

# **“Risers”**

**Featured with permission in the Charity Anthology,  
BENEATH THE TWIN SUNS**

By  
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SERENA LAY UNDER the shade of the yellow leaves and closed her eyes. She looked forward to this moment—the one hour each month she was allowed above ground. During that time, she was free from the oppressive facility that was her home since arriving on this strange planet, and she wanted to savour every moment.

The sixth. That was her day. Every month at this hour, the guards escorted her to the surface at the first sun's light. Serena was thankful for this assigned time. The heat later in the day was stifling with the arrival of the second sun. Depending on the season, others cancelled their time altogether. But not Serena. Every hour above ground served a purpose.

The time passed quickly. It always did. But that did not stop her from taking a couple of minutes for herself, a moment of respite to fill her lungs with fresh air and think about the future. Of course, the future she looked forward to now was different from the one she once held dear. Everything about that life seemed so long ago; those dreams dying with her life on Earth. But in the new future that waited for her, she was free, and it was everything.

She couldn't wait to escape and be Serena again. Not 1,065. That is what she was to them—a number, nothing more—and every part of her existence, from the assigned white monochromatic athleisure suit to the daily schedule, was meant to remind her of this, every minute, of every day.

But Serena was not just a number. She would never be 1,065. That's why she chose this spot under the protective canopy of the willow-like tree. The lemon-coloured leaves and bright pink flowers reminded her of who she was and where she came from.

Serena had always been smart and courageous—a girl who never took no for an answer. But when her parents died, she nearly forgot who she was. The death of her mother, a victim of a pathogen that claimed the lives of billions in Earth's final days, and father, who passed suddenly and without explanation shortly after arriving here, had filled her with an unbearable sadness. But then she met Mateo, and everything changed.

The monitor on her arm beeped, and instinctively, Serena pulled her wrist close to her chest and took a couple of deep, calming breaths. Mateo always sent her heart racing, but she knew how to steady it and silence the alarm. She'd had plenty of practice.

The first time it happened caught her by surprise. She had been on her way back down from the surface when they passed in the tunnel—his hand grazing hers, sending a wave of heat down her spine. The medic who arrived minutes later appeared to have come out of nowhere, ushering her to an examination room to identify the cause of her sudden spike in heart rate.

A team of doctors were fanatic about the health of all who lived at the facility, and the monitor each person wore, kept track of their vitals, ensuring they remained healthy. But Serena knew it had not been a health reason that sent her pulse racing that day. Something happened the moment the boy called 1,066 touched her, and as he looked over his shoulder and smiled, she felt something she had not since before the world ended—alive.

After that day, it was as if Serena's eyes were open for the first time, and she began to notice things she never had before. Like the fact, every person in the facility was a teenager, and those in charge, adults. Boys and girls were kept apart—each restricted to different levels of the facility. Serena had never seen the boy from the tunnel, with his wavy brown hair and golden skin, because the last time she saw a boy was on Earth.

There were whispers of a growing dissonance among a group that called themselves Risers. Details of when and where they met was communicated in code, shared in seemingly innocuous exchanges. Those interested in attending used the ceiling air vents in their room to access the facility's duct system, crawling like mice to their meeting place in the bowels of the facility, near the massive battery and tech stacks that powered the complex.

It was at the first meeting Serena learned the truth about the facility. It was created by Nathan Exeter, the eccentric founder of Exeter Pharmaceuticals, the man who masterminded the end of their world. It was Exeter that created the deadly pathogen hidden in a revolutionary new vaccine that promised to cure the world of its diseases and collaborated with governments around the world to mandate its distribution.

Exeter believed mankind was reckless, and the damage done to Earth, irreversible. He believed however, humans could do better if given the chance to start over. When an Earth-like planet in a neighbouring solar system was identified, and lack of funding for space exploration opened international programs to public funding, Exeter invested in each and used their collective resources to build the facility.

But mankind could not start over without ensuring its survival, so Exeter found a safeguard—a rare gene that made carriers immune to both his deadly virus and every other disease. Among millions, only thousands possessed the gene, and those 1,200 children between the ages of 13 and 18 were brought to this facility.

Referred to as special, their blood was more valuable than gold. But they were not special. They were simply cows, herded for the apocalypse. The blood in their veins—Serena’s veins, as well as every other teen’s in the facility—to be transfused into every member of Exeter’s new society once the colony above ground was completed.

That night Serena vowed to get her life back. She became a Riser, without hesitation, and the boy whose hand grazed hers that day in the tunnel was no longer a stranger. He introduced himself as Mateo—leader of the Risers, the one who planned to get them out.

As a Riser, Serena found not only a purpose but a family, and as their legion grew, so too, did her belief in the future they were planning, and her feelings for Mateo. The chemistry between them was electric—everyone could see—and one night when a bootlegged music player filled their meeting space with sounds of the past, he reached for her hand and pulled her to him. From that moment on, he was hers, and she, his.

Knowing they were days away from a future where she could be with Mateo filled Serena with anxious energy. It was time to forget about the past. Standing, she emerged from under the tree's canopy, surveying the horizon in front of her.

Like every Riser, she used her time above ground to observe their surroundings and take note of any changes from the previous month. Over the past year, she collected details on temperature, wind pattern, even sky colour, and along with information collected by other Risers, at different times of day, they had a thorough record of their environment. Using it alongside a map of the planet that another Riser had stolen, they planned their escape down to the hour.

Serena stared out across a savannah, knee-high grass extending as far as the eye could see—twisted trees, barren of foliage, peppering the horizon. It was warmer this month, and there was no wind, nor visible signs of wildlife. Like the African savannah, this part of the planet seemed absent of life, and Serena wondered if, at one point in time, it had been home to beautiful creatures like elephants, giraffes, and countless other species that once called Earth home, before being hunted to extinction.

She took note of every detail, even down to smell and planned to share at tonight's meeting. It would be their last. In two days, at the first moon's light, they would make their escape, and by the time the third moon rose high in the sky, they should be at the foot of the white-capped mountains at the edge of the grasslands.

The monitor on Serena's arm beeped, indicating her time was up. Without having to be told by the guard to move, she surveyed the horizon one last time, before making her way over to a glass elevator sticking out of the ground. The next time she stared out at this grassland, she would be free—Mateo's hand holding hers—and the anticipation tight as they escaped to the future, making her fingers tingle with anticipation.

## About the Author

**D.M. Simmons** writes character-driven fiction and urban fantasy, science fiction fantasy, young adult, and new adult stories. She studied literature, creative writing and communications at the University of the Pacific and her debut novel EVOKE received a Gold Medal in the Reader's Favorite 2019 International Book Awards in the Young Adult category. To learn more, visit [www.dmsreadwrite.com](http://www.dmsreadwrite.com).