



THE CITIZEN

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Project Canvas Trilogy, Book One

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This version was published on 2013-11-04



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1 Chapter One

Government Official #132 is on the broadcast box. She calls herself Stefania, because government officials are allowed to have names. It distinguishes them from the rest of the populace. Stefania handles most of the public speeches and press conferences, though she's not very personable. She speaks in a clinical, monotonous voice that puts people off, and her eyes could turn Hell into the United Arctic. Maybe the other government officials are even worse, so they appointed her their public representative. "Today marks a vital day to the United States of America," the official begins. "Today, March twenty-third, is the thirtieth anniversary of Project Canvas's successful implementation into the public." Her speech goes on and on. I don't know if it serves any purpose other than to give us all a history lesson, but it's on the broadcast box, so it must be important. Stefania's brunette hair easily stands out even with her pale skin. She is unassimilated, another allowance she is given due to her government status. How they can stand being the odd ones out all the time is incomprehensible. Everyone in the live audience before her is just as pale, if not more, but their hair has been bleached white since infancy. When they were born, thin film was put over their eyes, which quickly melted into them, causing the irises to remain baby blue forever. They all look exactly the same.

They look exactly like me.

Our uniformity is easily forgotten; it's been like this for generations, so we don't think about it much. Then we see the government workers, and they're outcasts. I would never say that to their faces, but everyone thinks it. It's necessary, of course, for them to look different: if they didn't, how would we know when they were in our midst? And how would they know if someone had sneaked into their offices? Not that that happens; their security level must be through the roof.

An audience member rises to face Stefania. "With all due respect, our system is flawed! Don't you see all the children, still finding new reasons to bully their peers despite the fact that they're all assimilated? "We've made leaps and bounds over the last thirty years, I'm not denying that/ However, I believe we need to impose stricter parenting regulations, to insure our young are raised feeling secure, to insure the well-being of the next generation." It's a wordy remark; no one speaks with that kind of criticism, not to a government official. The man is either crazy, or truly impassioned, or both. Probably both.

To my surprise, the official doesn't look at him with frustration or annoyance; instead, she smiles faintly and replies, "Yes, I agree with you. Our children are the future of this great nation, and it's a shame to see these young mind perverted by petty thoughts. We are working towards a solution for problems such as this. It's a slow process, but a steady one."

The clock on my wall sounds, alerting me of the hour. 11:00 AM. The mail will be here.

Every morning at promptly 11:00 AM, mail is sent to my communication tablet. These so-called C-screens allow me to receive mail but I can't send it. As a safety precaution, only government officials are allowed to send communications to each other and to citizens.

Most days, official announcements and bylaw changes are my only messages. Today, however, I'm expecting something more personal. My C-screen blinks and chimes on the kitchen counter, as does the fixed version installed on my wall. I favor the portable one because it allows me to multitask. As it chimes, it stops to say, "*Three new messages,*" then continues its nagging.

Turning on the screen, I see one message detailing the citizen IDs and photos of criminals at large in the city—two men, wanted for unlicensed hunting—and another, reminding everyone that today is the day to pick up our grocery rations for the week. The third message is the one I've been waiting for.

Addressed to me, from the Institute of Sciences in the United States University, Manhattan Chapter. The first line reads, "*Citizen #39514Sci, we are pleased to announce that you have graduated from the Science Pathway and your old tattoo will be replaced with one that reflects your degree. We have also received your request for government lab training, and based on your exceptional work you have been accepted into the program. See below for details on your first training*

session.”

I’ve been accepted. Just like that. I am going to work in a government lab. My five years of studying the sciences, being bored by all its mundane implementations, dreaming of doing something bigger, better, were not wasted. The message tells me to report to the given address on Monday at 6:00 AM sharp. That’s three days. Eight weeks of training starts in three days.

I have to tell my mother.

Throwing on a billowy black dress, I leave the broadcast box on and tuck my C-screen into my purse, then head down the street, to the school where my mother works, teaching twelve-year-olds in their last year of elementary school before they head off to university.

The walk is about ten minutes from our house. I can hear the children yelling and laughing every day when school gets out, running back to their homes to do their chores and stuff their faces. If I ever get married, my husband and I are moving as far from any school as possible.

Each house on this street looks the same: three to five stories with one household per floor, with one-way-glass windows and white walls made of concrete. The concrete extends to the yards, which are really more like ground-level patios. Two-way streets with high medians insure the safety of those who practice cautious driving, and for the most part condemn those who don’t.

The school itself is made of the same materials as the

houses; it's just wider, with a playground in the front and a sign telling of the school's daily events. Inside the doors, it smells like meat pies. I remember them from my days in elementary school, and they always left me sick to my stomach. Public institutions which supply meals are given the leftover rations, so households get the best quality. The meat in schools is often fatty, and instead of juicy red muscle, their rations are eyes, hearts, livers—all the undesirable bits. Meat pies are essentially all these pieces stewed together and folded into pastry dough.

I reach the door to my mother's classroom, tiptoeing across the white floor, now brown and soggy from all the tiny, muddy footprints. She is giving a lesson on the importance of equality and shared resources when I enter.

She stares at me with beady eyes, probably trying to decide if I'm here to tell her I'm in some kind of trouble. "This had better be important," she says in the strongest mom voice she's got. The chatty students go silent, turning to me with looks of confusion and intrigue.

I'm torn between feeling self-conscious and full of power, the children's eyes following me as I walk down the center of the room toward my mother. She allows me to pull her to the side, but is visibly annoyed at being interrupted during class. These kids are her life and I'm obstructing her from educating them. "Make it quick," she whispers.

My broad smile makes her regard me as if I'm about to tell her an inappropriate joke. Instead I say, "I was accepted!"

“You mean...into the government labs?” she questions me, shoulders relaxing under my hands.

“Well, a government *training* lab.”

Now it’s her turn to smile. She hugs me, wrapping her dainty arms so tight around mine I can’t even move them enough to return the embrace. Quickly she regains her composure, smooths her coral skirt down and says, “Now get out of my classroom and let me do my job.”

As I’m leaving the school, I get stopped by the principal. “Who are you and what are you doing here?” he asks, stern face directed at me. He is a tall, slender man, probably in his mid-thirties. He has only been the principal here for a few years, because I don’t recognize him; when I went to school, and I only graduated five years ago, the principal was an elderly woman who always smelled of pancakes.

He’s young, but intimidating. I stare up at him, doe-eyed and trying to keep my anxiety on the inside. “My mother teaches here. I just came to share some good news with her; I was just leaving,” I say, starting toward the door.

The man stops me. “I need to scan your tattoo for our visitor records.” He pulls out a portable scanner, points at my arm. I pull up my sleeve and hold out the intricate white tattoo for him. Each design within the tattoo represents something different: medical history, lineage, genetics, assigned

career, degree earned, date of birth—the list goes on and on. It would be almost invisible against my pale skin, except for its raised appearance. It looks more like scar tissue than ink.

The scanner beeps once, then flashes green, letting him know I have no warrants or criminal record. I breathe a sigh of relief, although I knew it would flash green. I have never been in any sort of trouble. Still, there's always that irrational fear that the scanner will act up, flash red, and I'll be hauled off to prison. Or worse.

He nods once and says, "Very well. On your way. And next time," he adds, "scan in at the office when you arrive."