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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

CHAPTER 1
XANDER

Every morning, the sun comes up and turns the earth red, and I think: This could be the day when everything changes. Maybe today the Society will fall. Then night comes again and we're all still waiting. But I know the Pilot's real.

Three Officials walk up to the door of a little house at sunset. The house looks like all of the others on the street: two shutters on each of its three forward-facing windows, five steps up to the door, and one small, spiky bush planted to the right of the path.

The oldest of the Officials, a man with gray hair, raises his hand to knock.

One. Two. Three.

The Officials stand close enough to the glass that I can see the circle-shaped insignia sewn on the right pocket of the youngest Official's uniform. The circle is bright red and looks like a drop of blood.

I smile and he does, too. Because the Official: is me.

In the past, the Official Ceremony was a big occasion at City Hall. The Society held a formal dinner and you could bring your parents and your Match with you. But the Official

Ceremony isn't one of the three big ceremonies—Welcoming Day, the Match Banquet, and the Final Celebration—and so it's not what it used to be. The Society has started to cut corners where they can, and they assume Officials are loyal enough not to complain about their ceremony losing some of its trimmings.

I stood there with four others, all of us in new white uniforms. The head Official pinned the insignia on my pocket: the red circle representing the Medical Department. And then, with our voices echoing under the dome of the mostly empty Hall, we all committed to the Society and pledged to achieve our Society-designated potential. That was all. I didn't care that the ceremony wasn't anything special. Because I'm not *really* an Official. I mean, I am, but my true loyalty is to the Rising.

A girl wearing a violet dress hurries along the sidewalk behind us. I see her reflection in the window. She's got her head down like she's hoping we won't notice her. Her parents follow behind, all three of them heading toward the nearest air-train stop. It's the fifteenth, so the Match Banquet is tonight. It hasn't even been a year since I walked up the stairs of City Hall with Cassia. We're both far away from Oria now.

A woman opens the door of the house. She's holding her new baby, the one we're here to name. "Please come in," she tells us. "We've been expecting you." She looks tired, even on what should be one of the happiest days of her life. The Society doesn't talk about it much, but things are harder in

the Border Provinces. The resources seem to start in Central and then bleed outward. Everything here in Camas Province is kind of dirty and worn out.

After the door closes behind us, the mother holds out the baby for us to see. "Seven days old today," she tells us, but of course we already know. That's why we're here. Welcoming Day celebrations are always held a week after the baby's birth.

The baby's eyes are closed, but we know from our data that the color is deep blue. His hair: brown. We also know that he arrived on his due date and that under the tightly wrapped blanket he has ten fingers and ten toes. His initial tissue sample taken at the medical center looked excellent.

"Are you all ready to begin?" Official Brewer asks. As the senior Official in our Committee, he's in charge. His voice has exactly the right balance of benevolence and authority. He's done this hundreds of times. I've wondered before if Official Brewer could be the Pilot. He certainly looks the part. And he's very organized and efficient.

Of course, the Pilot could be anyone.

The parents nod.

"According to the data, we're missing an older sibling," the second in command, Official Lei, says in her gentle voice. "Did you want him to be present for the ceremony?"

"He was tired after dinner," the mother says, sounding apologetic. "He could barely keep his eyes open. I put him to bed early."

"That's fine, of course," Official Lei says. Since the little boy is just over two years old—nearly perfect spacing between siblings—he's not required to be in attendance. This isn't something he'd likely remember anyway.

"What name have you chosen?" Official Brewer moves closer to the port in the foyer.

"Ory," the mother says.

Official Brewer taps the name into the port and the mother shifts the baby a little. "Ory," Official Brewer repeats. "And for his middle name?"

"Burton," the father says. "A family name."

Official Lei smiles. "That's a lovely name."

"Come and see how it looks," Official Brewer says. The parents come closer to the port to see the baby's name: ORY BURTON FARNSWORTH. Underneath the letters runs the bar code the Society has assigned for the baby. If he leads an ideal life, the Society plans to use the same bar code to mark his tissue preservation sample at his Final Celebration.

But the Society won't last that long.

"I'll submit it now," Official Brewer says, "if there are no changes or corrections you want to make."

The mother and father move closer to check the name one last time. The mother smiles and holds the baby near the portscreen, as if the baby can read his own name.

Official Brewer looks at me. "Official Carrow," he says, "it's time for the tablet."

My turn. "We have to give the tablet in front of the port,"

I remind the parents. The mother shifts Ory even higher so that the baby's head and face are clearly visible for the portscreen to record.

I've always liked the look of the little disease-proofing tablets we give at the Welcoming Day ceremonies. These tablets are round and made up of what looks like three tiny pie wedges: one-third blue, one-third green, and one-third red. Though the contents of this tablet are entirely different from the three tablets the baby will carry later, the use of the same colors represents the life he will have in the Society. The disease-proofing tablet looks childish and colorful. They always remind me of the paint palettes on our screens back in First School.

The Society gives the tablet to all babies to keep them safe from illness and infection. The disease-proofing tablet is easy for babies to take. It dissolves instantly. It's all much more humane than the inoculations previous societies used to give, where they put a needle right into a baby's skin. Even the Rising plans to keep giving the disease-proofing tablets when they come to power, but with a few modifications.

The baby stirs when I unwrap the tablet. "Would you mind opening his mouth for me?" I ask the baby's mother.

When she tries to open his mouth, the baby turns his head, looking for food and trying to suck. We all laugh, and while his mouth is open I drop the tablet inside. It dissolves completely on his tongue. Now we have to wait for him to swallow, which he does: right on cue.

"Ory Burton Farnsworth," Official Brewer says, "we welcome you to the Society."

"Thank you," the parents say in unison.

The substitution has gone perfectly, as usual.

Official Lei glances at me and smiles. Her long sweep of black hair slides over her shoulder. Sometimes I wonder if she's part of the rebellion, too, and knows what I'm doing—replacing the disease-proofing tablets with the ones the Rising gave to me. Almost every child born in the Provinces within the past two years has had one of the Rising immunizations instead of the Society's. Other Rising workers like me have been making the switch.

Thanks to the Rising, this baby won't only be immune to most illnesses. He'll also be immune to the red tablet, so the Society can't take his memories. Someone did this for me when I was a baby. They did the same for Ky. And, probably, for Cassia.

Years ago, the Rising infiltrated the dispensaries where the Society makes the disease-proofing tablets. So, in addition to the tablets made according to the Society's formula, there are others made for the Rising. Our tablets include everything the Society uses, plus the immunity to the red tablet, plus something more.

When we were born, the Rising didn't have enough resources to make new tablets for everyone. They had to choose only some of us, based on who they thought might turn out to be useful to them later. Now they finally have enough for everyone.

The Rising is for everyone.

And they—we—are not going to fail.

Since the sidewalk is narrow, I walk behind Official Brewer and Official Lei on our way back to the air car. Another family with a daughter wearing Banquet attire hurries down the street. They're late, and the mother is not happy. "I told you *again* and *again*—" she says to the father, and then she catches sight of us and stops cold.

"Hello," I say as we pass them. "Congratulations."

"When do you next see *your* Match?" Official Lei asks me.

"I don't know," I say. "The Society hasn't scheduled our next port-to-port communication."

Official Lei is a little older than I am: at least twenty-one, because she's celebrated her Marriage Contract. As long as I've known her, her spouse has been out in the Army stationed somewhere at the edge of the Borders. I can't ask her when he's due back. That kind of information is classified. I don't think even Official Lei knows when he'll return.

The Society doesn't like us to get too specific when we talk about our work assignments with others. Cassia's aware that I'm an Official, but she doesn't know exactly what I do. There are Officials in all different departments in the Society.

The Society trains many kinds of workers at the medical center. Everyone knows about the medics because they can diagnose and help people. There are also surgics who operate, pharmics who make medicines, nurses who assist, and physics

like me. Our job is to oversee aspects of the medical field—for example, administrating medical centers. Or, if we become Officials, we're often asked to serve on Committees, which is what I do. We take care of the distribution of tablets to infants and assist in collecting tissue at Final Banquets. According to the Society, this assignment is one of the most important ones an Official can have.

"What color did she choose?" Official Lei asks as we approach the air car.

For a second, I don't know what she means, and then I realize she's asking about Cassia's dress. "She chose green," I say. "She looked beautiful."

Someone cries out and the three of us turn in unison. It's the baby's father, running toward us as fast as he can. "I can't wake my older son," he calls out. "I went in to see if he was still asleep and—something is wrong."

"Contact the medics on the port," Official Brewer calls back, and the three of us move as fast as we can to the house. We go inside without knocking and hurry to the back where the bedrooms always are. Official Lei puts her hand on the wall to steady herself before Official Brewer opens the bedroom door. "You all right?" I ask her. She nods.

"Hello?" Official Brewer says.

The mother looks up at us, her face ashen. She still holds the baby. The older child lying on the bed doesn't move at all.

He rests on his side, his back to us. He's breathing, but it's slow, and his plainclothes hang a little loose around his

neck. His skin color looks all right. There's a small red mark in between his shoulder blades and I feel a rush of pity and exultation.

This is it.

The Rising said it would look like this.

I have to keep myself from glancing at the others in the room. *Who else knows?* Is anyone here part of the Rising? Have they seen the information I've seen about how the rebellion will proceed?

Though the incubation period may vary, once the disease is manifest, the patient deteriorates quickly. Slurred speech is followed by a descent into an almost comatose state. The most telltale sign of the live Plague virus is one or more small red marks on the back of the patient. Once the Plague has made significant inroads into the general populace, and can no longer be concealed by the Society, the Rising will begin.

"What is it?" the mother asks. "Is he ill?"

Again, the three of us move at the same time. Official Lei reaches for the boy's wrist to take his pulse. Official Brewer turns to the woman. I try to block her view of her child lying still on the bed. Until I *know* the Rising is on the move, I have to proceed as usual.

"He's breathing," Official Brewer says.

"His pulse is fine," Official Lei says.

"The medics will be here soon," I tell the mother.

"Can't *you* do something for him?" she asks. "Medicine, treatment . . ."

"I'm sorry," Official Brewer says. "We need to get to the medical center before we can do anything more."

"But he's stable," I tell her. *Don't worry,* I want to add. *The Rising has a cure.* I hope she can hear the sound of hope in my voice since I can't tell her outright *how* I know it's all going to work out.

This is it. The beginning of the Rising.

Once the Rising comes to power, we'll all be able to choose. Who knows what might happen then? When I kissed Cassia back in the Borough she caught her breath in what I think was surprise. Not at the kiss: she knew that was coming. I think she was surprised by how it felt.

As soon as I can, I want to tell her again, in person: *Cassia, I'm in love with you and I want you. So, what will it take for you to feel the same? A whole new world?*

Because that's what we're going to have.

The mother edges a tiny bit closer to her child. "It's just," she says, and her voice catches, "that he's so *still.*"