

Breeder

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Sanctuary

Chapter 1

I awake in a sea of darkness that changes quickly to hazy yellow light. I'm in pain, but I can't remember why. I blink, and the light changes from yellow to pale blue. I blink again, and it sharpens, as does the pain.

Pain is a sensation almost foreign to me, one nearly forgotten. I groan and press my hands to my abdomen, the nucleus of my pain. My stomach feels flat and smooth to my touch, but inside I feel swollen, ballooned, ready to burst apart.

I blink again, but the light does not change this time, and all I can see is the pale blue of the ceiling. There is a soft beeping beside me. I try to turn my head toward it, but I can't move.

Then there are voices.

"She's awake."

"She should still be sedated. What went wrong?"

"Nothing went wrong. The procedure went just as planned."

"Then why is she awake? Is she in pain?"

There is a tugging on my arm, gentle. I don't think they mean to hurt me, but they do. I gasp, and a tear slides from my eye to my ear.

"She *is* in pain." A cold hand on my forehead. "The poor dear. Her bag ran out."

"Rectify it. Immediately."

"Another thing that should not have happened. You don't think—"

A hiss. A sharp intake of breath. "Not now. She can hear us."

The hand is removed from my forehead. I hear movement around me, and the tugging on my arm increases before it ceases altogether.

A door opens and closes, eliciting a quick rush of air against my skin. I'm left alone. Coolness descends on me, first into my arm, then traveling through my veins. I sigh and another tear slips out as the pain diminishes. I don't know why I'm crying, and I don't remember why I'm here.

Someone new enters the room. I can tell by the cadence of the footsteps, which are almost silent, and the shadow that enters my periphery. I'm not afraid. I have nothing to fear in Sanctuary. I blink again, and this time when I open my eyes, my vision is filled with the pale green shirt of a person standing over me. A Protector. Only Protectors wear that color.

But there is something wrong with this Protector, or maybe it's just the fuzziness in my brain making me think there is. I scrunch up my eyes, fighting to stay lucid. The Protector's form is tall and broad in the shoulders, flat across the chest. The Protector is a man.

But Protectors are never men, and a man should never be here alone, with me.

He bends over me, and my view changes. His visor—opaque, reflective bronze—hovers inches above my face, and I catch my breath. Not because I'm afraid, and not even because I'm startled, but because I see myself reflected in it. Myself. Large brown eyes above narrow cheeks, nose, and full lips, features that are optimal for survival, since I am nearly genetically perfect. Features I haven't seen since I came here five years ago. In Sanctuary, we only see others, never ourselves.

My vision blurs as the coolness in my veins swims into my chest. The pain is gone.

The Protector is still here. His bronze visor turns to gold as the light spangles on the edges of my vision and then blends with green.

“Who are you?” I ask. My lips are heavy and want to stick together as I speak. “What’s your name?”

I don’t know why I ask this. It’s a foolish question. Nobody goes by names in Sanctuary, and for good reason. I must be losing my head with the cold wave that is carrying me away.

But he answers. I haven’t heard a man’s voice in five years. It’s deep, and pleasant, and warm, even as it sounds canned behind his helmet and visor. Maybe he *is* supposed to be here. Maybe he’s supposed to calm me back to sleep.

“My name is Pax,” he says. Then he leans lower, his helmeted face just inches from my ear. “What’s yours?”

My name? I don’t have a name. “Seventeen,” I say. I’m slurring my speech now, and I lick my lips. “B-Seventeen.”

“No,” he says. “Not your designation. What’s your *name*?”

I close my eyes as memories from a life almost forgotten swim through my mind. My name. My name. I had one once, didn’t I? The other girls gave me one. We named each other, before we knew better.

It comes to me like a fish rising in circles from the bottom of a pond.

Pria.

I part my lips to speak it, but I’m carried under instead, and all I release is a breath of air. But it’s best. Names create dangerous divisions. It’s why we don’t have them here. Who does he think he is to ask this of me, anyway? Who did I think I was to ask it of him?

It’s best he doesn’t know it.

Chapter 2

I am an approved Breeder for the Controlled Repopulation Program. Years ago, Gaia Earth was dangerously overpopulated, resulting in three Great Devastations: the Great Famine, the Great Pandemic, and the Great Incursion. Entire nations were wiped out as humans fought, unsuccessfully, for survival, and Gaia Earth's population plummeted to fewer than 100,000 people, threatening the extinction of the human race.

Then the Unified World Order stepped in to take control, to create peace out of the chaos, and to ensure the controlled repopulation of Gaia Earth would take place under optimal conditions. I am privileged to be a part of that effort, to be approved as a carrier of genes that will make humanity better, stronger, smarter, and more versatile. And here, in Sanctuary, I want for nothing. My life is perfect.

I will remember this. I will repeat it until I remember it is true, and I will cease these foolish doldrums.

I'm sitting with my feet curled up beneath me on the settee facing the Looking Glass in the gathering room. With one finger, I curl the hair around my right ear. It's just long enough to almost wrap around the tip of my finger, which means I will be called in for a shave soon. My hair grows faster than most of the other Breeders', overhanging my ears in just two weeks. Any longer than it is right now, and it could incite feelings of vanity on my part and jealousy on the part of my sisters. We all submit to the regular shaving of our heads to avoid these feelings, to make us equal. It is wise and good, but I can't help acknowledging I like my hair when it gets longer. It is thick and smooth and loosely curled, and I can almost remember what it looked like

before I came here. But that is why it must be shaved. I close my eyes and mouth my admonition. *My life is perfect.*

“What’s wrong, Seventeen?” The cushion depresses next to me as a familiar voice asks, “Why were you gone all last week?”

I open my eyes and smile at her—at Breeder Eight. She’s younger than I am by three years. She replaced the previous Breeder Eight, who was reassigned just last year.

“Nothing is wrong,” I say. “I had a procedure done. That’s why I was away.” I hadn’t realized it had been a full week, though, and the revelation makes me feel disoriented for a moment. I put my fingertips to my forehead.

Eight’s brow creases and she touches my arm. I flinch away. Unlike many of my sisters, I am wary of touch. I don’t know why.

“A procedure? Is everything okay? Would you like to talk about it?”

“Everything is fine.”

No. It isn’t. I avert my eyes so she can’t read my lie.

“I’m just tired from it, that’s all,” I say.

She gives me a sympathetic smile and reaches to touch me again. “You should rest in our dormitory, where it’s quieter. Would you like me to walk you?”

“Eight, I . . .” I sigh and pat her hand. For a fifteen-year-old girl, she has maturity beyond her years. “Thank you, but I would rather stay here.”

“May I stay and talk with you?” Her expression is open, hopeful. Like all the Breeders, she is lithe and strong, with brown eyes, flawless olive skin, and even white teeth. It is fitting we call each other “sister,” for we look so much alike.

All of humanity looks like us now, although we've been told it has not always been that way. Once, there was a wide variety of recessive traits saturating the human gene pool, but that was before the Great Devastations almost wiped out humanity. Most of those with genes on the fringe—with too much melanin, or not enough, or an eye color with a tendency for weak sight, among other things—died out in the Devastations. And because of their weaknesses, and their inferiorities, it is now our job to make sure those sorts of genetic flaws never infiltrate the human race again. It is our great honor as Breeders, as Carriers, to ensure the survival of a more perfect human race.

“Seventeen?” Eight asks again.

“Of course you may stay. I enjoy your company.” Best to not seem too disturbed by my procedure. It was, after all, not the first time it's happened to a Breeder since my time here at Sanctuary.

She gives me a brilliant smile, revealing a dimple in one cheek, and settles in more comfortably. “So,” she says with the air of one beginning a long conversation, “why are you tired? Is it *just* because of your procedure, or is there another reason? Are you sleeping enough? Are you eating enough?”

“I believe so, yes,” I say with an indulgent smile and tip of the head, twisting my finger back into my hair.

“Oh, *oh!* You're Carrying, aren't you?” She pushes herself up onto her knees and grasps my shoulder. “Of course, why didn't I see it immediately? What an honor, Seventeen! What contribution number is this for you?”

I shift so her hands fall away and say, “Actually, I’m not Carrying. I . . . *was*, but something must have gone wrong, because I’m not anymore.” I press my hands to my abdomen. I have been so unsettled since the procedure, it’s difficult to remember exactly what happened.

Her expression turns crestfallen. “What do you mean, something went wrong? Isn’t that why they choose us? Because our genetics prevent things from going wrong?” She leans away, wrapping her arms about her ribs as though to shield herself from my imperfection.

Heat rushes to my face. “It can happen to anyone, perfected genes or not,” I say. “Sometimes mother nature just says *no*.” Without meaning to, I’ve drawn myself up and folded my hands in my lap like an older sister. I have no right to claim that title, as I’ve contributed only one healthy Carry to the Program so far, but I feel the need to put Eight in her place.

To her credit, she lowers her lashes and bows her head. “You’re right, of course. I’m sorry for judging. But . . . it frightens me.”

I deflate and tap her chin, encouraging her to look up. “What frightens you?” I ask.

“The possibility of carrying—of passing on—flawed genes,” she says in a low whisper. “They would kick me out of the Program, wouldn’t they?” Tears cling to her lashes, threatening to spill over, and I mentally chide myself for revealing what happened to me.

“They didn’t kick me out,” I say. “Even with a problem here or there, they have chosen us because we are their best opportunity of restoring humanity. There is no need to be afraid.”

She nods and wipes at her eyes, her gaze going to the long, curving window we call the Looking Glass. Outside, beyond the foot-thick glass, is a stunning vista of pine-swept mountains. We do not have a view of the Commune here, from this side of Sanctuary. Over here, we watch the world through the privacy of the one-way Looking Glass.

“Have they scheduled your first Carry yet?” I ask Eight. “You have been here a year already, haven’t you?”

She nods and continues staring out the Looking Glass as she says, “Yes. I have one more month of preparatory vitamins and exercise, but Mother says I should be ready after that. She evaluated me herself.”

There is such a proud note in her voice I don’t tell her Mother evaluates all the Breeders before their first Carries. I just nod and say, “That’s wonderful.”

A medical technician comes around with a tray of little cups, each numbered and containing pills. I hold out my hand for mine, as Eight does for hers, and we are quiet for several moments as we swallow them dry, one at a time. We have never been told what each pill does, other than being given vague references to their being necessary for our “health and wellbeing as Breeders of the Unified World Order,” but I have always trusted that they are for our good. The UWO has every reason to keep us healthy, and one look around the room at the strong bodies and shining complexions confirms they are doing their job.

Each Breeder has her own drug regiment, so I don’t pay attention to the quantity or size of Eight’s pills, but I’m missing one—a small pink one I’ve taken every day since I first arrived. I frown and stir my finger around the bottom of the cup just to make sure it isn’t hiding beneath a bigger pill, but it’s definitely not there.

“Excuse me,” I say to the med tech, who is waiting for us to return our cups. “I’m missing one. The . . . well, I don’t know what it does, but it’s the one that is about this big”—I hold up my fingers a quarter-inch apart—“and light pink.”

“Yes,” the med tech says with a smile. She wears a wrap around her head because, beneath it, she has a full head of hair. Only Breeders are required to have shaved heads, but

Mother doesn't want us to feel jealous of the medical technicians who serve us, so she requires the wraps. "Mother has determined you no longer need that one after your recent procedure," the med tech says. "She made the change in your prescription herself."

"Oh. So . . . it wasn't anything necessary for my nutrition, then?"

The med tech's smile widens. "I'm not at liberty to say, B-Seventeen. But you can trust Mother's judgment. She would never prescribe anything that would not be to your benefit."

"I still have mine," Eight says, holding it up between her thumb and forefinger with a slight frown. She gives me a narrow-eyed look that says she's jealous I've reached a milestone she hasn't yet, and then puts it on the back of her tongue.

I finish my pills and hand the cup back to the med tech. I swallow several more times, trying to clear the feeling of the dry pills traveling down my esophagus, a feeling I can never quite get used to. But another technician will be around with glasses of water soon, as it's almost time for our mid-morning meal.

After the med tech walks away, Eight settles back against the cushions of the settee with a deep sigh and says, "Do you ever *feel* anything, Seventeen? When you're Carrying, I mean." Her gaze flits around the room, and I know she's taking in the several sisters who are in various stages of Carrying—some of them with hardly a bulge beneath their cotton gowns, others so distended they look about ready to deliver, and all of them with languorous expressions on their faces. Many sit with half-closed eyes, rubbing vacant circles on their bellies.

"I mean, I know they give us drugs to calm us through the process, and other sisters have told me I'll barely know I'm Carrying until it's over, but . . ." She bites her lip and looks out the Looking Glass again.

I shouldn't push, but I'm curious where her thoughts are taking her. No other sister has ever approached me like this before—with fears before their first Carry. I wish *I'd* felt comfortable enough to talk with someone before mine. "But what?" I ask gently.

"Why do they touch their stomachs if they're not fully conscious of the procedure?" She asks the question in a rush, as though afraid I'll find it stupid.

"Well, I suppose a part of the brain always knows," I say.

"But you never *felt* anything?" she asks again.

It's my turn to look away. I study the giant tree that grows through the floor in the center of the gathering room. The Tree of Life, we call it, and it's our emblem here at Sanctuary, signifying our contributions to the human race. Its branches don't yet reach the greenhouse skylight far above, but they will someday. I wonder what they'll do when it gets too high. It would be immoral to cut it down. They'll probably have to raise the ceiling.

My gaze travels from the tree to the Carrying women sitting in its shade. Eight wants to know if we *feel* anything when we Carry. I think about my experiences.

The first time I Carried, I didn't feel anything—that is true. The drugs I was on made the forty weeks seem like mere days. I have very few recollections beyond vague remembrances of yoga exercises and time spent lounging here, in the gathering room. But the second time, before my procedure, and after, it was . . . different.

My fingers flex and I realize I'm pressing on my abdomen again, and Eight is watching me do it.

I look into her earnest expression. She does not need more anxiety than she's already feeling. The first Carry is always the scariest.

"No," I say, relaxing my hands. "I never felt anything."

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