed in The War, a part of me didn't believe him. Then the attack happened, and I was left even less certain of my safety. But now I see with my own eyes that the warriors who came here before us are absolutely, undeniably *alive*.

A blond woman about the age of my parents, who looks vaguely familiar, steps up to the microphone. The oppressive silence that fills the room is broken when she begins to speak, "For those of you who don't know me, my name is Tracy Edwards, Warrior Representative of The United States of America, West Coast Division. As you may be aware, less than forty-eight hours ago, one of our transportation drones was ambushed. Two lives were lost and other individuals sustained significant injuries. This type of occurrence is unacceptable. We are in the process of studying the

circumstances surrounding the attack in excruciating detail. I give you my word that every possible step will be taken to ensure that this never happens again.

“We will discuss the incident at length very shortly. First, however, I feel that it is imperative to carry out the original purpose of today’s meeting: to introduce our newest warriors to our mission.” She gestures toward those of us in the first row. “It feels like only yesterday that I was in your position. Sitting here as a brand-new warrior, I wondered what job could possibly be important enough to justify leaving behind my family, my friends, and the only life I’d ever known. I am certain that you are contemplating the same question right now, especially in light of recent events.” She inhales. “Well, we are about to show you why you are here.”

Half a dozen warriors file down either side of the classroom and then stand behind Edwards, facing us. One by one, they step forward and speak. As they do, lifelike three-dimensional images appear beside them, illustrating what they say. One woman describes how she helped transform dying forests into thriving communities of plants and animals. Another woman designed handheld weapons that temporarily incapacitate—rather than permanently damage or kill—their targets. An older man tells how he and his team developed a medication to cure a type of cancer. When the man says the name of his medication, W22 147, I feel as if my heart leaps into my throat.

When I was twelve years old and I developed my brain cancer, I took W22 147—crushed up in a spoonful of peach puree—every day for two weeks. That medicine saved my life. *The warriors saved my life.*

Suddenly, I understand what it really means to be a warrior.

Being a warrior isn’t about destroying life. It is about preserving it.

For the first time ever, I *want* to be a warrior. More than anything I’ve ever wanted to be.

But I can't be a warrior if I'm pregnant. And as long as I am pregnant, I am a danger to my friends and my family. If my secret is revealed, all of our lives will be destroyed.

I stare at the warriors who stand before me, wishing they could help me solve *this* problem, wishing they could help me find a solution that saves the lives of everyone I love.

There must be an answer.

My mind searches, grasps, reaches ...

And then, I see it.

In the faces of my fellow warriors.

There is a way to spare my baby without sacrificing anyone at all. But to do so, I need to do something that no warrior has ever done.

I need to go back home.

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WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2

1022

“Impossible,” Ryan says after I finish explaining my plan to him and Ten in the little black room.

I sink down onto a chair, frustrated that Ryan dismissed my idea before he seemed to fully consider it. “*Why* is it impossible?”

“Entering or exiting your old compound without authorization is like breaking into a maximum-security prison,” Ryan explains.

“A what?” Ten asks.

Ryan exhales. “What I’m saying is, it’s nearly impossible.”

“Wait.” A hesitant smile creeps onto my face. “You just said it’s *nearly* impossible. That means it *is* possible.”

Ryan shakes his head. “It’s much too dangerous.”

“But this plan has the potential to save *everyone*,” I say.

Ryan sighs and walks to door. He stands inches away from it. Staring at it. “You’re talking about successfully doing the nearly impossible ... four consecutive times.”

I am. My plan is to go back to my old compound and switch chips with Six. She’ll come here and I’ll stay there until my baby is born. Then we’ll switch back. In order to accomplish that, I’ll need to get into the compound unnoticed. And Six will need to get out. Nine months later, Six will need to get in again. And I’ll need to get out.

“It *could* work,” Ten says.

“It *could*.” Ryan turns to us. “But there are so many ways that this could go wrong. And if we fail just once ...”

“Do you have a better plan?” I ask Ryan. “A plan that, if successfully accomplished, leaves everyone safe and alive?”

Ryan looks down. “No.”

“So we agree on my plan then?” I ask, hopeful.

“Yes,” Ten says with determination.

“All right,” Ryan says, his eyes remaining focused on the ground. “But we’ll need one more person.”

“Why?” I ask.

“I think the best way to get you in and out of the compounds unnoticed is to conceal you inside an aerial transport drone,” Ryan says. “But if we want to use a drone, we’ll need a pilot.”

“Don’t the drones fly themselves?” Ten asks.

“I can’t send Murphy alone. I’m going to have to travel with her, and all drone travel involving human passengers requires an authorized human pilot to be on board, just in case,” Ryan explains. “Only soldiers have that authorization. We need a soldier.”

Instantly, I know who I would choose.

But she could say no. Most people would.

* * *

I message Jackie and ask her to meet me at the little black room. She shows up less than a minute later. Ryan and Ten stay outside the room, and I lead Jackie inside. I gesture to one of the chairs, and she sits on the very edge of the seat. I didn’t indicate in my message the importance of what I was going to discuss with her, but she seems to sense it.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

“This is going to sound crazy,” I say as I take a seat on the other chair. “I’ll understand if you say no.”

She leans forward. "Okay."

"I need to break into my old compound," I say.

Her forehead creases. "Why?"

"I can't say." I've already decided not to tell Jackie my secret. It's too risky, both for her and for me.

"You're right. That does sound crazy." She leans back in the chair. "So why are you telling me this?"

I inhale. "I need your help."

"I've never been to your old compound, Murphy," she says. "I don't even know where it is."

"Ryan does. And he's coming with me. But we need a pilot."

Jackie's eyes look serious, and a little scared. "So you want me to help you break into a classified government compound. And you won't tell me why."

When she says it like that, it sounds absolutely ridiculous. No one would agree to that plan.

Jackie bites her lower lip. "I'm in."

I stare at her, incredulous. "Really?"

"Yeah," she says.

"This is dangerous, Jackie," I say, even though I know I'm stating the obvious.

She cocks her head. "I kinda figured that based on the mission overview you provided."

"Then why are you saying yes?" I ask.

"Because of who you are," she says.

My chest swells painfully with guilt. I'm not who Jackie thinks I am. I am not a *real* warrior. I'm not special. I was not chosen by the Decision Makers to be here. I have no idea if I have what it takes to solve problems that save billions of lives. I am here merely because I switched places with my sister.

“You have no idea who I am,” I say.

She stares hard into my eyes. “When your life was in imminent danger, you put yourself at risk to help me, even though you barely knew me. That’s the kind of person you are. The kind who marches into danger to help others.” She smiles. “That’s the kind of person I am too.”

* * *

In the bare little room, the details of our plan come together. Ryan explains that, a few times per month, an aerial drone travels from the warrior compound to my former compound to deliver supplies. Traveling inside that drone would allow me to pass undetected through numerous layers of security at both compounds. The next reprovisioning run is this Friday. We decide to carry out our mission then.

Ryan, Jackie, Ten, and I chart out our mission in painstaking detail, including planning for multiple worst-case scenarios. By the time Friday evening arrives, I feel more prepared for this than I have for anything in my entire life, and yet, instead of confidence, I feel terror. If we fail, the consequences for the people who I love will be horrific.

After we review our plan one final time, Ryan glances at his navigator, and then he says, “We still have a few hours left. Let’s try to get some rest.”

Ten and I go back to my quarters, where we spend those final hours in each other’s arms, talking softly. At some point, we lose control. Quietly. Instinctually. As if we’re halfway between dreaming and being awake.

Twenty minutes before our mission is set to begin, Ten puts his clothes back on, presses his lips to mine one final time, and then heads off to the drone hangar to meet Ryan and Jackie, leaving me to make my final preparations. My mind runs over and over our plan as I shower, dress, and carefully secure my hair into a neat bun.

And then I take the red pill from my chest pocket.

I stare at it, awed by the power it holds. If I let it.

But I want my baby to live. Even if I'll never see her grow from infant to child to adult. Even if I can't be part of her life, I want her to have a life. Or at least a chance.

I release the pill from my hand and it tumbles into the toilet, hitting the bottom of the bowl with a tiny metallic clink. I activate the flush sensor, and air sucks the pill away.

I take one final look in the mirror and then head into the deserted hallway, my heart racing as the worst-case scenarios of our mission play out in my head.

"Psst," someone says from behind me.

My stomach tightens. Without looking, I know the voice belongs to Twelve.

"Where are you heading?" he demands.

"Go away, Howard," I say in a low voice, as I continue walking. I don't have any time to waste here.

He grabs my wrist and spins me around. "I asked you a simple question."

I pull myself free from Twelve's grip and stare at him, trying to determine his intentions. I'm fairly certain that the quickest way to make him go away is to offer a response and so I say, "I'm going to do something in honor of my instructor." That's not entirely untrue. Although she would never approve of me putting myself in danger, I think Ma'am would be proud of me for undertaking this mission.

Twelve shakes his head with disgust. "Good riddance to that vile woman."

Before I think, I seize Twelve's arm, twist it behind his back, and slam him to the ground, face first. I land on top of him and press his cheek to the floor with my free hand. He moans and tries to right himself, and I push harder. I want to hurt him. I want him to feel the pain of what he just said. "Don't you *ever* mention my instructor again," I say through clenched teeth.

“Fine,” he says, spitting out the word as if it repulses him.

“Are you going to leave me alone now?” I ask.

“Yes,” he sneers.

I release him, jump to my feet, and continue down the hallway. Twelve doesn't follow me. But when I glance back, I see him standing next to an emergency call button. He places his hand over it. I freeze. If he activates the button, soldiers will be summoned, thwarting my attempt to escape from the compound tonight. Twelve watches me for a moment, and then, without pushing the button, he barrels toward me. I turn away from him and run.

I can't risk revealing my actual destination, and so I bolt in a different direction, choosing the most mazelike corridors. After a few turns, I no longer hear Twelve's heavy footsteps. I wait a few minutes, and then I head to the drone hangar, walking fast. It's already past our agreed-upon meeting time. I hope we haven't missed our departure window.

Suddenly, Twelve rounds the corner ahead of me. With one quick move, he pushes me up against a wall, shoving his body against mine. I jam my knee toward his groin, but he twists away just before I make contact. I struggle against him, but he is too strong to overpower.

“I apologize for what I said about your instructor,” he says. “I'll make it up to you.”

“You could start by letting me go,” I say, seething.

“I'd like to show you how to mate,” he says with a smile that makes my body recoil in disgust. “It isn't anything like they told us,” he adds. “It feels really amazing.”

His hand moves over the curve of my hip. I feel his hot breath on my cheek. Anger burns my skin. And then I have an idea.

“Go ahead then,” I say, keeping my voice steady, “show me.”

Shock registers in Twelve's eyes. His face flushes. “We have to take off our clothes.”

I look into his eyes, feigning uncertainty, and then I say, “All right, let’s go where we can have some privacy.”

Twelve’s lips curl into something halfway between a smirk and a smile. His grip loosens. “Okay.”

Twelve follows me into the pool room and scans the door closed behind us. I continue walking, careful to keep him in my peripheral vision.

Once I’m in the middle of the room, I turn to face Twelve, but I wait until he is close to me before I slowly start unzipping my jumpsuit. His eyes look into mine. I watch them. Reading them. Knowing that eventually they will betray him, giving me an opportunity to attack. When my zipper is halfway down my chest, Twelve’s gaze shifts to my body. I lunge forward, wrap my arms around him, and leap into the center of the pool, taking Twelve with me. As soon as we’re submerged, I kick away from him and swim off as fast as I can. In seconds, I reach the edge of the pool and propel myself out.

When I glance behind me, Twelve is still in the center of the pool. His head is tilted back. His mouth is open and gasping for air. His arms flail out to the sides wildly. He’s barely keeping his face above the surface.

Twelve isn’t a strong swimmer. I knew the water would slow him down, allowing me a head start to make my escape, but I didn’t think it would cause him to panic like this. Then again, until now, he’s only been in the water with his instructor nearby. Maybe now, on his own, he can’t handle it.

But what if his panic is just an act?

This could be my only chance to get away.

Twelve’s face sinks down into the dark water. I can’t see him at all now. I step back from the edge of the pool. He could surface anywhere, at any moment, and attack me. But seconds pass and he doesn’t. The seconds turn into a minute. And then two. He can’t possibly hold his breath that long.

He's going to drown.

I sprint to the wall and grab the long metal hook mounted there. I sink the end into the water, searching for Twelve.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

And then I feel the weight of a body. I ease it toward the surface.

Quiet gives way to the sounds of coughing and retching as Twelve's face moves above the water. I drag him to the side of the pool and he latches onto the edge desperately, vomiting a stomachful of water onto the pool room floor.

I slip the hook out from under him and resecure it to the wall, then I look into Twelve's red eyes. The eyes of the boy who has hurt me so very many times.

"I'm leaving now," I say.

Still coughing, Twelve nods weakly.

But I can't leave him like this. I seriously doubt that he has the energy to climb out of the pool without assistance, and he probably inhaled some water. He could need medical attention. Twelve won't be safe if I leave him here alone. And so I do something I'd hoped to avoid. Something that will almost certainly ruin my chance to escape the compound tonight. I press the emergency call button to summon the security soldiers.

And then I run.

I don't stop until I arrive, breathless, at the drone hangar. I knock and Ryan opens the door to the cavernous room. Inside are aerial drones like the ones that brought us back to the warrior compound after we were attacked by the Outsiders. Now, the drones sit deathly still.

Ryan leads me toward them at a brisk pace. "We have to get going," he says. "We need to be airborne within the next six minutes." He eyes my undone bun; water drips from it. "What happened to you?"

I tell him everything, and then I say, “I guess we need to abandon tonight’s mission.”

Ryan shakes his head. “This is the last flight before your medical evaluation. It’s our only chance.”

“What if Twelve tells the soldiers what happened?” I ask.

“They’d never believe you attacked him without sufficient provocation,” Ryan says.

“But if they check the security cameras—”

Ryan stops beside one of the drones. “Like your former compound, security *outside* our walls is serious. Security *inside* is a joke,” he says. “I think we should proceed.”

I look into his eyes. I trust them. I trust him. “Okay.”

Ryan leads me into the aerial drone. Jackie is in the pilot’s seat, reviewing navigation screens. Ten is sitting in a passenger seat, but he jumps to his feet when I enter. I nod to Jackie, sink down into a seat next to Ten, and get to work resecuring my hair.

Ten’s forehead creases. “You okay?” he asks me.

As I tell him what happened with Twelve, he listens closely, his jaw clenched.

“He got what he deserved,” he says when I am through.

“I guess,” I say. And then I think of Six. Of what she’ll face when she arrives here. Twelve looked almost grateful, staring up at me from the edge of the pool, but I know that I can’t trust him. “Twelve might try to get revenge. Please keep an eye on him.”

Ten nods. “I will.”

“We all will,” Ryan says, buckling himself into a nearby seat.

“Initiating takeoff,” Jackie announces.

The hangar ceiling opens, and our drone rises into the night sky. We hover over the dark ocean for a moment before we head toward the green light that illuminates the beach.

Ryan releases his harness and heads toward the rear of the drone. A dozen black terrestrial drones—exactly like the one Ten and I saw emerge from the wall of the restricted hallway back home—are lined up by the back door. They still look menacing, even though I now know they’re just harmless delivery drones.

“Hanson, I need you over here,” Ryan says.

Ten joins Ryan, and they scan open the door of one of the delivery drones with Ten’s warrior necklace. They rearrange the boxes in the drone’s storage compartment, leaving a large empty space big enough for me to fit into.

I lean my head back and look through the transparent ceiling above us, staring at the vast sky. A few minutes later, Ten and Ryan return to their seats and resecure their harnesses.

“There are so many more stars here than back home,” I murmur, still looking up at the sky.

“*These* stars are different,” Ryan says. “The stars above us now are tremendous balls of heat floating far away in outer space. The ones in your old compound are just dots of light on a screen. I spent countless hours staring up at those dots, wondering what they were.”

“When did you do that?” Ten asks.

“When I was a child,” Ryan says.

“When you were a *child* ...?” I start. And then I realize what Ryan has just revealed to us. “You grew up in our compound?”

Ryan nods and says very softly, as if he’s speaking only to me, “My name was One Thousand Four Hundred Seventy-two.”

I never called my parents by their full names, but of course, I know their names. My mom is One Thousand Four Hundred Sixty-six. My dad is One Thousand Four Hundred *Seventy-one*.

“You were born just after my dad,” I say to Ryan.

“Fifty-six seconds after,” he says. “Your dad and I are twins. Fraternal, of course. We hardly even look related.”

My dad never mentioned that he had a brother who was sent above the sky. But when I look into Ryan’s eyes, I am certain that this is true.

“You’re her uncle?” Ten asks, incredulous.

“I wasn’t supposed to disclose that to either of you yet,” Ryan says. “But ...”

I understand why he told me now. “I’ll make sure my dad knows that you’re okay.”

Ryan’s face relaxes, as if a burden has been lifted from him. “Thank you, Murphy.”

“So you were a warrior once?” Ten asks quietly.

Ryan nods. “I specialized in military operations, working closely with the faculty at National War College. When I completed my eighteen years of warrior service, I chose to stay on as an instructor.”

“Are all of the instructors former warriors?” I ask.

“Just a few of them,” Ryan says.

“What about Ma’am?” I ask.

Ryan inhales deeply. “When the commander told you about The Great Warrior Massacre, he mentioned that there was only one survivor. What he didn’t tell you was that she was among us.” He swallows. “Her warrior name was Anna. But you knew her as Ma’am.”

Instantly, so much about Ma’am makes sense. From the moment we met, Ma’am was preparing me for a battle that most people never thought I’d have to fight. Maybe she actually believed that I might someday need my training. The unthinkable had happened to her; maybe she thought it could happen to me. Maybe that is why she was so tough on me. Because she believed that my life might one day depend on how well she taught me.

Ryan glances out the window and his face tenses. “We’re here,” he says quietly.

The ground below us is crisscrossed with numerous wide black paths lined by hundreds of tiny blue lights. “What are all those black paths for?” I ask.

“They’re runways,” Ryan says, and then he explains, “where airplanes come in for a landing.” He gestures out another window, to a massive black drone—fifty times larger than the one we’re flying in—sitting on one of the paths. “Your old compound shakes when the big ones land.”

“The shaking ... The War ... was just *drones* landing?” I ask, my voice trembling with disbelief.

Ryan nods.

“People should be told the truth,” I say.

Ryan smiles. “That’s exactly the kind of thinking we need from the warriors.”

“No one’s ever suggested that?” I ask him.

“The past warriors were less ... rebellious,” he says. “Things seem to be changing with each generation. For the good, I think.”

I turn back to the window, trying to refocus on our mission. “Where’s our old compound?” I ask.

Ryan points to a garden nestled between two runways. “There.”

I stare at where he points. Ryan told us during our mission prep that the compound is hidden under the ground. There are five ways to access it: two elevators, two stairwells, and one ladder. I guess I expected to see something at the access points. Some sign that the compound exists, but I see nothing but grass and trees. It’s hard to believe that below that is the place where I spent the first eighteen years of my life. My former home.

Ryan unfastens my harness. “Ready?” he asks me.

“Yes,” I say, trying to sound strong and confident, but feeling completely the opposite.

I wrap my arms around Ryan, *my uncle*. Then I embrace Jackie. Finally, I remove Six’s warrior necklace and give it to Ten. And then I cling

to him, as if I'm clinging to life itself. We don't cry. I know he is trying to be brave for me, like I am for him.

"It's time," Ryan says gently.

I release Ten, and he and Ryan lead me to the open delivery drone. I squeeze myself into the spot that I watched them clear in its storage compartment. Ten kneels beside me and points to a tiny black box inside the drone's doorframe.

"The scanner is right there," he says, his voice controlled and certain. "It should activate if you get my chip close to it. But if the door won't scan open, you can unlock it manually by raising this latch." He touches a curved metal bar below the scanner. "Let's test it out. I'm going to close the door, then you lift the latch."

Ten shuts the door, plunging me into complete darkness. I have to wiggle the skinny metal latch back and forth a bit to get it to slide up, but when I finally lift it, the door pops open, and I am rewarded with a view of Ten's face.

Ten passes me his warrior necklace, and our hands touch for one final fleeting moment. "Goodnight, Murphy," he says so softly that I can barely hear the pain beneath his words. He tries to force a smile, but he fails. His strong exterior cracks and his eyes fill with tears.

"Goodnight, Hanson," I whisper, unable to hold back my own tears any longer.

Ryan moves in and grips my arm tightly, pulling my focus back to the mission. "I'll see you on Warrior Departure Day," he says as if there is no doubt that we will see each other again.

I nod, rather than speak. I don't want to risk anyone hearing the uncertainty that might seep into my voice if I say anything in response.

I take one last look at Ryan and Jackie ... and Ten ... before the drone door closes again and everything goes black.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 4
1932

Ryan told me what to expect next. The delivery drone will transport me into an elevator that will carry me to a passageway that leads into the same drone closet that Ten and I discovered when we explored the restricted hallways. I will disembark in the drone closet—before the drone heads to the area where it will drop off its packages. Fifty minutes later, Six and I will meet up with the drones in the drone closet, and I will help her hide inside one of them before they head back to the aerial drone above us.

My heart pounds as my drone bumps over uneven ground, jostling me back and forth and up and down. We're moving. We're moving. We're moving. We're moving. Stop. *We've arrived at the elevator.* A moment later, we travel forward again, much less turbulently. We're moving. We're moving. Stop. *We're inside the elevator.* The drone shakes. Shake. Shake. Shake. Shake. Shake. Stop. *The elevator has arrived at the passageway.* We're moving. We're moving. We're moving. We're moving. We're moving. We're moving. Stop. *We're in the drone closet.* At least I hope so.

With trembling fingers, I locate the drone's door scanner and run Ten's necklace over it. The door pops open, revealing a familiar space: the drone closet. I exhale with relief.

Just a few months ago, I was in this closet with Ten. I can almost sense his presence here now, but instead of comforting me, it makes my eyes blur

with tears. I hang Ten's warrior necklace around my neck, wipe my eyes dry, and remind myself to focus on the mission.

Ryan told me to set the timer on my navigator for fifty-five minutes and start it when my delivery drone first began moving. I check my navigator. The timer is counting down. *Forty-nine minutes to go.* I climb out of the drone and shut its door. Then I scan myself into the restricted hallway. The hallway is, as usual, empty.

In order to enter the public part of the compound, I need to be dressed in a blue jumpsuit—like the other adults—rather than the black warrior one that I wear now, and so I head to my next destination: the laundry room.

When I scan open the laundry room door, every machine is operating. I check each drying machine, and each time my stomach sinks. White jumpsuits. White jumpsuits. White jumpsuits. *Children's jumpsuits.* Anxiously, I move to the washing machines. White jumpsuits. White jumpsuits. White jumpsuits.

Not finding a blue jumpsuit was one of Ryan's worst-case scenarios. Our Plan B is for me to wear a white one. Although anyone who knows me well will instantly realize that I am wearing the wrong colored clothes, most people will just assume that I'm still a white-jumpsuited child. Plan B is far from ideal though. The people I'm heading to see will notice the error at once.

I swallow back my unease and grab a jumpsuit from one of the drying machines. *Too small.* Another one. *Much too small.* Another one. *Close enough.* I pull it on.

I touch my hair to make sure it's still secured in a relatively-neat bun, and then I walk through the dimly-lit restricted hallways, heading to the place where they exit into the public portion of our compound, trying to ignore the ache in my chest from the childhood memories stirring inside me.

At the main door, I scan Ten's warrior necklace.

The red light flashes.

I scan it again.

Red light. *I need an access code.*

We planned for this. Before we left, Ten programmed my navigator to enable it to obtain access codes, just like his. I switch my navigator into Ten's code-capture mode and run it over the scanner. A long, promising-looking string of letters and numbers appears on the screen. I transfer the code to Ten's warrior necklace, raise the necklace to the scanner, and anxiously hold my breath.

The red light turns green and the door slides open. Blinding white light stings my eyes, forcing me to squint them shut. I give myself a second to let my eyes adjust, then I race through the hallways, toward my family's domicile, feeling as if I'm sprinting through a vivid dream. Everything seems real but unreal at the same time.

My gait slows as I approach my former home. I tap lightly at the entrance. A moment later, my dad opens the door. He looks at my face and then my jumpsuit. His brow immediately furrows with concern.

"Seven, is everything all right?" he asks. Although he calls me by my real name, it's clear by his reaction that he doesn't realize that he hasn't seen me in months.

"I'm fine, Dad," I say.

He leads me inside the domicile. As soon as the door is closed, I wrap my arms around him, drawing strength that I so desperately need. When I let go of him, he stares into my eyes. And something in his expression changes.

"You came back from The War," he breathes. "How?"

I'm not sure how he figured out who I am, but he certainly knows, and so I swallow and explain, "There isn't a war. Well, not exactly. I'll tell you and Mom all about it, but I need you to message Six and have her come here right away. I don't have much time."

After he sends a message with his navigator, he turns back to me. “I’ll get your mother,” he says, his voice barely there.

My dad goes to his capsule. I walk to the window and deopacify it, then I sit on the cold floor, take a breath, and look up at the dark sky, trying to steady the trembling inside me. I check my navigator. *Thirty-eight minutes.*

An instant later, my mom sits down on the floor beside me and looks into my shiny eyes in my reflection in the window. Silently, she begins to cry, pulling me to her.

I allow myself a moment in her arms before I whisper the truth to my parents—or at least, the truth as I know it. About Up There. And the real purpose of the warriors. And that my switch with Six is at risk of being discovered because I’m pregnant.

“How do you know you’re pregnant?” my mom asks.

“I had some bleeding when I went to the bathroom, and so I did a pregnancy test. It said that I was five weeks along, and that the baby was a girl—”

“How much bleeding did you have?” my mom asks, her eyes appear concerned.

“Just a little bit. It’s stopped now.”

She jumps to her feet and rushes to the lavatory. A moment later, she returns with a pen-sized medical device that I recognize as a handheld imager.

“Does pregnancy normally cause bleeding?” I ask, worried by her reaction.

“Sometimes there can be a small amount of blood ...” she says as she opacifies our gathering room window. Her hands are shaking.

My heart pounding, I unzip my two jumpsuits and expose my lower belly. My mom touches the smooth, cold tip of the imager to my skin. At first, the picture above it is fuzzy, but then, inside a pool of black, I see

something the size of a pea. Mom zooms in on ... my baby. Her head. Her arms. Her legs. Inside the tiny body, I see a dot that pulsates rhythmically. And I hear the quick staccato whoosh of a heartbeat.

My mom smiles, the relief spreading across her face like sunshine. "She looks absolutely perfect."

My dad, who had averted his eyes when I started unzipping my jumpsuits, finally looks at the image. He smiles with pure awe. "I can't believe that's my grandchild!"

And then I tell my parents about my plan.

I'm almost finished when there's a buzz indicating that someone is outside the domicile entrance. The message system tells us that it is Two Thousand Seven, but of course that isn't true. I zip up my jumpsuits as my dad goes to answer the door.

He comes back into the gathering room ... with Six.

Her jaw drops as she gazes at me in shock. Tears fill her eyes. "You came back!"

I throw my arms around her. When we release each other, we're both crying. We sit on the gathering room floor and I tell her about the warrior program, and my pregnancy, and my plan.

"It is dangerous above the sky," I finish, "but there are people who will do everything in their power to keep you safe until they can bring you home."

Six shakes her head. "No."

I freeze. "No *what?*"

"I just ... I can't do it." Six jumps to her feet and races to the domicile exit, but since she doesn't live here anymore, she can't scan the door open. "Mom, Dad, let me out!" she screams frantically.

"I'll talk to her," my mom says, rushing past me.

I sit on the couch and bury my head in my hands. My dad sits next to me. Somehow, that comforts me even though I can't imagine how anything

can comfort me now. I didn't think there was even the slightest chance that, once I told her the truth about everything, Six would say no.

Twenty-two minutes.

I thought I'd have months to give Ryan's message to my dad, but now I have only minutes.

I meet my dad's gaze. "Your brother wanted me to tell you that he's okay."

"What?" he asks, looking bewildered.

"Your twin," I say. "Seventy-two."

"Seventy-two is alive?" he asks. His eyes beg for me to confirm it.

When I nod, I see a deep sorrow lift from my dad's face, one that I never realized was there until I saw it disappear before my eyes.

"Uncle Seventy-two has been taking good care of me," I say. And then I ask, "Why didn't you ever tell us about him?"

"Losing my brother was the worst fate I'd ever endured. I didn't want to introduce that possibility to you. The idea that you could lose your twin to The War." He turns away. "When your sister was chosen as a warrior it was far worse than losing my brother, because this time, I knew the greatest pain would fall on the two of you."

His words remind me of a question that I didn't ask earlier. "How did you know that Six and I switched places?" I ask him.

"Just before Warrior Departure, when we said our final goodbyes, *you* initiated the embrace," he says. "Six would never be so bold as to do that, even under those circumstances. I couldn't say anything with all the other families around. Later, when I told your mother what I suspected, she confirmed it."

"And so when I embraced you tonight ..." I start.

"I knew it was you," he finishes.

There is a loud sob from the entryway. My dad is about to go investigate when a bedroom door slides open. Forty-one jumps from his

capsule and pads toward us.

He stares at me. “Seven?”

“What’s wrong, Forty-one?” my dad asks, sounding overly chipper.

“I heard someone crying,” Forty-one says. He eyes my clothes and my heart races. “Why are you wearing a *white* jumpsuit?” he asks.

Before I can offer a response, there’s another sob from the entryway.

Forty-one bounds toward the source of the sound. “Who is that?”

I leap from the couch. “Forty-one, no!”

But it’s too late. Forty-one is gazing down the entryway at my mom ... *and Six*. He looks from Six to me and back again. Six uses the distraction to grab our mom’s arm and scan it. The door opens and Six bursts out into the hallway. My mom rushes after her. My dad rushes after them.

Forty-one turns to me. “Are you Six or Seven?”

“I’m Seven,” I say.

“How did you get back from The War?” he asks.

“Six went to The War,” I correct him.

“No,” he says, “you traded chips with her, so you could go.”

He knows. “How do you know that?”

“The night before Warrior Departure, you woke me up and we went on an adventure. You were pretending to be Six, but I knew it was you. Six would never go exploring in restricted areas or climb pipes or sit on The Edge. You were wearing Six’s clothes and your arm opened our domicile, so I figured you switched chips.”

“How come you didn’t tell me that?” I ask.

“I thought it was a very big secret,” he says. “The kind we mustn’t say out loud.”

“You were right,” I say, pulling Forty-one into my arms.

“But the secret is over now, right?” he asks me, his voice muffled by our embrace.

I release him and look into his eyes. “No, it’s still a very dangerous secret. You must never tell anyone else. Okay?”

His expression turns serious, probably reflecting my own. “Okay.”

I check my navigator. *Seventeen minutes.*

If Six isn’t going to switch with me, I must go back to the warrior compound. I need to get to the drone closet. But with Six outside in the hallway, it is risky for me to leave my family’s domicile. Each of us can safely be seen here on our own, but if we are spotted together—

“What’s it like above the sky?” Forty-one asks me.

I wish I could tell him all about Up There, but there isn’t enough time. “It’s a little like a fairy tale, and a little like a war.”

“I want to see it,” he says, his eyes wide with curiosity.

“Maybe you will someday.” Now that I know the true purpose of the warriors, I think I understand how they’re selected. The Decision Makers choose people who they think can solve problems that don’t seem to have a solution. People who are able to discover answers that have never been considered. People who are willing to believe that the impossible might be possible. I think Forty-one would be an excellent warrior.

The domicile door slides open and my mom and dad come down the entryway—without Six. “We tried everything,” my mom says to me, shaking her head. “She’s just too afraid.”

“Too afraid about what?” Forty-one asks.

“Six and I were going to switch places again,” I say. “But we’re not now.”

My dad turns to me, his face tight. “You told him about switching—?”

“He already knew,” I say.

I check my navigator. *Fifteen minutes.*

I can’t risk missing the drone. “I need to go.”

“Where are you going?” Forty-one asks.

“I have to go back above the sky.”

Tears pool in his eyes. “Why?”

“To keep our family safe.”

“When are you coming back?” he asks, his voice breaking.

I swallow. “I don’t think I can come back again.”

“No, don’t go!” He wraps his arms around me, frantic. “Please ... please ... please don’t go!” he pleads. His little body trembles and sobs. The only other time I’ve seen him this upset was when he said goodbye to me right before Warrior Departure. I had thought he was crying for Six then. But now I know that he was crying for *me*. The way he is now.

“I’m so sorry, Forty-one,” I whisper.

I inhale, fighting the urge to fall apart, and pull my mom and dad into our final embrace. Then my mom takes an inconsolable Forty-one from my arms, and my dad walks me to the domicile door, his eyes brimming with tears.

“Tell my brother that I think of him every day,” he says to me.

I nod. “I will.”

He looks into my eyes. “I have never been more proud of you.” Those are the last words he spoke to me before Warrior Departure. I had thought then that he was proud of Six for being chosen to be a warrior. But he said those words *after* our embrace, when he knew I was Seven and not Six.

“Why are you so proud of me?” I ask him. “The Decision Makers didn’t choose me to be a warrior.”

He gives me the smallest and saddest of smiles. “Clearly, they made a mistake.”

My dad scans open the door. I take one final look at his heartbroken face, and then I race through the hallways, gathering strength to face what is about to come—not just tonight, but for the rest of my life.

Maybe Ten and I *can* live outside the warrior compound. If Ryan could get Ten and me here, he should be able to help us get there. Living among

the Outsiders will be extremely dangerous. But we've survived other dangers. Maybe we can survive that too.

I scan myself into the still-deserted restricted hallway and go to the laundry room. I remove my borrowed jumpsuit and drop it into a pool of swirling white. Then I scan myself into the hidden drone closet and slump down against the wall.

Five minutes.

I hear something in the hallway ... a child's voice.

"Seven?" *Forty-one?*

I jump up and scan open the drone closet. In the hallway, I see my family: *Forty-one*, my mom, my dad ... and *Six*.

Six looks into my eyes, more certain than I've ever seen her. "I'll do it, *Seven*. I'll go above the sky."

My heart leaps and falls at the same time. "There isn't enough time to switch chips," I say. "One of us needs to leave here in less than five minutes."

"We can try," my mom says. She holds up two small white boxes. Medical kits.

Hope surges inside me. I pull my family into the drone closet, sit on the floor, and push up my left sleeve. As my mom goes to work on *Six's* arm and my dad goes to work on mine, the closet wall reopens and the delivery drones begin to file into the room.

Forty-one stares up at the drones, looking impressed, and a bit frightened. "What are those?"

"They're warrior delivery drones," I answer. "They're harmless."

"They're so cool!" he says.

The first drone comes to a stop at the back wall of the drone closet and the wall slides open, revealing a corrugated passageway beyond. At the end of the passageway is a waiting elevator. This is the time when I'm supposed

to be scanning open one of the empty drones and helping Six climb inside it, but my dad is still searching for Six's chip in my forearm.

"We're not going to make it," Six says, her voice shaky.

I inhale, trying to keep still, as tearing pain shoots through my arm and my vision falters. "We only need to get my chip into you," I say. "Mom and Dad can put your chip into me after you're gone."

My navigator beeps, indicating that our time is up, but I already know that; I'm watching the last delivery drone enter the passageway. The wall begins to close behind it.

My mom takes a chip from my dad and pushes it into Six's arm. "Are we too late?" she asks, as she quickly glues Six's wound closed.

I leap up, feeling dizzy and seeing dancing spots of light all around me that I know aren't really there. "I can scan open that wall," I say. "As long as at least one of the drones is still in the passageway, I'll be able to get Six onboard."

Forty-one and my mom and dad turn away as Six and I exchange clothes, navigators, and necklaces. Then I grab Six's hand and race to the back wall of the drone closet. We scan it open and Six gasps.

Ahead of us is darkness. The corrugated hallway is gone. The drones must already be in the elevator. In a few minutes, they will arrive at the surface and make their way into the aerial drone. And then Ten, Ryan, and Jackie will stare at them, waiting for one of their doors to pop open. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting. They'll probably call out Six's name. Of course, she won't answer.

"What do we do now?" Six asks me, her hand still in mine.

Warm blood trickles from the incision in my forearm and drips onto the floor, making me feel lightheaded all over again. "Plan B," I say.

"What's Plan B?" Six asks, her voice strained.

I don't answer right away. Instead I turn to my mom. "First, I need a band-aid."

My mom applies a bandage over the wound on my forearm. She hasn't inserted Six's chip into me, but there isn't time right now. And besides, the pain of the insertion would likely make me feel even more lightheaded than I do now. And I can't afford to be lightheaded at all, not with what I'm about to do.

I turn to Six. "How are you at climbing?"

Her body tenses. "Climbing what?"

"That." I lean out into the darkness and point to the rungs of the ladder on the outside of our compound—the same ladder I climbed with Ten.

"Awesome! Can I do it too?" Forty-one asks.

"No!" everyone else says.

Six stares down into the blackness below. "How far is the drop?"

I don't know the answer for certain, but we're on the top level of the compound, and I assume the dark empty space extends to at least the bottom floor. Who knows how much further the drop is after that?

"I suggest you only look up." I pull two self-illuminating headbands from the pocket of her warrior jumpsuit.

Six shakes her head. "I can't climb that ladder."

I grab her hands and look into her eyes. "You are so much stronger than you realize. Don't let *anyone* ever tell you that you're not. Not even you," I say. These are Ma'am's words. She said them to me on my very first day as a warrior.

Six keeps her eyes focused on mine. She's truly scared. I can see that. But we don't have any time to waste. By now Ryan, Jackie, and Ten have realized that Plan A has failed. They will be initiating Plan B. According to the plan, they'll stall for time by reporting a minor technical problem with the aerial drone. They will say that they're going to run some tests. If they're not ready to leave within thirty minutes, security will send over soldiers to assist them. At that point, Plan B won't work, and we'll have to proceed to Plan C.

Plan C is aborting the mission. The aerial drone will depart, leaving both Six and me here until Ryan can arrange a rescue mission. But by that point, I will have been discovered to be missing from the warrior compound ...

Without a word, Six takes one of the headbands from my hand. She pulls it over her head, turns it on, and reaches out to the ladder. I glance back at the tear-filled eyes of Forty-one and the worried eyes of my mom and dad, set my navigator's timer for twenty-five minutes, and then follow Six into the darkness.

I have so much to tell her. I wish I had days to prepare her for what she's about to face, instead I have only minutes. "Ten is in the aerial drone, along with Ryan and Jackie," I call up to her. "Ryan and Ten know about our switch and my pregnancy, but Jackie doesn't. Ryan is Ten's instructor. My instructor, Ma'am ... she died in the attack a few days ago."

Six doesn't respond to me at all. She's climbing fast. But even from fifteen feet away, I can see that her entire body is shaking. The uppermost edge of our box catches the light of her headband and she climbs out of view. I ascend the final rungs of the ladder and find Six standing on top of our box, her mouth open wide.

She stamps her foot. Dust rises up around her shoe. "Our home is inside here?" she asks, incredulous.

I nod. It's still hard for me to believe it too.

Fifteen minutes.

I take Six's trembling hand and lead her forward. "We need to find the center of the box," I say. "There's a ladder there that leads to the surface."

As we walk, I look up, scanning the darkness with my light, and Six looks down, watching where we step.

"Ryan is dad's brother," I say. "They're fraternal twins."

"Dad has a twin?"

I nod and continue, “Dad wanted me to tell Ryan that he thinks of him every day. I won’t get the chance now so—”

“I’ll tell him,” she says.

There is so much more to say, but our time is almost up. “Is there anything I need to know about that Mom and Dad can’t tell me?”

“Pairs are supposed to mate twice per week,” she says. “Nine and I mate every Tuesday and Saturday night after dinner.”

Dread creeps through me. “Tomorrow’s Saturday.”

“Once they confirm that you’re pregnant, there won’t be a need for you to mate anymore,” Six says. “You can make an appointment with the obstetrics clinic in the morning.”

“I’ll do that.” I like Nine, but I’d rather not mate with him.

Six continues, “Three knows that we switched places. She figured it out the first time she saw me.” She wipes her eyes with her sleeve. “Tell her that I’m sorry I didn’t say goodbye.”

“I will.”

I hope we’ve covered the most important things. Ten and Ryan will help Six with the rest. And my family will help me. And so I ask a question that I don’t *need* the answer to, but I want to know the answer to this more than anything else right now, “What changed your mind about switching tonight?”

Six takes a long, slow breath. “When I found out I was going to be a warrior, I wrote you a letter apologizing for letting you down. But I never gave it to you,” she says. “Mom found it after you left and held onto it. She gave it back to me tonight. I opened it, not expecting to see anything but my own words, but at the bottom, there was a response in your handwriting. Do you remember what you wrote?”

I do. “You did not let me down.”

“You wrote that *after* we switched. After I agreed to let you go off to be subjected to my fate,” she says. “I *did* let you down. But I’m not going to

let you down again. I'm going to earn the words you wrote to me."

"You didn't let me down, Six. I chose to take your place. I wanted to be a warrior. I still do." As I say that final word, I spot the bottom of a ladder extending from the darkness above us.

Eight minutes.

I point to the ladder. "I think that's the way up."

"Okay," Six says, her forehead creased, but her voice strong.

She releases my hand, grabs hold of the ladder, and starts heading up. I climb behind her, my pulse throbbing in my ears.

"There should be a hatch at the top," I say.

"I see it." Six's light reveals the hatch that Ryan described. If all went according to Plan B, Ten and Ryan and Jackie are on the other side of the hatch, waiting for us.

"Do you see a scanner up there?" I ask Six.

"Yes." Six points to a small gray box with a faint red light on it. The scanner looks very, very old. Older than any scanner I've seen before.

I change her navigator into code-capture mode. "We need to retrieve an access code. Run your navigator over the scanner."

She does, but nothing appears on the navigator's screen.

"Try again," I say.

She does. Still, nothing appears.

She tries again. And again. My heart sinking more each time.

Four minutes.

We are so close. But unless we can open this hatch, our plan has failed. All of the lives we tried so hard to protect will be torn apart.

Six unzips one of the pockets on my jumpsuit and pulls something out: *Ten's cellular*. "Can we use this?" she asks.

"Where did you get that?" I say, taking it from her and turning it on.

"Forty-one said we might need it in order to get through the restricted door. It didn't fit in his little pocket so he asked me to hold it for him. It was

yours, wasn't it?"

"It was Ten's." I set the cellular to capture mode and raise it up to the scanner. In an instant, a string of numbers and letters pops up on the screen. I touch the cellular to Six's warrior necklace.

Transfer Complete.

I look into Six's frightened eyes. "When you scan your warrior necklace, the hatch should open. Ten, Ryan, and Jackie should be on the other side." I inhale and say what Ryan said to me just about ninety minutes ago, "I'll see you on Warrior Departure Day."

Six lifts her warrior necklace to the scanner. I hear a soft *click*, and a tiny rim of white light appears in a circle above our heads. I slide the cellular into my pocket as brilliant light floods the dark space around us, along with deafening sound. Ryan reaches down and pulls Six into the aerial drone that straddles the hole that I occupy, just like we planned.

As soon as Six's body disappears into the drone, Ten's face appears in its place. He extends his hand toward me. I reach up and touch my hand to his, feeling the heat radiate from his fingers to mine. We clasp our hands together, so tightly that I can feel the blood pulsing, as if it is flowing between us. I can still feel Ten's touch when we release each other, and he withdraws into the drone. His gaze remains locked with mine until he slips out of view.

Ryan gives me a nod, and he shuts the drone's hatch. The drone will be taking off immediately. For safety reasons, the hatch over our compound must be securely latched before the drone lifts off. I pull the hatch closed, and my surroundings disappear into darkness—despite the light radiating from my forehead. Overwhelming relief, tinged with unbearable emptiness, floods into me.

The silence is interrupted by the steady beeping of my navigator's timer.

Our time to complete Plan B is over. But that doesn't matter anymore.

We did it.

I make my way back down to the top of the box, and across the box, and down the ladder that runs along the side of the box, and into the waiting arms of my mom, dad, and brother. Then I sit on the drone closet floor, and my mom puts back into my arm the chip that was there for all but the last three months of my life. She cuts away the old scar tissue so that, once she has carefully closed the wound with glue, it appears to be just a very thin line, nearly unnoticeable.

Now almost everything is the way the Decision Makers wanted it. Six is a warrior, and I am here. But I'm pregnant with *Ten's* baby; that's the only thing that isn't as the Decision Makers planned. For now.

In nine months, on the next Warrior Departure Day, while everyone is in the plaza waiting for the new warriors to enter the Transport Chamber, delivery drones will arrive on the opposite side of the compound. Six will emerge from one of them, and she and I will switch chips one final time. When the delivery drones leave, I will travel with them to the warrior compound. And then Six and I will live the lives we chose, rather than the lives that were chosen for us.

Someday, I hope my daughter will be able to decide the path of her life. Until then, she will be safe. In a box. Under the ground. With a war raging above the sky.

* * *

End of Book One.

* * *

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About the author

J.W. Lynne has been an avid reader practically since birth and now writes inventive novels with twists, turns, and surprises. In the science fiction series [THE SKY](#) ([ABOVE THE SKY](#), [RETURN TO THE SKY](#), [PART OF THE SKY](#), and [BEYOND THE SKY](#)), an eighteen-year-old fights to survive in a dystopian future society founded on lies. The romantic contemporary novels [LOST IN LOS ANGELES](#) and [LOST IN TOKYO](#) follow a young woman's journey after an unthinkable betrayal. [KID DOCS](#) dives into the behind-the-scenes action at a hospital where children are trained to become pint-sized doctors. In [WILD ANIMAL SCHOOL](#), a teen spends an unforgettable summer working with elephants, tigers, bears, leopards, and lions at an exotic animal ranch.

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