

Name: Kiari Stanton

Age: 19

Year: 2141 | Present Day

County One, Solteria

Chapter 1

“S_{tanton.}”

“Yeah?” She looked up from her spot on the floor to see her group walking out of the dilapidated building. Her eyes shifted to Ekon standing by the doorway.

He pulled on his gas mask and nodded towards the outside. “Moving out, let’s go.” She stood, pulled on her own mask, and stepped out into acid rain. The scarlet sun above her was sweltering, even in its quick descent, and her tank top was sticking to the arch of her back with sweat. The land around her lay in scattered ruins. Steel carcasses that once seemed tall and beautiful were now just ominous creaking rusted skeletons. The ash that normally polluted the air swirled in the pools of rainwater by her feet. The rain was pouring down in bullets now, and she could hear it *ping pinging* against the metal roof of a shed not too far from where she stood. The sound of the water rushing downhill filled her ears and she looked at the dirt roads as they started to turn to slush. Every now and then a fire would start, a reminder that things like fire did exist, but the unpredictable rain would come just as quickly and she couldn’t help but marvel and want to explore what she felt nature had to offer her. Something told herself that there had to be more than this, more than melted memories of things called *cars* and *skyscrapers*, but this was all she or anyone else knew.

There were no trees in Solteria and nothing was in a state where it could thrive. The surroundings were too destroyed to support any form of life, it seemed, except her own. She looked at the grayed cobblestone pathways and dilapidated faded brick of the ancient townhomes. It wasn’t the most beautiful place, but it was home.

County One was the most developed of the three small neighboring counties. It was home to the turbines and generators that powered each county in Solteria. Kiari had lived in Solteria all of her life and so knew no other home. Her only other options were the other two counties, but she could never see herself leaving her family. In fact, it was forbidden.

She sighed. The edges of her combat boots had started to rip open weeks ago and now water and dirt was seeping in the sides and soaking her socks. She made a mental note to tape them together somehow. The few resources she was given in the monthly shipment were depleting. No one knew where the things came from, or *who* they came from. But they came, and that was all that mattered.

She lifted one foot after the other out of the puddle of muck that had formed around her, feeling the water in her socks *squish* in-between her toes. She scrunched her face and toes in disgust, adjusted the strap of the gun around her chest and squinted against the rain, scanning the group for the familiar flash of wild blond hair.

“Cato?”

“Got your six.” The sing-song voice said from behind her.

She spun around and Cato took a quick step back to avoid getting hit by the barrel of the gun, graceful as always in her movements. She exhaled heavily through her nose and glared up at Kiari.

“My bad.” Kiari lowered her weapon and faced forward, trying to keep her mind off of the murky water rushing downhill.

“Alright.” The group of ten stood at attention while Ekon stood at the head of the crowd. “You all know how this works. We move, and we move quick. No one gets left behind. Stick with your partner. Stick with the team.”

At this the group separated into their pairs, then split off in two opposite directions. Kiari and Cato were with the group that veered left, leaving the more familiar area of the Solteria Relics and heading into what the Authority would deem “off the grid”.

Lately, citizens of Solteria had been going missing. They ventured out too far beyond the barriers and were never found again. For this reason Kiari made sure to follow the rules as much as she could. Cato, however, had a “rules were made to be broken” philosophy, and was constantly pushing the limits.

She’d only been to a border once, and once there she felt a strong metallic force that screamed at her to keep her distance. The land beyond it was vast, it resembled the place she knew as home, but knowing she was kept inside only fed her hunger to have more. To know and be certain that there was *more*.

It was believed that some people had made it across the border, but no one ever returned to tell their own story.

The one time she’d gone out that far was what people referred to as the “Ilian Umbers incident”. Some people made a joke about it, others understood the weight of the situation and spoke about it in hushed tones. Ilian was the only Solterian known to have committed suicide by means of the barrier, and Kiari had seen her do it. This alone was enough to keep her comfortable within what she knew, though curiosity always made it’s presence known.

Still, none of the troops could pass the barrier that lead out of Solteria and into the unknown. But the Relics served as a crack in the shield built around the world Kiari and Cato had come to know. There, many Solterians found themselves stuck in a vast in-between, unable to cross the barrier, and yet far away from civilization. How they found home and shelter was still uncertain.

Either way, it was Kiari’s job as a Solterian Sentry to aid and rescue anyone who had wandered down the wrong path. She and her squad were to bring their people home.