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Opening extract from
Breathe

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I squeeze Abel's hand and he looks at me. 'Now?' he asks. He puts his other hand into his pocket.

'No, no. Not yet,' I whisper. Several cameras are trained right at us and there's a steward only metres away. I pull Abel close and nuzzle his neck. We aren't a couple but posing as one makes us less conspicuous.

'Tell me when,' Abel says.

We get to a cluster of silver birches and join the group gazing up at them. The tour guide is giving a detailed explanation of what is required to keep the trees alive in here and the tourists, mostly Premiums, are eating it up. 'It took twelve years for this particular breed to grow. Nowhere else on Earth will you find such a specimen.' I resist rolling my eyes and even pull out my pad to take a picture so I seem like a real tourist.

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An announcement comes over the loudspeaker, the voice firm: *'The conservation area will close in five minutes. Please leave the biosphere. The conservation area will close in five minutes. Please leave the biosphere.'*

'We're too late,' Abel says, letting go of my hand and heading for the exit. I throw my arms around his neck. In training he was so cocky; I could never have imagined fear setting in like this.

'We can't backpedal,' I say. 'We've been saving for months to pay the entrance fee. And we need those cuttings. We aren't leaving without them.' I glance around. Everyone is coming our way. Including the stewards. I kiss the tip of his nose. He pulls back.

'Why can't your aunt or uncle do this?'

'I already explained it once,' I snap. 'They're in agriculture and they don't get permits for this part of the biosphere.' The tour group shuffles by and heads for the gift shop. I grin at an older couple watching us and they return the smile, linking arms with each other as they move on.

'If I get caught . . .'

'We won't get caught,' I say, though I can't know this for sure. All I know is that I've never been caught before, and Abel's hesitation is only putting us at greater risk.

I lead him back to our planned spot, where only camera four can see us. 'It's to your right,' I say. 'Do *not* miss.' He

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nods, rummages in his pocket and pulls out a fist, so I know he has the rock in his hand. I want to kiss him for real now, but there isn't time, and anyway, he might not want a real kiss from me.

As the camera scans in the opposite direction, I elbow Abel, and he launches the rock into the air. I hold my breath. And I want to shut my eyes because I can see that the rock is going to miss. We're going to get caught. And it won't be jail time for us. We'll simply go missing.

'Shit,' Abel says.

Instead of hitting the camera, the rock bounces against a tree then down on to the head of a tourist. I gasp. Stewards come running as he starts to howl.

'I've been hit!' the tourist shouts. 'I've been shot.'

'I have to get out of here,' Abel says. 'Now. You don't understand.'

'Do you have another one?' I ask, grabbing his elbow so he won't run. He nods and pulls another, larger rock from his pocket. He tries to hand it to me. '*You* have to throw it,' I say. 'Your aim is better than mine.' The camera continues to pan the area. 'Quickly!'

'If I miss, this could kill someone.'

I look down at the rock in his hand. He's right. It's huge and jagged, and Abel is strong.

'Then don't miss,' I say. The stewards are calling for a

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stretcher. If anyone turns our way and spots us off to the side like this, we'll definitely be flagged. Abel has to throw it now, or we have to get out. 'Do it!'

The rock spins through the air. It hits the camera, smashing the lens to pieces. Glass and plastic shower the pathway and more stewards appear. Abel glances at me, then runs forward to where the crowd is growing.

'That could've killed someone!' he shouts. 'This place is a death trap!'

I take a deep breath and slip under the ropes. I sprint through the trees, crouching low, hopping over roots. Most auxiliaries can't run like this; their hearts wouldn't cope with the strain. But that's why we spend our nights in alleyways chasing one another up and down, forcing our hearts to pound and breathing in unlicensed quantities of oxygen.

I pull out a hand-drawn map of the biosphere with an *X* marking the spot where the elm is growing. But even without the map, it wouldn't be hard to find: its branches, like splendid wings, are spread so wide it looks like it is ready to take flight.

My breath catches at its grandeur, but I have no time to stand and admire it. I open my rucksack, take out a rope and hurl it over the lowest, thickest branch. I grab a pair of clippers from the rucksack too, stick them into my pocket

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and climb. When I reach the lowest branch I let go of the rope and begin to scramble up the tree using the branches and knots as handles and footholds. I don't think about failure. I think only of the cuttings and getting them to The Grove. I scuttle along a branch and snip, throwing the cuttings to the ground as I go.

I would like to stay here, have Abel join me and spend the afternoon breathing real air, nestled in the arms of this elm. Or his arms. Not that it's allowed; *No romance between members of the Resistance*, Petra insists. It complicates things and compromises our decision-making. And she's right. When I chose Abel for the mission, I didn't care that he wasn't really ready. I just wanted an excuse to train with him.

But I don't have time to worry about that now. Soon the stewards will have swept up the camera pieces and injured tourist and everyone will be filing towards the exit. I hasten to the ground, gather up my equipment and the clippings, and race back, my heart hammering.

When I near the space in the trees where the yellow pathway reappears, I get down on to my knees and inch forward. No one notices me as I stand and saunter over to Abel. He turns his head, smiles and steps away from the fringes of the crowd.

We follow the last of the tourists through a revolving

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door into a dark tunnel separating the biosphere from the rest of the pod and the air changes; it no longer tastes real and green but plastic. And once we reach the end of the tunnel, we calmly walk away, careful not to go above three miles per hour in case a speed camera flashes us or a steward notices.

We are in Zone One, with its clean boulevards and mirrored buildings. Every person we pass is pristinely dressed, with face masks strapped to their self-satisfied faces and connected to air tanks tied to their hips. They are all Premiums, of course, and when they see us, their gazes shift away. Ever so slightly.

We move steadily forward, and while there are no walls or electric fences, no barricades separating the different zones in the pod, when we enter Zone Two there can be no doubt we've left behind the elite. Here, closer to the centre of the dome, houses have turned into squat blocks of flats. Open boulevards are now narrow streets and the place is swarming, not with suits but with stewards, because this is where they live. We keep our heads down.

Before long we reach Zone Three. The blocks of flats, built to house one thousand people each, reach up towards the glass dome of the pod, and the roads are so dark it could be night: all the natural light is swallowed up by the concrete. We slip into a gloomy alleyway between two buildings.

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They are poor substitutes for the grandeur of the elms and alders.

Abel rubs his hands together and dances on the spot with excitement. 'We did it! Did you get everything you needed? Can I see? I'll take care of everything if you like. Hand it over.' He is back to his old self.

'I got a heap of clippings. Silas won't believe it. Petra will probably promote me!'

'You were amazing!' he says, and grabs my hips to draw me in towards him. He is smiling and so close the tips of our noses are practically touching. I push him away playfully, not ready to begin whatever it is a kiss would start.

'Me? The way you threw that rock and distracted everyone. I'm glad Petra found you, Abel. You're going to be very useful to us.' I don't know why I continue to make our relationship all about the Resistance. I don't know why I can't tell him I'm glad he's around whether we're working together or not.

'So are we going to deliver them to The Grove?' he asks.

'Yes. Will you come with us?'

Abel beams. 'Of course I'm coming!' We slink back into the street and Abel throws his arm around my shoulder. My insides tumble.

'Do you trust me?' he asks. He tickles my neck with his fingers.

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‘Cut it out, Abel!’ I say. ‘We’re comrades, not a couple.’ I want him to contest this and tell me he can’t live without me. He doesn’t. He just laughs. And I do not push his arm away. But unlike him, I’m not laughing.