

## Chapter 8

John was drawn to the bookstore because it felt friendly. There was something about the people who went there that made it that way and whatever that was, it was something he liked. He figured if there existed people in the world who went home to families that loved them, these were they.

The wooden sign on the storefront said Smithy's was a used bookstore, but it had all kinds of things, including a restaurant where you could get beer and sandwiches. People came there to drink but it was different from the bars where the DM types went and got stupid drunk. No one got into fistfights at Smithy's because Smithy didn't allow it.

The initial lure for John was the stuff from all over the world hanging on the walls. One wall had a collection of guns and hunting bows that John studied every time he went. Some of the guns were from the war in Africa. John supposed the storeowner must have been someone important to have traveled and collected so many interesting things.

The owner's friends played cards in a room down the back hall. John could hear them talking when people went in and out. Sometimes he got close enough to hear what was said but mostly they were careful about closing the door behind them. He wondered what kinds of things he'd learn if he could sit in that room and listen.

For John's friend Ethan, the most important thing about Smithy's was the books. Once Ethan found out that Smithy's had the old kind of books, the kind that weren't allowed anymore, he bugged John until he agreed to smuggle them out. John was interested in many of the books too, but Ethan seemed to want them all, especially the books on coding, math, and physics. No matter how thick the book, Ethan read it in a week so that John could return it and get another. It was flat out crazy to risk it, but every Friday night John returned a book and slipped another into his coat. And even crazier than *that*, John could have sworn the owner knew what he was up to. Then one night, he found out he was right.

John had been staring at the objects on the wall from Africa when in the next aisle, he heard someone speak to the owner.

"That kid's here again."

"Ok, thanks," answered Smithy.

"Are you going to let him keep stealing your books?"

"Maybe."

John froze. He felt like he couldn't move but his feet chose otherwise. He ran up the nearest aisle and slammed right into the owner. John would remember staring into that man's face for the rest of his life. Smithy just grinned at him and walked past without a word. It took a lot of nerve to go back again, but John did, and everyone in the shop went about like nothing had happened. John didn't understand why Smithy didn't turn him in, but he wasn't going to question it either.

One night, John noticed that no one was sitting in the cushioned chair next to the table piled high with magazines and newspapers. The chair was rarely empty but on this night, for almost an hour no one sat there. He wasn't as interested in the newspapers because he could get them when they were put out for recycling, but there were some old-time magazines there that dated back twenty years with articles about a time that no longer was. He hovered by the table and noticed the old ones were about cars, electronic gadgets and hunting. He was seated with his feet up and had read three magazines before it occurred to him that they might take offense to him

hogging the most comfortable chair in the place, especially considering he never bought anything. He quickly dropped his feet to the floor and looked around, but no one said a word. One night, after ripping out the articles of interest from the newspapers in the recycling bin, John went inside the shop again to warm up before making the trip back. He was looking at a hunting rifle placed high up on the wall when Smithy stopped and spoke to him.

"You must've memorized every inch of every piece up there," Smithy remarked. "Planning to make your own gun?"

"No sir."

"Know how to use one of these?" Smithy asked.

Afraid that saying anything would give too much away, John just shook his head no.

"Around here, if you don't hunt you don't eat. But mind you, using a gun for anything *else* will change you forever, and in some, the change is for the bad."

He sat John down at the counter with a half pint of beer and a sandwich, talking to him about this and that. At one point, Smithy indicated the chair next to John where his coat was bundled up to conceal a book. "You can keep that one if you want," Smithy offered.

"No, sir," John said. "I'll bring it back like all the others."

The man's eyes seemed to twinkle as he put out his hand, "Name's Smithy."

John shook it and said, "I know. I'm John."

"Nice to meet you John. Do you read all these books yourself?"

"I read some of them, the one's about engineering things like airplanes and cars," he said. "The rest are for my friend Ethan."

Smithy rubbed his chin. "Uh huh. John, I'm gonna be straight with you. I know you're from the orphanage, I know that you slip out two or three nights a week... God only knows how with all the guards and dogs they have... and come into town here."

John tensed and thought to run but Smithy held up a calming hand.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to tell anyone and neither will any of the folks who come here, but the DM can't be trusted that way. So, you be careful. Understand?"

"Yes sir!"

"Don't they have books in that place?" Smithy asked. "I thought you kids were supposed to be getting a high education."

"We have a library full of books, but they're not the kind you have," John explained. "And there're *no* newspapers or magazines to tell us about the world, I mean... that *really* tell us."

"I see... You're running a big risk sneaking out like this," Smithy warned. "That Head Mistress of yours has a mean streak a mile long. A *boy* has a real future coming up in a place like that but if *she* finds out about you coming here, she might just ship you off to the war. Your friend would be in trouble too. She'd *ferret* him out."

"It's worth it."

"Hmmm." Smithy leaned back in his chair. "John," he said, "there're two kinds of smart: the practical kind- that's the kind you have- and the theoretical kind. Sounds like your friend's got the theoretical kind."

"I guess."

"We need both those kinds of smart in the world, but your friend... I'm guessing he wouldn't make it out here on his own. If someday you decide to make a break for it, you'll have to look out for him. Get him to other people like himself."

John had to think that over. Finally, he answered, "OK. I will."

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John had been seven years old when the Head Mistress in the only home he'd ever known came and told him he was going to be shipped to a different Children Center. No explanation, just 'you're going' and 'take nothing with you'. As if he had anything. When he'd arrived at the new Center, one of the guards brought him to the schoolyard where all the girls and boys were out for recess.

"This is the new boy?" the new Head Mistress asked the guard.

"Yes Ma'am."

"Well boy, school here is just like where you were, only better. Rules are the same, only stricter. When the bell rings, you come stand here," she said. She pointed to a number painted on the ground. "This is where you stand when your class lines up. Now go on out there with the others. Hurry up."

As John walked into the fray of children playing, the first thing that caught his eye was a big kid pushing a little kid and yelling at him for stepping on his hat. When the big kid whacked the smaller one, John intervened without thinking, and discovered something that changed his life. John found not only could he fight, he could fight and win.

Kids got into big trouble if they were caught in a scuffle in a Children's Center and something terrible should have befallen John, but it didn't. That was because the younger boy who was being bullied was Ethan and Ethan bribed the Head Mistress to overlook John's offense in exchange for doing what Ethan did as easily as he breathed... math. Ethan started doing the Head Mistress's accounting, the bully who hit him disappeared from the Center and, from that day forward, John was king of the schoolyard.

For a few years, John thought it was ok being there, going to school with a bunch of kids and keeping things fair-and-square in the schoolyard, but by the fifth year he knew the Head Mistress was rotten and there wasn't anything he could do about it. He could keep the bigger boys from picking on the smaller ones, but he couldn't stop her from thrashing them. He began to feel restless and he felt it most when the guards took them outside the gates to collect firewood. He always wanted to stay out longer than they did.

The fenced-in compound where they lived was surrounded by forest, and because Ethan had access to the Net on the office computer, they knew there was nothing for fifty miles in any direction except trees, a small town here and there, and mountains. Inside the fence, the only paved road went up to the big house where the Head Mistress lived and had her office. The rest were dirt roads and paths.

The children, numbering one hundred or so, lived in barracks-style housing and were herded from one activity to another by school guards. With the exception of the Head Mistress, all the people who worked there came in each day from the nearby towns and a couple of them stayed over night to guard the place. Since the townspeople never spoke with the children except to teach them the curriculum in class, and the Head Mistress didn't talk to them at all, the children were left to imagine how they ended up where they were and what life was like in other places. "I think Mistress Fish," Ethan said to John one day, "is a murderer who escaped a penitentiary, found this place when she was on the run, killed off the old Head Mistress, and has pretended to be her ever since. That would explain everything about her."

"It would," John agreed. "What do you suppose the locals think about the Fish?"

Ethan shrugged. "The same as us. I've heard the teachers call her 'the piranha'. She can't beat the teachers like she does us kids, but with the war and all, losing your job is a beating. To know

more, we'd have to go into town... to some place where it's safe for people to speak their minds."

"I'll do it," John said.

"Do what?"

"Sneak into town and find out what people think."

Ethan looked horrified. "Are you crazy?"

"Not yet," John grumbled, "but if I don't get outside that fence, I will be."

John had already hidden a pair of wire cutters from the toolshed under a floorboard and found a place in the chain-link that was well concealed on both sides of the fence. He would cut a flap large enough to slip through, tying it back in place while he was out and after he returned. The nearest town was two miles down the road but he'd heard there was a shortcut to it through the woods. His bet was on the well-worn footpath from which the kitchen staff emerged each morning. All John needed was for Ethan to get his hands on the guard schedule, because he'd already worked out everything else.

At first, Ethan was so scared about John slipping out at night that he couldn't think straight, but Ethan's dread vanished the day John brought him a newspaper article. Having access to publications from outside was, for Ethan, worth every kind of trouble. For John, getting on the other side of the fence without any guards to order him around was so exhilarating that his first time out he thought he was going to rocket to the stars. He wanted to shout as loud as he could and jump up and down but instead he shimmied up a tree and joyously shook its branches.

He thought he'd get used to it, but he never did. Every time he escaped into the forest, there was something new, something worth remembering. Owls hooted in branches over his head and animals slinked unseen in the nearby brush. Deer sometimes appeared ahead of him on the path and disappeared as silently as they'd come. He didn't know what, but there was something about walking in the woods at night that quieted his mind like nothing else.

He tried to be as inconspicuous in town as he was in the woods so that he could study people unnoticed. What he saw was encouraging since none of it looked too hard. The Orphan Center had given him the impression that the world was a difficult place and you had to be prepared before you went out in it, but that didn't seem true at all. The locals were nice in an up-front kind of way. He liked how they got right to the point.

The town was more advanced than he expected. They used solar electricity to heat their homes and businesses unlike the Orphan Center, which used wood stoves everywhere except in the Head Mistress's house. Poking around the outskirts of town, John discovered that the hills were covered with solar farms and that there was a telecommunications tower in a Domestic Military base a quarter mile down the road. That explained all the men dressed in military uniforms everywhere. At first, John assumed the town was part of the base or had grown up around it because the DM acted like they owned the place. But a placard in front of the post office said the town of Jefferson had been founded in 1796, predating the existence of the Domestic Military by more than two hundred years.

The members of the DM were easy to spot because they had to be in uniform on-duty and off. Before his excursions into town at night, John had thought that serving in the DM was a good way to earn a living, until he saw that the DM were like Mistress Fish in how they treated people. He didn't know where he'd end up in life, but at least now he knew he wasn't going to be in the Domestic Military.

While perusing the newspapers at Smithy's one night, an article grabbed his attention. It denounced a terrorist group that committed crimes against the Orphan System by kidnapping

some of the children. John guessed that the author expected to evoke outrage in his readers, but that wasn't the effect on John. As he saw it, any organization that was against the Orphan System probably had some right ideas. Ethan agreed and even said, "Maybe the kids were rescued, not kidnapped."

They decided that, from then on, John would scour the periodicals at Smithy's for any mention of underground organizations and Ethan would do the same on the Net.

Ethan had been using the office computer to mine the Net for anything he was interested in ever since he started working for the Fish. Weaving in 'accidental' searches now and then on topics that were forbidden was easy to do because he'd disabled the computer's spyware. Even if the Net-spyware flagged him and someone investigated, he'd just claim that he'd meant to look up a different word, like *background* not *underground*, for example.

But when he started looking for information about underground organizations all he learned was that the news was one-sided on the topic. If you believed the articles, there was only one valid perspective: Children Centers were good, underground organizations were bad. But Ethan knew *their* Children's Center was not good.

For years, he'd been aware that what they learned in the classroom was censored because of how much more information the Net had on every topic they were taught, and because sources on the Net often contradicted what they learned in class. Someone was right and someone was wrong, but since he wasn't in a position to be able to determine which was which, he decided to zoom in on the biases. Ethan started a collection of topics in the news that were only ever presented from one point of view. He knew if he did that, he'd at least learn something about what the people controlling the Net wanted the public to think. This much he could do, but figuring out *why* those topics were censored... *that part* was going to be tricky.

To add firsthand accounts to Ethan's information collection, John agreed to eavesdrop in town and pay attention to the things people talked about *openly* versus the topics they avoided. He listened more carefully to conversations between people in Smithy's and outside the bars the DM frequented. Ethan was especially interested in what people said about the Corporation sponsored Orphan Centers and the orphan system in general.

John began to notice that most of what the townspeople said about the local Orphan Center was awkwardly truncated and if the DM were nearby, their guardedness was even more pronounced. One time John saw a man silence his friend with a shove followed by an alarmed nod in the direction of a couple of DM when the man started to say something about Mistress Fish. John didn't know of any connection between the DM and the Orphan Center so it didn't make sense to him, but he knew what he saw.

Then came the night when John overheard a group of DM talking about the girls at their Center, laughing about how dumb they were to believe they were going to college. Blinded by rage, John sprinted all the way back to the compound. As soon as he got inside the fence, he went straight to Ethan and told him what he'd heard.

Ethan blew a gasket. "We have to warn them!" he exploded.

"No," John replied grimly. "We need to find out if it's true first."

Ethan started to pace the room. "How?"

"You could look for some kind of proof in the Fish's records," John suggested.

"She wouldn't put something like that in the computer," Ethan argued. "Too many people have access to it."

"Then it's *somewhere else*."



Ethan sat down to think. “She keeps a briefcase locked and there’re paper files inside... *That could be it!*” he said, springing to his feet. “Because when someone calls and she opens the case, her voice gets all high-pitched and wheedling, like she’s got stolen stuff and the fence is on the phone. Then she puts the person on hold, and screams at everyone to leave the room and shut the door.” Ethan began hopping from one foot to the other. “Next time, I’ll stay by the door and listen to the call. And somehow... I’ll find out what’s in that case.”

John and Ethan stood quietly for a time, staring straight-ahead and unseeing. Finally, John said, “I knew the Fish was bad...but I didn’t know she was this bad.”

“She has a *kid* doing her bookkeeping,” Ethan reminded. “Guess why a person would do that?” “Why?”

“So no one finds out she’s stealing,” Ethan informed. “She mixes her personal accounting in with the Center’s to confuse me, but she can’t hide that she spends a lot more than her salary.”

John knew it was close to sun up by how the woods sounded and by the barely noticeable breach of darkness in the sky. Everyone would be getting up soon and he felt pressured by that, and by the necessity of acting immediately on this rotten discovery. They needed a plan and they needed it now.

“You be on the lookout in the office for *anything* about the girls,” John said, “and I’ll try to find out more in town. If you get a chance to pick the lock on the briefcase, do it.”

“OK, but... Even if we find proof, what can we *do*?” Ethan moaned desolately. “Telling them is worthless if there’s no way to help.”

“We can escape, and take them with us. I’ve been thinking about it for a while... how to get you and me out.”

“What?” Ethan scoffed. “And go where?”

“To the Resistance.”

Ethan glared. “We’ve been trying to find the Resistance for months and still have no clue how to contact them, let alone whether they’re safe or not! What if they *are* violent terrorists?”

“I’ll ask Smithy.”

Ethan pondered that silently.

“I’ll only talk with him if no one’s around,” John assured. “Like... when he goes out back to smoke his pipe. I can talk to him then.”

“All right,” Ethan grudgingly agreed. “If you find out how to contact the Resistance, I’ll look for proof of what you overheard in town.”

“Deal,” replied John.

Ethan began taking every opportunity to read anything on the Head Mistress’s desk including her personal computer, which she tended to leave unlocked. Mistress Fish believed that once she sent a NetMessage that the message stream was hidden. She didn’t know that nothing in a computer could hide from Ethan. He’d never once come across software that he couldn’t break into.

Day after day, he waited for her to bring the briefcase to the office. He started to feel desperate and even wondered if he should try to sneak upstairs and look for it in her private suite. The only other thing he could think of was to hijack her phone. That was a crazy, last resort because she kept the phone strapped to her wrist. He’d have to spill something on it, deluge it enough to practically ruin it, then offer to dry it out and restore it. He winced, imagining her wrath.

Then came the lucky break. The briefcase was sitting on a chair one afternoon when Ethan came in to work and, miraculously, she was called out of the room and *left one of the files on her desk*. Ethan began frantically copying all the papers in the file and just barely got them back in the

folder before he heard her footsteps pounding down the hall. With the copies stuffed in his jacket, he slipped past her, mumbling that he was going to the bathroom. To his great relief, though no surprise, she didn't notice he was there let alone that he'd spoken.

Once both John and Ethan had read and reread them, there was no denying that the papers Ethan copied supported what John had heard in town. Each document was a receipt for an advanced payment for a one of the girls in the Orphan Center and a balance was due before May of the following year. John and Ethan knew the girls whose names were written on the receipts expected to go to a college preparatory camp in May and after that, attend the local college. The documents gave an address for the future residence of each girl starting May 31st but their new residences were all different and nowhere near the college. Some of the addresses were on the other side of the country.

On their own the documents might have been interpreted in a variety of ways, but in conjunction with what the DM had said in town, the sickening scenario that John had understood was now too plausible to ignore. The only question was whether the girls would believe them.

"They're gonna ask where we heard the DM," said John. "We'll have to tell them I sneak out at night."

"No," Ethan emphatically objected. "One of them could tell the Fish."

"Then... we need more evidence."

"Ugh," Ethan groaned, remembering how terrifying it was to photocopy the documents. He sighed. "There is *one thing*..."

Ethan had overheard a government inspector talking on his phone one day and learned that the Fish had grown up destitute and had no living relations. At the time, Ethan couldn't imagine why this information was significant, but it was *definitely* notable now. The Fish didn't have a rich relative funding her extravagant lifestyle *but the money was coming from somewhere*.

Ethan started to dig for evidence in the playing field he knew best: *numbers*. For five years, he'd been keeping the books for the Orphan Center and the Head Mistress. In addition to all the accounting, he had access to the Fish's calendar, her Netcard purchases, and her travel history. He took this mother lode of information about the Head Mistress and condensed it into one spreadsheet. Soon it was clear that each of the spending sprees the Fish had enjoyed in the last five months corresponded with the dates of payment and dollar amounts on the papers he'd photocopied. How the Fish lived wildly beyond her means *without incurring debt* was no longer a mystery.

To make it clear even to someone who didn't love numbers, Ethan added up all the Head Mistress's personal expenditures over the past year: hotel and restaurant bills, wine, gourmet food, clothing, perfumes, jewelry, spa treatments... and found that her expenses were triple her yearly salary. Then he added up her expenses for the four years before that and learned Mistress Fish had been earning a second, *very large* income for at least five years that she was not reporting to the IRS. Ethan happened to be perfectly positioned to know this since he was the one who prepared and filed her taxes.

"What if the government inspector had found out that the Fish has a ridiculous amount of spending money," Ethan asked, "and called someone in the IRS?"

"He'd be told that the Fish doesn't report it all," John answered.

"Uh huh. So... she paid off the inspector to give her a good score in his report *and* keep his mouth shut about her extra income," Ethan said.

"Probably had to pay off the IRS guy too," John surmised.

“Which means,” Ethan said with a grimace, “if I reported her for tax evasion, I’d be the only one who got in trouble.”

“Yeah.”

Nevertheless, *it was tempting*. Ethan knew if he just thought about it long enough, he could figure out a way to tell the IRS without putting his own head on the chopping block. Like a jig dancing for a squid, the idea taunted him for a whole day, but then he let it go. They had a metastasizing predicament weighing on them that required his full attention.

He remembered the girls who’d left for ‘college’ the spring before and his heart sank. He agreed that if they were going to tell the girls about the danger ahead then they had to have some kind of solution for them. Just warning them wasn’t good enough, but John’s escape plan was *very risky*, especially with the new kid Blake nosing around. Blake had already snitched on a kid just to gain some privileges.

Risks stood like fences blocking the roads in every direction. The only solution was to accept that safety was an unknown factor in the equation. Ethan did know one thing: they *had* to tell them. His conscience could afford no other choice.

“What’re you gonna say?” John asked.

“I’ll show them the photocopies of the receipts and explain the spreadsheet,” Ethan replied, “and for now, leave out the part about you going into town.”

John shook his head. “Start by telling just Maeve, since you know her the best. Tell her the whole thing, and see what she says.”

Even though she was six years older, Ethan had been in the same class as Maeve since he was five years old. When Ethan was six, they were paired up as partners for a math project and from then on, they’d studied together before every test. Though they argued about everything incessantly, they trusted each other implicitly. In keeping with the spirit of their friendship, when Ethan showed her the evidence, Maeve scoffed at Ethan’s interpretation of the documents.

“You can’t know this is a *sales* agreement!” she exclaimed. “You have no idea what these are.”

“Maeve,” Ethan replied, trying to stay calm, “the name of the girl is listed as the item purchased, next to the amount of money paid and the amount due. Below that is a simple specifications section delineating the buyer’s expectations regarding confidentiality and timing, then there’s a man’s name in print and his signature! This couldn’t be clearer.”

Maeve scowled. “You think the Children Centers would allow girls expecting to go off to college to be sold off *instead*? That’s crazy! These papers could mean anything.”

“Like *what*?”

“What if these people are donors, providing money toward our college education, and the ‘event’ is a congratulatory ceremony sponsored by Orphan Center patrons? The addresses... could be the donors’ so we know where to send the thank you notes.”

Ethan shook his head somberly. “If that were true, there would be some accounting that showed the money had been deposited into a bank account set aside for your education. But there’s no record of the money except on these papers, *which she keeps locked up in a briefcase*. You’ve seen the thing; it’s a portable fortress and now we know why. This is a *huge* amount of money that just disappears... and, based on expenses minus income, Mistress Fish is the one who spends it.”

“That’s not what’s happening,” she snapped.

Ethan cringed. John was right; he had to tell her. “John sneaks out a few times a week and goes into town.”

Her face went white.



“He heard some DM talking who work as guards for a sales event every spring where girls from orphanages get sold, including girls from our Center.” He paused to take a breath. “Where the sale happens is the same place as your camp, the one you’re going to in May.”

Maeve didn’t respond. She just stared at him.

“You have to get out of here before they take you away and John and I know how to do it. He started planning an escape, but not really deciding on the ‘when’ part. We’d just have to change it to accommodate a larger number of people, that’s all. We can do it. I have access to all the calendars, including the guard schedule, so I’m informed about what’s happening and when.”

Maeve hadn’t moved; her face was expressionless.

Ethan tried again. “I know the Fish seems to you like she’s always on top of everything, but she’s not. Yes, she has her full game in gear when outsiders visit but when no one’s coming, she pays no attention to this place. Because I’m in the office every day, I know when she’s paying attention and when she’s not.”

“The goose that lays the golden egg knows when the giant sleeps,” Maeve murmured. “How would we get out of here?”

When Ethan described the escape plan in detail, Maeve just laughed. “You can’t be serious!” “I’m dead serious.”

She looked uncertain. “I know you mean well, but talking any more about this could get you in a lot of trouble. Do you really want to risk telling the others?”

Ethan was aghast. “Do you want to risk *not* telling them? I don’t want that on *my* head. Do you want it on yours?”

Now Maeve looked terrified. “Telling them... Ethan, it’s not going to go well,” she warned.

“They don’t know you like I do.”

“What if you tell them?” Ethan asked.

Maeve pressed her fingers to her forehead to release the headache forming there. “I’ll try.”

The girls took it hard. After Maeve told them, Ethan tried too, but they refused to believe. The truth was just too much of a shock for them. They’d listened, but their minds couldn’t grab hold of such a painful thing, so they spat it back out at him. They raged at the mention of running away and threatened to go to the Head Mistress with ‘Ethan’s lie.’ Maeve and John had to spend most of the night talking them out of doing that.

The next morning, when the guards took a group of them outside the gates to cut firewood, John told Ethan he’d made a decision. He wasn’t going to wait until May.

“I’m not going to stick around to see them get on *that bus*,” John vowed, slamming his axe into a log. Lifting the axe again, he said, “I’m leaving as soon as it’s warm enough to be in the mountains,” and then split the log in two.

Ethan loaded the next log on the stump and backed away. “The girls who left last year... I keep seeing their faces in the windows when the bus drove away, waving, all excited about going...

They had those bags they’d sewn themselves for... to go to-”

**WHACK!**

went the axe, as it smashed the log and sent wood flying.

“Hey!” a guard yelled at John. “Watch it, kid!”

John waited until he was sure the guard wasn’t coming over, and then said, “I won’t be here for the next bus. You can come with me, or stay.”

“Oh, I’m definitely going.” Ethan placed another log on the block. “I’ll keep talking to Maeve. Maybe she can get the others to see.”

“Ethan,” John paused to wipe his face with his sleeve. “If you do that, by the time we’re ready to go the whole school will want to leave with us.”  
Ethan’s mouth dropped open, and then he laughed. “That would be *great*.”

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As John predicted, other children in their Orphan Center heard about the plan and wanted in. The deal was, anyone could come if they agreed to follow everything that John and Ethan said until everyone was safely away from the Center. The consequence of going to Mistress Fish or in any way not following the plan as Ethan and John explained it, was to face lifelong rejection from every member of the group. Those who agreed to this, met in secret in the old schoolhouse when Ethan gave the signal.

To manage the additional complexity of accommodating a large number of kids, John decided to map out multiple escape routes. Toward this end, he expanded the territory he covered when he slipped out at night and learned every path that led away from the compound. He added to the map all that he heard in town about hunting trails and patterns in DM movement. Once he felt he’d done the best he could, he handed it over to Ethan to align it with maps on the Net. In two months, they had a realistic map of roads and trails in the White Mountains region.

To John’s surprise, Smithy readily agreed to help him make contact with the Resistance. A rendezvous was set at a point twenty five miles south in early May, but not an exact date, since that was dependent on the weather, the guard schedule, and the moods of the Fish. The indefinite nature of these details didn’t faze John. Once he’d met a person in the Resistance, a person Smithy said he *trusted*... he was determined to find a way to get everyone out who wanted to go. All of his energy and attention was now focused on designing an escape plan that couldn’t fail.

Ethan’s job was to learn how to navigate the White Mountains in early May, a time of year when snow was still on the highest peaks and the weather was as tricky as the tides. A sunny day could lure the unsuspecting up a slope and trap them in a blinding blizzard that afternoon. Every spring there were stories of people who’d headed up on a lovely, warm day and then lost their lives to the cold.

No one noticed Ethan learning these things on the office computer, because Ethan always studied something or other after he finished the bookkeeping each day. The Head Mistress had a digital tuner that could access TechNet, a combined Corporation & Government super cloud that made approved science information available to the public. She also had access to sites for educators where a person could learn almost any academic topic. In some fields, Ethan could learn the entire course load up through the graduate level. He’d learned basic accounting practices that way, then intermediate and advanced, as well as countless other subjects.

Ethan was nine years old the first time he stayed up all night studying something on the office computer. The Head Mistress never said a word about it, and still nothing when he began to do it regularly. She didn’t realize that Ethan was tracking every movement the night guards made until John was safely back inside the compound and earning subject credits at the same time. Although the Head Mistress hadn’t yet guessed *his* game, Ethan knew hers. He knew he was a cash cow. He’d read extensively about the federally run Orphan System, and about how Corporation-funded Parenting Our Children Centers like theirs attained ‘honors standing’ if one of their boys won a placement at the genius level in a Corporation College. More importantly, the Head Mistress of the Center that raised the genius received a massive, cash bonus.

In his short life, Ethan already understood that empathy towards others could either be learned through kind mentoring or the school of hard knocks... and that some people like Mistress Fish, were impervious to ever acquiring it at all. If empathy were an ocean, she didn't have a drop. He wondered from time to time, what had produced the thick layer of scar tissue that encrusted her psyche. He would probably never know, but he could at least thank her for one thing: knowing her provoked him to want to find a place where the people in charge cared about something other than money. There had to be something better than the way of the Fish. Ethan and John were keenly aware of the combination of circumstances in favor of an unobserved escape. The war had caused a sharp population decline in rural areas so not only were there very few people, the ones that lived within twenty miles never came near the Orphan Center unless they worked there. The avoidance was mostly due to a rumor about the 'vicious' guard dogs. Locals believed the dogs were allowed to run free all day inside the fence and that some of them escaped into the forest at night. But Ethan discovered this was a myth created to keep intruders away and children in line. A few of the gentle dogs were allowed to roam but they spent their day outside the kitchen begging for scraps. The rest of the dogs were leashed or inside a dog run all day and then crated at night so as not to disturb the Head Mistress's sleep. With the dogs in their crates and Ethan's knowledge of the guard schedule, all they had to do was teach the children how to quietly exit the compound. Once outside the fence, John would make sure they made it to the mountains before dawn without ever running into a soul. Everything was moving along as planned until the new kid began to cause trouble. John recognized Blake as a problem the first time he heard him speak. Blake went off on crazy rants when he didn't get his way but he knew not to rage near the Head Mistress. Time in the Orphan System had taught Blake how to act in front of the one person who had the power to do him harm and grant him what he wanted. Mindless raving was just a trick Blake employed to alarm and distract his peers so he could control the situation. When John thought things over, he did so with the intention of being truthful with himself about every part. Not because he'd been taught to be honest, or because it was good to be honest, but because honesty was a tool that enabled him to trust what his eyes saw and his ears heard. If he never fooled himself, at least he'd always have one person he could trust. He didn't share his private concerns with anyone but Ethan, and that had been a long time in coming. A thing had to be very important for John to bring it up, even with Ethan, but John knew they had to address the problem of Blake.

"He's a turd," Ethan admitted, "but if we don't let him in, he'll rat us out."

"It won't be as easy as that," John warned. "Blake's the kind who'll sell you out when he doesn't get his way."

"Well, *right now*, I'm worried about how much his mouth moves without his brain," Ethan grumbled. "When he bosses kids around and tries to monopolize with his mouth, anything can come out. I'll give him one thing, though; he knows how to wag the Fish. Having someone who can schmooze *her* could come in handy."

"I get that we have to let him in," John said, "but know this: *Blake's only loyal to himself.*"

Ethan was quiet a moment and then said, "Yeah, I know."