

Chapter 11

Cara supposed she'd been asleep, but that didn't explain why she couldn't move. Finally, her eyelids responded to her unspoken command but what she saw only caused more confusion. Everywhere there was movement. Light and shadow danced across every surface and the walls moved as if billowed by a breeze. Leaves twirled around the ceiling and her ears were filled with the swishing sound of leaves in the wind. Gradually it came to mind that sunlight was shining through wind-tossed trees above a tent.

Vague memories drifted in: the sick man... reaching the rendezvous point... and hiding the car. But what happened after that?

A flap opened on the tent and although the light was too bright to make out more than a silhouette, she knew who it was. Mason sat down on the ground next to her.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi," Cara managed to croak.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Thirsty."

The tent flap opened again and Cara heard a young voice say, "I'll get some water!"

"If you're going to eavesdrop," Mason called, "you might as well come inside."

Cara tried to push herself up but her arms gave way. "What's wrong with me?"

"You're just weak," Mason explained.

"Why?"

"The receptionist in the psychiatrist's office was a skilled pickpocket," he recounted.

Cara stared without comprehending.

"She took the antiviral meds from your coat," he continued, "and replaced it with a pack of extended-time-release sedatives disguised in antiviral packaging. So... not only did you miss taking your antiviral yesterday, you took sedatives instead."

"And you had *three* of 'em!" Reed guffawed as he plopped down next to Mason. "You'd already taken one pill and Mason told you to take two more!"

Mason cuffed Reed mildly on the back of the head saying, "I was hoping she'd forget that part."

"Not a chance," Cara ribbed and tried to smile but her mouth moved strangely.

Mason placed a backpack behind her so she'd have something to lean up against then helped her sit up.

"It's amazing you hung in there as long as you did," he said, giving her a sip of water. "Better?" he asked.

"Yes thanks," she answered, and then leaned against the pack. "Wait... they *sedated* me? Does that mean they intended to kidnap me in my apartment while I was asleep?"

Mason's expression turned grim.

"Appears so," he said. "Rachel doesn't know if they'd already suspected you were Resistance but we have to assume they believe it now, given they discovered you had a packet of Resistance-formula antiviral in your possession."

Reed's eyes sparkled mischievously. "And now there are wanted posters with your picture in laundromats and grocery stores," he joked.

Cara grinned, but her smile quickly disappeared. "Does this put Rachel in danger?"

"We don't think so," Mason answered. "Except for her initial interactions with you two years ago, she always met you at locations outside of work."

Derek came in banging a plate of food with a spoon calling, "Time to eat, you lazy bum!"

Cara groaned.

"You have to eat! You're gonna need strength to hear all we have to tell you!" Reed sang out. Mason sighed.

"You're not going to believe it," Derek agreed.

"Let me tell it!" Reed said excitedly as

Cara looked expectantly from one face to the other.

"Go ahead," Mason consented but did not appear pleased.

"Okay, so here's the story," Reed stated with a theatrical flair. "When we got into camp last night with the stretcher and that guy- he's awake by the way! But not doing so well because he was *really* bad off... Anyway! Guess what we found sitting around the fire when we got here?" "What?"

The two boys started laughing so Mason stepped in to relay, "An interesting quirk of fate has delivered some *orphans* to us."

Still chuckling, Derek handed her the plate and said, "These kids ran away from one of those Centers north of here about three days ago and showed up at our camp last night. Smithy had asked us to take on *two* boys, and we agreed, but a whole bunch of 'em showed up!"

Mason leaned toward her, his eyes misty with mirth. "Cara. There are twenty one orphans in our camp."

"That's... *unbelievable*," she murmured. "In the Center where I lived, it would've been close to impossible for *one* child to escape."

"It looks like they made a clean break, too," Derek told them in amazement. "Eve headed off last night to trace their route back to Smithy's and cover up footprints, but I wonder if she even needed to. They had every detail figured out, I tell you; their escape plan was pure genius."

Still incredulous, Cara said, "But what're you going to do with them all?"

Reed burst into a laugh. "We don't know!"

"I may have a solution," Mason revealed, "but I'd like for us to talk with some of them first to understand their expectations, and I was hoping," Mason hesitated. "Half of them are girls... so I was wondering if you could speak with a few of them, when you feel up to it."

"I'd be happy to," Cara assured him.

"One kid's a *big* problem," Reed added.

"He's got a big *mouth*," Derek agreed.

"There's gonna' be a duke out," Reed stated. "Only a matter of time."

"A bomb we'll have to defuse," Mason conceded.

"Well, I'll talk with the girls," Cara said, trying to push herself up. "Ugh! If I can walk!"

"Just take care of yourself today," Mason advised. "We've asked them to do simple jobs to earn their keep. Maybe tomorrow you could say hello while they're doing their chores?"

"Sure. What do you need to know?" Cara asked.

"Their expectations," he replied. "If they have crazy, grandiose ideas of running off to the city and being on their own, we'll have to address that. There are too many things they don't understand for that to be a safe option."

Cara nodded. "Smithy couldn't have risked telling them they've been receiving an antiviral medication all their lives, let alone that the vaccine doesn't exist." Then she smiled and added.

"Yet."

Mason brightened. "Any day now."

All day John and Ethan had been waiting to hear from the man named Mason but he left the camp late that morning and hadn't come back yet. Derek and Reed, the two kids who ran the camp, seemed decent, but Blake was wearing out their welcome by running his mouth and getting on everyone's nerves. John didn't know if Blake was wreaking havoc on purpose, or if he didn't have the sense to know not to give trouble to the people who were helping him. Ethan kept trying to pacify Blake hoping to prevent a mutiny and John just ignored him. But there was nothing new there; Ethan and John had always approached things differently. If John couldn't change a situation, he stopped thinking about it and moved on what could be done next. In contrast, Ethan believed no problem was unsolvable and would think on it until he fixed it. True to their natures, Ethan obsessed aloud about Blake as they collected firewood while John quietly threw himself into the task. Neither boy minded the other, because they knew it was the combination of their differences that had enabled them to survive the Center.

Still wobbly on her feet, Cara wound her way along the path to the stream. The freezing cold water invigorated her and for the first time as far back as she could remember, she felt whole and happy. Maybe her new life was going to be harder than the one she'd led before the Resistance, but her new life was honest. *Honest like the woods*, she thought. Nature didn't lie to itself because survival didn't allow it that luxury. The natural world could be brutal, but it wasn't malicious. To live in these woods, one needed only to be aware of the forces of nature and one's frailty next to them.

Cara brought dinner to Alfred Dyer that evening, but finding him asleep, she covered the plate and left it next to him. When she stepped out of the tent, Cara heard raised voices coming from the group of newcomers huddled around one of the fires. Drawing closer, she saw that two of the boys were in an argument and, at a smaller fire nearby, Mason and Derek were watching carefully. Derek's band of boys had gathered to gawk and as Cara came within earshot, she heard the larger boy say,

"If you want to stow away on a ship, go do it."

"I said I want to *hijack* a ship," the other yelled, "not *hide* in one! Hiding is what you do 'cause you're a chicken, John. Bok, bok, *BOK*," the boy squawked, flapping his elbows.

"*Hijack* a DM cargo ship?" John laughed.

"That's right, so I can get *as far away as possible* from *this* hell-hole," the boy jeered.

The orphans began to whisper among themselves. One of them jumped up and yelled,

"Yeah! We're in the middle of *nowhere*!"

Then they began arguing with each other until the boy named John spoke in a loud voice,

"Whoever thinks Blake should be your leader instead of me and Ethan, go stand with him now."

Grumbling followed, but no one moved.

Mason stood up and walked slowly through the throng of children with Derek and Reed close behind him. When they stepped inside the ring of logs used as seats, all the new arrivals to the

camp shrank away barring one. John remained planted where he stood, moving only to turn and squarely face Mason. John's challenger, the boy named Blake, watched sheepishly from the shadows, while John gazed unwaveringly at a man twice his strength and taller by a foot. Cara smiled when Mason took a step back to give the boy some space.

"If any of you want to go back to the Parenting Our Children Center," Mason said to the group, "we'll show you the way back. Those who do not, we'll take you to a safe place where you can live and earn your keep."

"John look!" one of the orphan boys called out. "Look at his armband!"

Derek's head swiveled. "What about it?" he demanded.

The boy who'd just spoken stepped timidly into the firelight. He was thin with thick-rimmed glasses and his manner of speaking was so adult that in the flickering light he looked like a very small man.

"Smithy told us to talk to the boy wearing a patch like the one you have on that armband," the boy explained, "but I didn't see you wearing it till now."

Cara looked on with interest as Derek studied the boy. Judging character was one of Derek's finely tuned instincts. Soon Derek held up his arm. "Here it is," he said. "What did you want to tell me?"

The boy with the glasses slipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out a bedraggled green patch.

Reed jumped forward and barked, "Who'd you steal that from?"

The boy's face turned pale. "I didn't- someone gave it..." but anxiety muffled his voice and he couldn't go on.

"Smithy gave it to us," John said.

The smaller boy nodded and having regained his courage, he stepped towards Derek and thrust out his hand. "My name's Ethan. This is John. We've come here to join the Resistance, but the others..." he looked back at the larger group, "are undecided."

Derek's eyebrows flew up as he met the boy's outstretched hand with his. "You already know I'm Derek. This is Mason," he told them. "When Mason's here, he's in charge. When he's not, I am."

Mason shook the hands of both boys and said, "Smithy asked us to take on the two of you, but we didn't know about the others until you all showed up. And," he added, "this is the first we've heard about your wanting to join the Resistance. We only agreed to find you a safe home."

"Yes sir, I can explain," Ethan began but was interrupted when the boy who'd been arguing with John pushed his way through the group and bellowed at Ethan, "WHO APPOINTED YOU KING?" Flicking his hair from his eyes, he derisively answered his own question, "*Nobody*."

Then he said to Mason, "These two don't speak for the rest of us."

"That's Blake," John said. "When he's here, he *thinks* he's in charge."

The children all laughed except Blake who stood there smoldering like a hot coal under wet leaves. Cara moved to get a closer view of the boy's face and what she saw was disturbing. He looked like a volcano ready to blow. She'd seen that kind of fury before in some of the children at her Center. They spewed anger like burning lava to avoid reliving their pain.

"Hello Blake," Mason said, offering a welcoming hand to him as well.

Blake shook Mason's hand sniggering at John and Ethan like he'd triumphed somehow, and Derek, seeing the truce was fragile, turned to Reed and said,

"Go ahead."

"*Time to eat everybody!*" Reed called out.

Uproar followed his words, and the lively clamor lasted until all the young stomachs had a second helping of food. Cara took her plate and joined Derek, Mason and Reed at the small fire. Speaking so as not to be heard beyond their circle, Cara updated the three of them on the ailing man's progress.

"Thomas said that Alfred should be well enough to join us for breakfast tomorrow," she told them, referring to the paramedic treating the man.

"That's good," Mason replied, sounding relieved. "We'll break camp day after tomorrow."

Cara frowned. "Do you think he'll be ready to hike by then? These mountains are steep."

"Alfred's all over the news right now," Mason warned. "The DM are under a lot of pressure to find him so it won't be safe here much longer. We can only hide him if we get him up the mountain."

"What about those two kids?" Reed asked. "You think they really want to join?"

Mason shrugged. "Can't tell. But if we take them with us, the long days of hiking in mountain air and sitting around a fire at night with full bellies..." He smiled. "We'll know who they are long before we get there."

Reed looked stunned. "Are you saying you want to take them to the base?"

"Smithy says these two boys are trustworthy so yes, I'm considering it. But I'll take them there only when I'm sure that they understand what they're getting into and can agree to my terms."

Reed looked concerned but fell quiet. Cara broke the silence. "You plan to give them the memory drug then?"

"Not unless it's necessary," Mason answered.

"Sir," Reed shifted uncomfortably, "you'd be breaking a serious rule."

Mason clapped him on the back. "Thanks Reed. Warn me about this again after we climb the ridge. I'll be making the decision at some point after that."

"Hmmm," Cara murmured. She was curious to know more but decided to pursue the subject when she and Mason were alone. "I think I can guess who the hothead is," she ventured.

Derek and Reed burst into a laugh but Mason looked chagrined.

"I suppose it's time to call them over. Ready Derek?" Mason prompted and Derek jumped to his feet.

"Yes sir. Just the two?"

"To begin with, yes," Mason affirmed.

A moment later, Derek returned with John and Ethan, each clutching a wooden plate of venison in one hand and a cup of strong coffee in the other. When invited to sit down, they did so with a comical amount of care not to spill what little was left on their plates. Cara caught sight of the boy named Blake lurking behind a rock, apparently attempting to eavesdrop. She motioned to Mason about the boy and Mason responded with a knowing wink.

Glancing at John and Ethan's plates, Mason asked, "Does the second helping taste as good as the first?"

"Yes sir!" their voices resounded.

Mason grinned. "I asked Derek to invite you over because we'd like to hear why you want to join the Resistance."

"To rescue some of the kids still at the orphanage," Ethan answered. "They're in danger."

Mason and Derek exchanged glances but before they could reply, Blake leapt into the circle and pointed furiously at John.

"I knew you'd betray us! I knew you were *that* stupid!"

Perplexed, John said, "Blake, what're you talking about?"

Then Blake kicked John's cup out of his hand and Derek leapt between the two boys forcing Blake to back down.

"You have nothing to fear from us, Blake," Mason told him. "We want to help."

Ethan sighed. "He knows that. He's just causing trouble because he's not in charge. If it's Blake's idea, it's great. If it's anybody else's, it's stupid."

Derek sat Blake down and stood over him as Mason asked the boys to continue their explanation. Ethan leaned forward. "We want to join the Resistance for a bunch of reasons but right now we're worried about some of the girls who stayed at the Center. They think they're going off to college but that's not--"

"No!" Blake shrieked. "That's what *you* two idiots want! The rest of us want to stay alive and joining the Resistance is *not* how you do that!"

Mason stood and towered over the group. "I'd have to agree with you, Blake," he said and looked meaningfully at John and Ethan. "The Resistance is a commitment that involves risk. With that in mind, those in your group who want to join are welcome. Those who don't, will either be escorted to a safe place on the coast to live with my friends, if that's what they choose, or taken back to the Center. Derek," he said, without taking his eyes off Blake, "find out who wants to join the R and who wants to leave. For those who want to go, get a count on how many will go back to the orphanage and how many would like to work for a fisherman for room and board. Tell them, if they go to our contacts on the coast, I promise that they'll stay together, they'll be treated fairly, eat well and when they're sixteen they'll be given the opportunity to learn another trade. But one way or another, we're all clearing out of here the day after tomorrow."

"Yes sir," said Derek and headed off to see to the task.

The three boys looked dumbfounded but Ethan finally found his voice.

"Th-thank you, sir!" he stammered.

From his earliest memory, Ethan had been required to address every adult man with 'sir' and had known to say 'thank you' whether the adult had earned it or not. This was different. Mason deserved their thanks and the experience of feeling grateful to an adult was disconcerting. Ethan was indebted to Smithy, but he'd never met him. Mason was standing *right there*, offering them help.

Blake sucked his teeth at Ethan and turned on Mason. "That's right. Throw us away, like everybody else. You're just as bad as the people at the *Center*," he spat, and stomped away. Ethan groaned. "I'll talk to him," he said, and gobbled the last of his food before running after Blake.

Cara looked quizzically at John. "Do you think Ethan's wasting his time trying to reason with Blake?" she asked.

"Blake would let Ethan drown to keep from getting wet," John stated flatly. "I think... it's best to give Blake what he wants in a way that works for you."

Cara hid a surprised smile and Mason gave the boy an approving nod. "Thank you, John. I appreciate the informed assessment." Turning to Cara he added, "I have to take care of something. Won't take long. Reed... with me."

"Yes sir," Reed replied, leaping to his feet.

"John, feel free to stay and finish your meal," Mason invited. "I'm sure Cara would love the company."

"I would," Cara agreed. "I'm dying to hear about the *grand escape*."

John smiled broadly. "Sure," he replied, "I'm just gonna see if there's some more stew... Be right back."

Cara easily understood why Mason wanted to encourage John and Ethan. The Resistance looked for people who were strong minded and tenacious and these two certainly were. When John returned, she asked the question foremost on her mind.

"How did you decide it was worth it to run away?" she asked. "I'm sure it could have turned out badly for you and Ethan, if you'd been caught."

"Yeah," John answered soberly, "but staying was worse. The lady who runs the place is terrible and I found out from talking to people at Smithy's that the POC Centers use us kids to make money. They were supposed to give us a great education but Mistress Fish lies and makes the teachers tell us whatever the Fish wants us to believe. They separate us from the real world so we won't know what's going on. That keeps us dependent on them, but we know they lie."

"How?" asked Cara.

"Because they slip up and tell the truth sometimes, or forget the lie they told and contradict themselves. But also because what they tell us doesn't fit with what we read in the newspapers I get from Smithy's and what Ethan reads on the Net."

Cara didn't know if she was in awe of this young person because of his knowledge of the system that had controlled him, or because of his no-nonsense style of communication.

"Do you think Blake will want to go back to the Center?" she asked.

"Maybe," John replied. "Blake thinks he can handle the Fish... I mean, Head Mistress Fish. He thinks she likes him and he can control her, but he's wrong. She doesn't like anybody."

"What kind of person is she?" asked Cara. "Can you describe her?"

"Like Blake only older. Blake said that."

"Wait," said Cara, "he sees himself in her and doesn't know that's bad?"

John grinned. "Yeah."

Cara threw her head back and howled with laughter.

Seeing her outburst had drawn the attention of the children at the other fire, Cara was careful to ask the next question quietly. "Did you know that the Corporation funds the Parenting Our Children Centers?"

"No," he answered. "But the Fish told some of us that we'd work there someday, like we had no choice."

"If you were to join the Resistance, you'd learn about the Corporation and why they have so much control."

"Money," he said.

"Yes," she agreed. "If you accept their money, you owe them; if you don't do what they say, they withhold money when you need it most. But it's worse than that. They took all the money in the government, money that citizens paid in taxes for roads and bridges and medical care, and they use it to control the government as well as individual people and businesses. Once they had control of the government, they had the power to freeze business assets and stall financial transactions."

"And the DM," John guessed. "The Corporation buys them too."

"Yes."

John put down his plate. "What else would we learn if we joined?"

"How to defend yourselves," she said, "and you'd learn at least one trade. Some people learn more than one."

John's face lit up. "The Resistance will train us to fight?" he asked, just as Mason rejoined them.

“First, you learn self-defense,” Mason responded. “We’d teach you how to assess your environment to recognize dangerous people and situations. You’d learn stealth techniques to avoid trouble and social skills to help you get away from unsafe people. You’d also learn to track and hunt so that you could survive on your own if you had to, and you’d be taught Tai Chi so you could out-maneuver an opponent and get away.”

John’s face fell. “Tai Chi’s for *old people*!”

Cara bit her lip to keep from laughing and Mason laughed outright. “A few of the instructors will be coming here tomorrow,” Mason told him. “Meeting them will probably give you a new perspective on the subject... In the meantime, it might help to know that they do teach other forms of martial arts to people who’ve become skilled in evasive maneuvers.”

John looked relieved.

Derek returned and said, “John, can you get some of your kids to help clean up?”

“Sure,” John replied obligingly and when he stood up, Mason said to him, “Listen to Derek. Ask him questions. He’ll advise you well.”

Caught off guard, John stood still. He wasn’t used to people looking out for him. It reminded him of Smithy.

“I will,” he replied and as he was heading off with Derek, Cara heard him ask, “Did you have to learn Tai Chi?”

Early the next morning, a peculiar birdcall made Cara sigh with relief. One of the lookout posts high up in the trees was announcing the arrival of compatriots bringing news and needed supplies. Now they could move ahead as planned.

Other things looked promising as well. Mason’s charge Alfred Dyer, sat next to her by the fire. Though he was still quite frail, he was eating a hearty breakfast and the color was back in his cheeks. The orphan children were still fretting but there hadn’t been any displays of hostility between them since Derek communicated Mason’s proposal the night before.

Scanning the tree line with amused anticipation, Cara strolled over to the orphan children’s fire, hoping to catch their reaction. Then, fixing her gaze in the direction of the warning call, she tried not to, but eventually she blinked... and then she laughed. She’d missed it again!

“Whoa! Where’d *they* come from?” Cara heard a girl say.

Another answered with a mouth full of breakfast, “Who?”

She saw Ethan shake John’s shoulder and point. Then the whole group of orphans was staring at the tree line buzzing like a beehive.

One said, “Are they real?”

“They’re girls,” said another.

“No... they’re too still. They’re statues.”

“Remember when we learned about the Norse and how they dressed?”

“You think they’re Vikings?”

“How come they don’t move?”

Cara smiled as she looked at the silent brigade at the edge of the clearing. She knew the young women would remain motionless until commanded otherwise. This particular group of GZ ranged in age from ten to seventeen years and despite their youth, they were highly disciplined. Though their leader was newly assigned, she’d grown up within their ranks.

An owl call sounded from the woods and when Eve walked out in front of them, the group deftly formed a line four persons across and followed her. The orphans watched open-mouthed as the large group moved soundlessly across the clearing, stopping abruptly in front of Mason on Eve's signal.

Cara heard Ethan murmur, "Amazons!" and had to stifle a laugh. To the children nearest her, Cara explained, "This group is part of the Resistance. They're called the GegenZeit."

"Derek!" they heard Mason call.

"Coming," Derek responded, and on his way, Derek stopped to tell John, "Your Tai Chi instructors are here."

At dusk, there were three fires in the camp instead of two and those at the orphan children's fire spoke in hushed voices as they ate, except Blake. He was loud and cantankerous in his attempts to lure the orphans into his complaints. Tired of his ranting, the girls wandered over to the new fire circle and ate with the GZ.

"Some *Resistance!*" Blake sputtered. "A bunch a' *girls!*"

"*Beautiful* girls," one corrected.

"They're a joke," Blake growled.

Ethan sat on a log, his glasses reflecting the firelight. "We watched them train today, Blake," he said. "The smallest one could shot-put you to Mars."

Blake jumped up and screeched, "ONE BIG JOKE! Their *leader's* like... eight years old! You think I'm gonna to take orders from a little girl? Yeah, well, you can forget it! I've said *yes ma'am* a million times too many. I'm gettin' outta here, away from these crazies, and tomorrow's not soon enough!"

The boys around the fire all began to talk at once. Ethan tried to reason with them while John ate his dinner outside the circle, thinking about his day. He'd gone with Derek to scout for signs of DM activity while hunting for food. Derek showed him how they protected the camp with concentric perimeters, ever widening circles of lookouts around the camp. When they reached the third perimeter, they crossed paths briefly with two of the GZ who were posted as lookouts. Back in camp, one of Derek's boys taught John how to make the stew they were eating. Ethan dragged his log nearer to John and pointed toward the fire where the girls from the orphan center were eating with the GZ.

"At least we got some of them out," Ethan said. "None of the older ones though."

"Don't remind me," John grumbled in frustration. The fate of the girls they'd left behind haunted him.

"They didn't believe me," Ethan said sadly.

"The Fish tricked them," John said.

"Yeah, they didn't know she'd do anything for money like we did. I just wish they'd trusted us," Ethan lamented, "and I wish *they'd* trust us," he added, nodding in the direction of the smaller fire.

"Mason?" John asked.

"I get the feeling we're on probation," Ethan said and a boy who overheard him agreed.

"Me too!" he exclaimed. "They really grilled us today."

"Who did?" asked John.

“That guy Reed and two other kids.” The boy eyed John suspiciously. “You were gone all day with Derek. Did he tell you anything?”

“I know the same as you,” John answered irritably. Blake was purposely brewing mistrust and it was testing his patience.

“What did they tell you last night, Johnny?” Blake prodded accusingly.

“You looked all cozy over there at their fire.”

All eyes turned to see how John would respond and though John felt anger rising, he said,

“How’s your dinner Blake? I made it just for you.”

That made all the boys snigger.

Then Ethan elbowed him. “They want your opinion, John.”

“About *what*?”

“Like... what’s going to happen to us,” said Ethan.

John was incredulous. “Why don’t you tell them?”

“They don’t want to know what I think.”

John groaned. Softening harsh realities wasn’t his strong suit, which was why he always left the talking to Ethan. From John’s perspective, cushioning the truth put himself and others in danger.

Sticking to the truth about things was smart because it kept a person receptive to what was coming next and left the playing field wide open. He drew in a breath and then said,

“Tomorrow, some people will be allowed to stay and join the Resistance and the rest will go to the coast or back to hell.”

For reasons completely inexplicable to John, simply repeating things the boys *already knew* caused a huge commotion. Ethan in particular looked like he’d received an electric shock.

“Are you saying,” Ethan began tremulously, “that even if some of us *want* to join the R, they might not let us?”

“Maybe...” John answered. “Like you said, it seems like they’re checking us out.”

Now Ethan looked terrified so John added, “*You* don’t have to worry. The Resistance needs smart kids.”

But when Ethan looked relieved John felt guilty. He didn’t *actually* know that was true, it just seemed like a reasonable assumption. John hated times like this, when you could tell someone anything and they’d believe you, just to be less afraid.

Blake stood up and addressed anyone who’d listen. “These Resistance are all gonna’ get themselves killed. If you want to live, come with me tomorrow. If you want to die, go with this loser,” he said, spitting on John’s boot.

“Thanks Blake,” John said, continuing to eat his dinner. “That should clean ‘em.”

Some of the kids laughed but stopped when Blake turned on them.

“*Die* with the Resistance for all I care,” Blake hollered, and left to get more stew.

“But before he goes he’ll eat their food,” Ethan noted wryly.

“And tonight there’s plenty of it,” a voice said behind them and they turned in surprise to see Cara standing there. “I hope you don’t mind that I overheard some of your conversation.”

“Uh, um...” Ethan stammered and John chuckled. Ethan was often tongue-tied until a question came to mind. Then you couldn’t keep him from talking. For most people it was money in their pocket, but for Ethan if a question went unanswered, it wore a hole in his head.

“Are you trying to decide about me and John?” Ethan blurted out.

“Decide what?” she prompted.

“Whether we can join the Resistance or not?” Ethan finished.

She smiled, thinking how refreshing his openness was. "Ethan, you and John are both very welcome. Mason just wants to make sure you know what you're getting into. Once he thinks you understand the risks, you will decide. If you opt out, he'll have someone escort you to the fishing village or back to the orphan center, same as the others."

Ethan frowned and she said,

"Questions are easy to ask if someone else has to provide the answer, but not so easy when you have to come by the answer yourself." She paused and tilted her head slightly. "You're free now; free of the orphan Center and the mistress there... free to begin a new life, but where you will go is something you have to decide."

When John awoke the next morning and stepped out of the tent, he was stunned. The camp had disappeared! Only the two tents that housed the orphans were still standing. No fire pits, no equipment, no supplies, and no people. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, and looked again, but it was still gone. A strange feeling crept over him and he wondered if he'd dreamt it all.

"Ho there, captain!"

John whirled around and was greatly relieved to see the medic coming toward him from the woods. "At least you didn't disappear," John said. "Where'd everything go?"

"While you and your crew were sleeping off the rye," Thomas winked, "we struck camp. Isn't safe to stay this close to the edge for long."

"Edge of what?"

"Property controlled by the Corporation and patrolled by the DM," Thomas answered.

"Nobody can own this," Ethan mumbled groggily as he pushed through the flap of the tent. "It's a national forest-" but he stopped speaking when he saw the deserted campsite.

"They haven't left yet," John explained and Ethan looked greatly relieved.

"You've been studying an old map," Thomas told Ethan, "because everything north of the notch in this state is controlled by the Corporation."

Ethan put his hand on his head. "Oh yeah, the Corporation bought a lot of property to prevent our enemies from stealing it."

"They didn't buy anything, they *took* it. Someone's fed you a lot of crap, my friend," Thomas remarked dryly.

Cara had emerged from the woods and joined them.

"Don't blame him," she said as she dropped the packs she was carrying on the ground. "That's how it's portrayed to children in all the schools."

Thomas looked angry and grumbled something in French.

"What's that?" Ethan asked.

He raised a brow. "I said the CEO of the Corporation is a thief. This war is just his excuse to steal," Thomas replied.

"We know a control freak like that," Ethan acknowledged.

Thomas snorted. "Yes, some of your friends told me about *Head Mistress Fish*. Good riddance to her. Speaking of parting," he added, "Cara, it's been a pleasure."

"Leaving today?" she asked.

He nodded. "Alfred's over the worst. He doesn't need medical attention anymore but he's weak. I told Mason to go *really* easy on him today. Nothing steep."

“Thank you Thomas,” Cara said, giving him a big hug. “What would we have done without you?”

“You’re so welcome.”

“Where’re you off to?” she asked. “Another mission so soon?”

“No,” he answered. “I’m going to spend time with friends in the Laurentian Mountains, away from the mess we’re making of this world.”

As Thomas and Cara talked, John noticed Ethan was lost in a cloud of bewilderment. He and Ethan had known that their understanding of the world was missing some big pieces, but now they were being told that some of the pieces they *had* were wrong. This was an annoyance to John but to Ethan it was an earthquake. Not to know the extent to which they’d been misinformed, even after all they’d done to learn the truth from the Net and the newspapers, was too much for him.

“You okay?” John asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I feel like somebody just through my brain up in the air like a deck of cards.”

“Just ask more questions,” John suggested.

Ethan brightened. “Okay.”

“So...” Ethan said to Thomas and Cara, “the Corporation runs the White Mountain National Forest?”

“Officials will tell you no, but the answer is yes,” Thomas replied. “They stole all the parklands.”

“Sounds like,” John ventured, “if you work for the Corporation you’ve got it made.”

Thomas hooted a laugh. “That’s all yours, Cara.”

She sighed. “To work for the Corporation,” Cara said, “you have to avert your eyes from how they do business.”

“And lose your soul,” Thomas commented, “but if you take mood altering meds or drink a *lot* of alcohol you might not notice for a while. To survive the Corporation, you’ve got to put your conscience on ice.”

“We should stop,” Cara told him. “We’re probably scaring them.”

“No, no. Look at them, Cara,” Thomas bid her. “These boys are here for *information*; you can see it in their eyes. If you water down the truth, you insult them.”

Just then Mason entered the clearing from the woods and they heard him call to Derek,

“Where’re Alfred and Reed?”

“The stream,” Derek answered.

“Okay... wake up the kids, it’s time to tell them,” Mason said to him as he dropped a box of supplies next to Cara.

“About the vaccine?” she asked.

“Yes,” Mason replied soberly. “Derek and I will tell the others. Will you inform these two?”

She nodded.

“That’s my cue to leave,” Thomas observed. “Stay quick on your skates, boys. Mason,” he said as they shook hands. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Is there anything else I should know about Alfred?” Cara asked and as she and Thomas walked towards the woods, Ethan whispered to John,

“Tell us *what*?”

John shook his head. “Something about the vaccine.”

Ethan frowned. "It didn't sound good."

At the Children's Center, every Monday right before breakfast, all the children lined up in the dining hall to get their vaccine injection. On Fridays, they had their blood tested for the virus. It was just what they did. None of them had thought anything of it.

"Safe travels," Cara called after Thomas, and when she returned to John and Ethan, she found them waiting for her in silence.

"We..." she began awkwardly, "the Resistance, that is... may tell you things you don't want to hear, but we won't purposely mislead you. We can't promise you safety, because there is none. What we can offer is the truth as we know it, and loyalty among allies."

Ethan shifted from one foot to the other impatiently. "What about the vaccine?" he insisted.

Cara looked at their faces, wishing she didn't have to tell them, but Thomas was right. She'd needed to know and so did they.

"It's not a vaccine," she said. "There hasn't been a vaccine available at all until the Resistance recently developed one. The shot you've been getting all your life is an antiviral chemical that kills the virus but doesn't help you build immunity against it. In fact, it has weakened whatever natural resistance you had to it."

"I don't understand," Ethan mumbled. "How did they keep that a secret?"

"When the DM learn that a person has stumbled on the truth, that person disappears," she answered. "We assume most of them are sent to work camps."

"Did you believe it was a vaccine?" John asked her.

"For most of my life, yes."

"Are we going to get sick?" Ethan asked, looking over his shoulder at the other children standing around Mason. "Today's the day we normally get the shot."

"No," Cara assured him. "Mason sent word about your arrival and requested that the GZ bring enough antiviral to cover all our needs...for now."

Ethan scowled. "Did people always lie this much?" he asked. "Was it always this bad?"

"I don't think so," Cara answered. "In the Resistance I've had access to books and documents showing that universities, and even companies, used to gather useful, factual data that guided people and businesses in their decisions. Very practical products were invented in this country and manufactured here. There's no lack ingenuity; we lack honest leaders and a system that backs them."

Ethan's eyes lit up. "I read a book from Smithy's about that!"

John groaned as Ethan launched into a summary of the most boring unintelligible book he'd ever found at Smithy's. *Smithy was right*, John thought. He had to get Ethan to a safe place before someone knocked his head off.

But, a funny thing happened. Cara was delighted to hear about the book and the two of them began discussing it with great enthusiasm. *She's just like him!* John thought, laughing to himself. Suddenly a roar erupted from the group of youngsters around Mason.

"Guess he told them," remarked John.

"I'll go talk to them," Ethan murmured nervously, but when he turned he stopped in his tracks.

"Uh oh. Too late!"

Blake angrily pushed his way through the throng of children and stomped up to Ethan.

"I knew it," Blake squawked. "I knew we should never have listened to you! You STUPID-" then he cursed and pushed Ethan so hard he would have fallen if Mason hadn't grabbed the collar of his jacket. Mason stepped between the two boys and towered over Blake, causing him to back off.

That made John very happy. It felt great to see someone else put Blake in his place for once; he was tired of doing it. John didn't blame him for being messed up, though. Blake just didn't know how to handle his fear, and he'd never know, so long as he couldn't admit he was bursting with it.

Cara looked at John curiously. "You're not afraid of Blake," she observed.

John shook his head no. "Ethan isn't either. He's just afraid of the trouble he starts."

Suddenly Blake was in John's face.

"*You knew* didn't you?" he raged. "You knew about the vaccine. We were safe from the virus at the Center! We were *uninfected*! But you made us leave, you son of a- " Blake threw a punch but John ducked. "You were already *infected* from going into town so it didn't matter to you!" he railed and swung again as John swept the punch aside.

By now, the children had encircled the two boys and in an attempt to distract them all, Ethan began waving his arms wildly.

"Blake!" Ethan yelled. "You're wrong! How could we have known about *this*?"

"From town!" Blake howled. "Somebody told him in *town*!"

This time Derek stepped in to separate Blake from John and Mason spoke to them all. "None of you could have known. It was a state secret."

"No!" Blake screamed. "John knew." Blake started toward John again but Derek held him at arm's length.

"John found out today," Derek stated evenly. "Same as you."

"No, John *knew* because he was already *infected*!" yelled Blake.

"*Think* Blake!" Ethan interjected. "They tested us for the virus every week. If John had been infected, they would have found out!"

"That's right," Cara affirmed. "John was protected by the weekly injections, just like your teachers who live in town are protected."

John folded his arms across his chest. "Blake knows we're not lying," he announced. "He's just causing trouble to hide that *he*'s lying. Right Blake? Did you work something out with Fishface before we left?"

Blake's eyes widened with surprise.

"Yeah, thought so," said John. "You've been planning all along to go back and rat us out. The Fish is waiting for you, isn't she?"

When Blake didn't answer, Derek let go of him and took a step back.

"Blake..." Derek spoke in a calming tone. "Your friends all found out *today*."

"My *friends*?" Blake spat. "Huh!"

"Until today, it was a secret within the Resistance too," Mason clarified. "Only a small group of us knew."

Ethan frowned. "Why today? What's changed?"

"Some news was leaked last night to the underground press that not even the Corporation will be able to suppress," Mason answered and then glanced at his watch. "About two hours ago, the public learned that the Resistance has developed a vaccine for the virus and, as you just discovered, that they've been receiving an antiviral medication instead of a vaccine. The leak is the beginning of a campaign to pressure the Corporation into mass-producing our vaccine. Only they have the resources to provide it to the whole population."

Ethan looked doubtful. "Will they agree to it?" he asked.

"We believe so, yes," Mason answered. "First, they'll stall. They'll deny they've been giving the population an antiviral until they can come up with some ridiculous story to excuse

themselves. Eventually, though, they'll realize it's in their best interest to manufacture it. So... congratulations. You're among the first to know!"

A murmur of amazement spread through the group of children.

"*Bullsheht!*" Blake burst out. "You want information? I'll leak some information." He pointed at the group of children. "They're gonna make you prisoners!"

That was too much for Ethan. He began hopping up and down, yelling, "Blake's a *stoolie!* He's Fish's snitch!" As he hopped, the tape holding his glasses together failed, but he was so incensed, he didn't notice when they flopped down and dangled from one ear. "Blake's gonna *rat* us out. *That's* how he got in so good with the Fish! Blake's a rat!"

The children were quiet until one boy grumbled,

"Nah, Blake's no squeal."

Ethan shook his head slowly, his glasses swinging like a pendulum. "Robbie, remember those shoes you found in the woods and hid under your bed? Guess who ratted you out."

The boy's head flipped from Ethan to Blake, his eyes wide with new understanding. Then he charged and it took both John and Derek to pry him off Blake.

Alarmed by all the fighting, Cara looked at Mason but he appeared unperturbed. He came over to her and whispered,

"Derek breaks up fights between his boys all the time, *real* fights. These kids just fling their arms around."

"The Fish won't take us back now, will she?" one of the girls asked Mason.

He shook his head and answered,

"I don't know."

"We'll probably test negative for the virus though," she suggested hopefully, "if we take the medicine today."

"That's right," Mason agreed. "That shouldn't be a barrier to your going back to the Center, if that's what you want to do."

"I'm never going back to that place," Ethan vowed solemnly and one by one the young heads bowed in quiet agreement, while Blake stood apart from them fuming.

Derek clapped Ethan on the shoulder. "Ethan, you and I are gonna get along. Just... we gotta do something about those glasses."

Ethan fitted his glasses back on his nose and said, "I just need more tape. Sticky's all gone."

Derek burst into a laugh but quickly quieted when Mason started speaking to the children.

"You're all welcome to join the Resistance and equally welcome to leave to go back to the Center or to the fishing town. Your choice."

"Will the seaman give us the virus medicine?" a girl asked.

"Yes," Mason assured them, "and you'll eat well there, have comfortable beds and best of all, you'll be safe. Everyone who works for them lives inside the family's compound, the women in their bunkhouse and the men in another. You'll work hard, but Carlos and his wife will be more than fair with you."

"You'll be prisoners!" Blake shrieked.

"What's your choice Blake?" Mason asked.

"I don't need to tell you *anything*," Blake barked. "I'll do what I want."

"You can't just strike out on your own," Derek told him. "You may think you know the way back but you don't. And, you need a dose of antiviral from us. Did you see the guy who came in on a stretcher the other night? He missed three doses and almost died."

That news silenced them all, even Blake, but Ethan knew that wouldn't last.

“Mason, sir,” Ethan said, “I really have to ask- Ahh!”

A large group of GZ had suddenly appeared at the edge of the clearing.

“What happened, Ethan?” John laughed. “I’ve never seen one of your burning questions go up in smoke.”

Ethan glared at him. “They appear out of nowhere, it’s not normal.”

John pointed at the GZ. “Look in the trees above them.”

Ethan gasped. “There’s a kid up there!”

John nodded. “There’re lookouts in about every fourth tree around camp and along the paths that lead here,” he said.

“Well,” Ethan mumbled and began nervously cleaning his glasses with his shirttail. “They’re something like elves or tree spirits or...”

“Eve!” Mason’s voice boomed over their heads. “Time to go!” and in seconds the leader of the GZ whisked across the clearing to them.

“Those of you who want to join the Resistance,” Mason said, “stand here with Ethan and John. Those looking forward to a warm bed and three square meals by the sea, stand behind Eve.

Reed?” Mason called out and

Reed dropped to the ground from a tree.

“Sir?”

“You’re with Eve,” Mason ordered. “Report back to me once they’ve safely boarded the vehicles.”

“Yes sir!” Reed shouted and raced across the camp to stand next to Eve.

“Those who want to go back to the Orphan Center, stand behind Derek,” Mason said, but the children stood still as if frozen in place.

“You heard the man!” Eve hollered and then began clapping her hands and yelling, “Move! Move! Move!” causing the entire group of children to jump as a unit and scuttle like a crab over to Eve, leaving Blake behind.

“Well that simplifies things!” said Mason and then he addressed the large group of children.

“Not far from here, there are fish trucks that have completed their local deliveries for the day and are waiting to take you to the coast. They’re about a thirty-minute hike through the woods from here. Once you’re in the trucks, you’ll be instructed what to do and what to say if the trucks are stopped and you’re discovered. Remember, you’re fugitives,” he warned. “The authorities will be looking for you but if you follow Eve’s instructions, she’ll keep you safe and all will be well.” He eyed them. “Do you understand?”

The group murmured their assent but

Blake cursed Mason and said, “I don’t believe a word he says! I’m going *back*,” he declared with defiant bravado. “*I’m* the only one who’s going to be safe.”

“Blake,” Ethan said anxiously, “remember what the Fish has done to kids before...”

“Not to *me*,” Blake swaggered.

Ethan threw up his arms in exasperation. “This is *serious*, Blake!”

“Yeah!” Blake sputtered angrily. “A serious situation that *you* got us in, and I’m getting out.”

He turned to the other children. “We can all go back together. I’ll talk to her for all of us. You know she listens to me.”

John started laughing and Blake whirled around.

“Who’re you laughin’ at?” Blake demanded.

“I was thinkin’ about the Fish’s face the morning after we left,” John said with a grin, “when she found out that the *kid who cooks her books* was *gone*.”

For a moment, all was quiet and then the whole group of children dissolved into hysterical laughter. The intensity of the last few days burst like a pipe and laughter flowed out of them like water off a cliff. One of the boys laughed so hard he fell to the ground and rolled around in the dust, making the others laugh all the harder.

"Her face!" one of the children cried out. "Can't you just *see her face*?"

They laughed and laughed as if hilarity was both a newfound freedom and superpower that could defy the Fish.

Cara spotted Blake standing by himself scowling like a thundercloud. Fearing he was a powder keg ready to blow, she nudged Mason and nodded toward the boy.

"Okay," Mason said to her. "Blake," he called to the boy, "You're welcome to your choice."

"You're damn right I am," Blake replied hotly. "And there's nothing you and your *girly* squad can do about it."

Before anyone knew what was happening, Eve leapt nimbly as a cat, twisted Blake's arm and locked it in a hold behind him. A split second later, she wacked his legs out from under him and he hit the earth with a thud. Instantly Eve dropped to the ground too and flipped him so that his face was in the dust. Pressing one knee into his back and pulling up on his collar, she cocked her free arm back, aiming the fist at Blake's head.

"Can I hit him?" she asked Mason.

"No."

Eve let go, allowing Blake's face to fall in the dirt, and she walked serenely back to her place in front of the gawking children. Derek helped Blake to his feet and said, "Come on, I'll show you the way back to the orphanage."

Blake's face twisted with contempt. "I don't need your help."

"Yes you do," Derek spoke patiently. "Come on."

"Mason, sir," Ethan said tugging on the man's sleeve, "Blake's gonna lead them back here."

"Thanks Ethan," Mason said. "I understand that." Then to the others he said, "Anyone who wants to go with Blake, this is your last chance."

None of the children moved.

"You can still change your mind, Blake," John said. "No one will think anything."

"Yeah!" a boy exclaimed. "Come with us!"

Blake spat on the dry earth, pointed at John and said, "*She* 'll find you." Then he turned his back on them and walked after Derek into the forest.

"What a *relief*," Reed muttered, then to Mason he said. "Am I in charge of the... uh...water?"

"Yes," Mason answered. "Run some out to Derek to give to Blake then take the rest to Eve."

"On it," said Reed and after grabbing a satchel stuffed with empty bottles, he headed for the stream.

"Eve," Mason called.

"Sir?"

"Go."

"Yes, sir," she replied cheerily, then yelled, "Listen up people! Get your stuff, 'cause we're movin' out!" But the children just stared dumbly back at her.

So Eve bellowed, "MOVE!" so loudly, one of the children complained she'd burst his eardrums. Despite their grumbling, the children gathered up their belongings and, once Eve began calling out orders to the GZ, in minutes the children were marching in single file into the woods.

"Where's the path?" one child asked.

"Right there," answered a GZ.

“*That’s a trail?* For what, mice?”

The GZ rolled their eyes at all the comments, herding them patiently into the forest until they’d all disappeared and not one voice or footstep could be heard.

“So quiet...” Ethan said. “It’s like, the forest swallowed them whole.”

When he turned around, he was surprised to find that he and John were the only ones still standing there. Everyone else was busily preparing to leave: Mason was rolling up the tent tarps; two of Derek’s boys were filling backpacks and Cara was concealing the outlines of the tents in the dirt by smoothing the dust with a branch and scattering leaves. When John and Ethan offered to help, Mason showed them how to return the wood used as the tent poles back to the forest so that each piece looked like it had come to its resting place naturally.

“We can’t fool the animals,” Mason said, “but they’ll keep our secret.”

“I don’t get it,” Ethan said. “It still looks like a camp.”

“It’s the game warden’s camp,” Mason explained. “We’re just hiding how many of us were here.”

“Ah ha!” Ethan responded with excessive enthusiasm.

John eyed his friend warily. He could tell that Ethan was still worried about Blake and was angling for the chance to discuss it again with Mason. There was no stopping him. Ethan stalked a problem like a ratter chases a rat.

Reed had returned, and everyone gathered around him to hear what he had to say.

“Blake’s got water now,” Reed reported to Mason, “took his antiviral meds and he’s hidden near the road. Derek said he’ll head back here as soon as Theo and Sam arrive; they’ll watch over Blake till he gets picked up by the DM’s morning sweep.”

“Good work,” Mason approved. “Now go bring the rest of the water to Eve. She’s waiting for you.”

“On my way!” Reed announced, picking up his pack and leaving the camp by the path the children had taken.

An hour later, Derek reappeared.

“I gave him another chance to go to the wharf with the others, like you told me to,” Derek told Mason.

“How did he respond to that?” Cara asked.

“He said, *‘the Fish will take me back with open arms’*,” Derek quoted.

Mason sighed. “It was worth a try... Thanks Derek.”

“Mason, sir, Blake’s gonna tell the Head Mistress everything,” Ethan warned, “and lead the DM back to you.”

“That may be his plan,” Mason answered, “but he won’t get to carry it out.”

“I don’t understand...” Ethan balked.

“Ethan, my friend,” Mason said, “you’re just going to have to trust me on this one.”

Ethan looked unconvinced but mumbled, “Okay.”

A loud birdcall arose from one of the lookouts and they heard the same call in response from elsewhere in the woods. One of the GZ suddenly appeared at the trailhead near where Ethan was standing and startled him.

“*Elf*,” Ethan announced, thinking no one else had seen her yet.

“Nah,” Derek laughed. “They don’t have any magic. They just know how to be quiet.”

“But what’s she doing?” Ethan asked. “She’s just standing there.”

“She’s a messenger,” Mason replied and to the young woman he said, “Tell Eve to continue as planned.”

She saluted and was gone.

"Now we can go," Mason proclaimed. "Ethan and John... Cara has your backpacks. Every able person carries some supplies."

"Is Reed going with Eve all the way to the coast?" Derek asked.

"No," Mason answered. "He'll see them off and circle back. I told him to meet us at the meadow and, because we're going to take it *really* easy on Alfred today, he'll probably get there before us."

"Sounds good. You want the usual three scouts ahead and three bringing up the rear?" Derek asked.

"Yep," answered Mason, pleased as always with Derek's acumen. Because he was so young, people mistook Derek's wisdom as something inherent, and though it was true that Derek had good instincts, Mason knew Derek's proving ground had been a hard childhood.

As the others readied to leave, John spotted a moment when Ethan was out of earshot to speak to Mason.

"Ethan's a worrier," John began.

Mason laughed. "He's fine."

"But..." John continued awkwardly, "I should tell you, sir, that his paranoia usually plays out just as he calls it."

Mason raised an eyebrow.

"I mean," John tried again. "Ethan's almost always right."

"Then, I'm glad he's coming with *us*," Mason declared.

John grinned.

"There's good reason to be concerned about Blake," Mason conceded, "but it's a problem we know how to address. Things will work out okay for Blake... but the Head Mistress won't get what she was aiming for. It might help Ethan if you told him that."

"Yes sir."

After the three scouts went ahead of them, Mason waved his arm with a grand flourish to Ethan and John. "After you, gentlemen" he said.

Ethan adjusted his glasses and looked more closely. "Is there a path?" he asked.

"We're making one," John said as he walked into the underbrush where the boys had just gone.

"Right," Derek agreed. "After a while we'll join up with a deer path, but it's easier to cover our tracks in this kind of brush."

Ethan looked tentative. "Well...okay..."

"Just follow me, brother," Derek told him entering the tall grass and Ethan stepped in right behind him.

Cara looked at Alfred. "Ready?" she asked.

"Yes... but first I have a question," he said. "These children... they'll all receive the memory drug? Obviously it's not safe for them to remember being here or seeing me."

"None of them know who you are," Mason assured him. "Only one of the children has had access to the Net, but if he's seen a picture of you he hasn't connected the dots yet. Regarding any of them talking about this camp, or the Resistance, the boy who went off by himself has the memory drug in his water, and the dose he was given will make it difficult for him to remember this last week for about nine months. Two of Derek's boys will stay with him overnight to make sure he drinks all his water and is found by the DM tomorrow. Our contact in the town near the Orphan Center believes it will be to the boy's advantage that he won't be able to help the Head

Mistress. He thinks it's best for him to learn sooner rather than later that she only looks after herself.

The kids heading to the wharf were led around in circles before reaching the trucks, then given a smaller dose of the drug in their water. Their memories will return fully in two months, and by then, we won't be in these mountains anymore. The game warden poses no threat to us either. He resents the DM because of the way they took control of this whole region."

"But this camp won't be safe anymore," argued Alfred. "The kids know the way here from their orphanage."

"They don't," Mason stated. "They traveled by night with only their leaders knowing the way, and their leaders are coming with us."

"What if those two bolt?" Alfred asked.

"That's unlikely because they need our help to get out of the mess they're in, and they know it. But if it makes you feel better, I'll describe the safeguards we have in place: by day, we have lookouts ahead and behind us on the trail. At night, there'll be two stationery perimeters around our camp. No one will come or go without my knowledge," Mason promised.

"And the DM?" Alfred pressed. "Won't they patrol deeper into the woods as the nights get warmer?"

"They will," Mason agreed, "and when they do, the GZ and Derek's boys will take them on a wild goose chase away from us." Mason paused and grinned. "They *love* doing that."

Satisfied with the answers, the man gave a nod and stepped into the brush after the others.

Glancing around to make sure the boys didn't hear, Cara spoke quietly to Mason. "Alfred told me he won't feel safe until we reach the base."

Mason nodded. "Understandable. Maybe once we're up in the mountains he'll sense the remoteness of the place and begin to relax." He turned to the three boys waiting to hear their orders. "You know the drill," he said. "Sweep and cover. Remember to fill in our prints but leave the animal tracks. Derek marked the trail yesterday and I'll remove the marks as I go, but you need to catch the ones I miss. Reed or I will check in with you each night. If we don't, that means something's not right and you should use your communicator to contact the GZ..."

Cara headed into the woods while he was still talking. She knew how to follow the trails Derek made. When she reached the deer path, Alfred and John were nowhere in sight and Derek and Ethan were climbing the slope just ahead of her. Ethan stumbled and she heard Derek say, "You gotta pick up your feet, bud. Lots of rocks."

A moment later Derek stopped to place a mark and Ethan ran right into him.

"I did say *follow me*, but maybe not so close."

"Sorry."

"It's OK. How about you go ahead of me for a while?" Derek suggested.

Derek stepped off the path and once Ethan was in front of him, he clapped a hand behind his shoulder and pushed him up the steep part of the incline.

Cara smiled at the kindness. She guessed that Ethan probably hadn't experienced much of it in his life. In her Center, benevolence was meted out with strings attached.

She turned to watch Mason loosen a branch that Derek had tied out of the way. The branch sprang back into place, hiding that there'd ever been a way through the dense brush at all. Derek and his boys had an uncanny ability to conceal themselves and remove signs of human activity. She knew their passage would be hidden.

Cara recalled her first time in the forest and how she'd worried the boys bringing up the rear would get lost. That made her chuckle; because since then she'd witnessed how they could make

their way home from any place in the mountains, and find you, with only a few footprints to follow. Cara crouched down to fill in a human footprint with dirt then continued up the hill.

“Do your legs still work if your mouth’s not moving?” Derek hinted jokingly.

“Am I talking too much?” Ethan asked.

“Little bit.”

Cara grinned knowing that Ethan wasn’t the first overly talkative child Derek had met. Either because of starvation and homelessness or because their families had been torn apart by the war, all of the boys in his Resistance unit were anxiety stricken when they first joined, they just showed it in different ways. Talking was probably Ethan’s way of calming himself. Hopefully he’d come to learn that connecting with the silence in the woods was a better way.

When they’d reached an outcropping of rocks at the edge of a meadow, they found Reed and John sitting there waiting for them.

“Did the scouts give the all-clear to cut across the meadow?” Derek asked his brother.

“Nope,” Reed answered. “But no warning call either.” He looked around. “Where’s Mason?”

“He’s coming,” said Derek and a moment later Alfred arrived looking disheveled with Mason right behind him.

“What’s up?” Mason asked.

“Don’t know yet,” answered Derek.

Being careful to remain hidden behind the tree line, Derek and Mason climbed atop a boulder to view the area while the others found places to sit down and rest. Reed took a drink from a water bottle and passed it around, then pulled out a pouch of nuts and doled out a palm full to each person.

Ethan went over to examine the place where they’d all emerged from the thicket but no path could be seen, no disturbance in the branches, and no leaf out of place. “Wow, you guys are good at hiding your tracks,” he lauded. “I couldn’t find my way back to the camp if my life depended on it.”

“Good,” Alfred muttered under his breath.

“It’s *easy*,” Reed said. “You’ll learn how to do it.”

Cara looked from Ethan to Alfred. Ethan’s anxiety made him talkative and Alfred’s anxiety made him irritable, but the two were similar in that they felt compelled to expose perceived threats. The ability to recognize danger was useful when aligned with an overall understanding of a situation, but they both lacked information and perspective in their present circumstances. Hopefully they’d come to realize that the people leading them through the forest weren’t just skilled and knowledgeable, they could be relied upon.

Derek jumped down from the rock and spoke to the group. “There’s a mother bear with cubs in our way,” he said, “so instead of cutting across, we’ll skirt the field and head down a different road. Move *slow*; be *silent*. Reed, you bring up the rear.”

“Ok.”

They followed the edge of the meadow in single file until they came to a wide, well-worn path. Once they were a safe distance from the clearing, Derek informed them they could talk again but to keep their voices low.

“This path’s a lot easier to walk on,” Ethan commented. Then as John fell in step beside him, he whispered, “Did they tell you what they’re going to do about Blake?”

John shot him an annoyed look. "Why would they tell me?"

"Just wondered," Ethan answered and a few seconds later he whispered, "I read an article from Smithy's about a root from South America that makes people forget things. It said the Resistance uses a synthetic version of it."

"I read it," John replied coolly.

Ethan sighed. "It would explain why they're not worried about Blake ratting us out."

"If I were in their place, I'd use it too," John owned.

Ethan pondered that. "I suppose... as long as we drink from the same bottles they're drinking from, we'll be okay." "If we wanted to leave, they'd have to give it to us," John warned.

"Well, *I'm* not leaving," Ethan retorted. "Why would we leave?"

John shrugged. "We don't know them yet."

Further down the path, the thicket on either side opened up to the grandeur of a tall forest that smelled of sweet balsams. White pines rose a hundred feet over their heads and pine needles cushioned their steps. At the edge of every hummock, light-green feathery ferns decorated the earth and for a time the travelers hiked peacefully together. When they merged onto a path that was wide enough to walk three abreast, Mason hung back to help Alfred, and Ethan and John ended up walking alongside Cara.

"It looks like this road is used a lot," Ethan whispered to her.

"Your *words mixed with the breeze*," she told him, "*wafting way up to the boughs of the trees*."

Ethan squinted at her, not comprehending.

"It's from a poem," she explained, "meaning, I didn't hear what you said."

"Oh," Ethan reflected. "There weren't any poetry books at school, or at Smithy's and I never thought of looking for poetry on the Net... I was wondering who uses this road."

"It's a path connecting two towns," she answered. "The townspeople use it regularly but no one else knows about it. Where we are is quite remote."

"Are you from here?" Ethan asked.

"No," Cara replied, "but Derek and Reed know the people in every town for miles."

Ethan pushed his glasses back. "Can you tell us more about the Resistance? Like... what happens with new people?"

"Sure. Hmmm... People usually start out in a training camp. Depending on where, there could be up to seventy people living in a camp and they could be any age, including your own. You'd learn various forms of self-defense partly as a fitness program, but also so that you know how to protect yourself.

Within your first week, you'd be tested to determine your strengths and abilities and then you'd be placed on a project to develop your talents. Everyone in the camp is assigned chores to help keep the camp running, so you'd be given chores too. Then, after a period of three to six months, new people are placed in a Resistance unit according to their skills. For example, if you have an aptitude for academics," she paused to peer at him, "you'd be placed in a unit that does research."

"Wow!" Ethan burst out and from behind them Alfred hissed,

"Shhh."

Ethan cringed. "Sorry."

"Don't mind Alfred," she told him. "We'll tell you if you're doing something that could endanger the group."

Ethan let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks. What's with the GegenZeit?" he asked. "Why are they so spooky?"

“Some might say,” Cara said with a grin, “twenty one children disappearing from an Orphan Center is supernatural.”

Ethan tilted his head proudly to one side. “Yeah?”

Cara laughed. “What other questions do you have rolling around in that mind of yours?”

Ethan was quiet for a moment, his face inscrutable, and then he blurted out, “Are you going to make us lose our memories?”

John winced. He couldn’t believe Ethan said that! He trusted these people too much, too soon.

Cara looked closely at both boys and responded cautiously, “Why would we need to do that?”

“I don’t know...”

“It’s a good question Ethan,” Cara told him, “and it shows you did a thorough investigation of the Resistance. I suggest you bring this up with Mason... but whatever your concerns, I promise you that this group of people is safe and we will do everything possible to keep you out of harm’s way.”

Ethan fell silent, slipping into his own thoughts, and Cara glanced from time to time at the two boys as they walked. A little further down the road she said to Ethan, “This is a lot to take in, isn’t it?”

Ethan frowned and said, “I have no idea how much of what I know is wrong and that freaks me out. We know some of the lies, but not all.”

“Lies are like weeds in a garden,” she said. “Just keep pulling out the plants that you know are weeds and wait for the truth to grow.”

Ethan smiled.

“Questioning is weeding... Keep questioning until things make sense,” she suggested. “Asking good questions can save lives. Where we’re headed, your inquisitive mind will be much appreciated.”

Up ahead they saw that Derek had stopped and was sitting on a rock. When they caught up with him, Derek passed around a water canteen and a piece of jerky. Ethan sat on the trunk of a fallen tree to reaffix the tape on his glasses when he noticed Derek staring at him.

“What’re you lookin’ at?” Ethan asked.

“A *miracle*,” Derek answered.

Sensing he was the butt of a joke, Ethan scowled. “What is?”

“You’re *quiet*,” Derek remarked. “Like somebody flipped a switch.”

Ethan put his glasses back on and grinned.

John sat near Ethan and in a low voice he asked, “*Why* did you tell her we know about the drug?”

“I was scared,” Ethan whispered, “and I thought her answer would make me feel better. I believe these people, not because she said I could; it’s a feeling I have... and I don’t think I’ve ever had it before.”

Unnerved by what Ethan was saying, John stood up abruptly and walked to the stream that ran along the path. He understood what Ethan meant. These people seemed trustworthy and Smithy said they were, but still... *It’s too soon to feel safe*, he reminded himself.

“Where are we going, anyway?” Ethan asked of anyone who’d tell him.

“Crazy!” Derek responded with a laugh as he knelt by the stream to fill his canteen. “Well, *I’m* going crazy. My sister went into labor two nights ago and we haven’t heard anything yet.” He picked up a huge rock next to him and cradled it awkwardly. “This is how you do it, right?”

“Don’t ask me!” Ethan laughed.

All the rest of the day, they followed one deer path after another and John guessed that the circuitous route Derek was choosing was intentionally confusing for at least three reasons. It

made sense that they didn't want him and Ethan to know where they were in case they tried to pull a stunt like Blake had attempted. Certainly, they wanted to keep Alfred hidden from the DM though no one explained why and a likely third reason was that they didn't want anyone to know the route to the place they were going. John didn't mind the secrecy. He considered it wise.

Maybe he didn't feel as safe as Ethan, but John was happy to be free of the suffocating Center and to be surrounded by forest, the only place that had ever felt like home. That night, he lay a blanket down on a bed of pine needles and fell asleep looking at the stars twinkling through the trees.

The second day was different from the first in that they were now heading straight up one of the higher mountains in the region. Although the road was wide, firm footing was impossible because of a thick layer of fist-sized stones that gave way under one's weight.

"This is like walking uphill on a pit full of baseballs," grumbled Ethan.

"When the snow melts and the rains come, this trail's a gushing river and it's hauling all *these*," Derek said, kicking the loose rocks at his feet. He picked one up the size of his palm. "You don't cross streams up here during the melt."

Farther up the mountain, sand and gravel covered the path except where solid rock jutted out of the earth at odd, sharp angles. Ankles twisted and feet slipped as they journeyed on.

When the slope of the incline deepened to forty-five degrees, John saw that Ethan was struggling. The trail required visual acuity for sure footing and Ethan was using one hand to hold his glasses over his eyes and one hand for the climb. When Ethan slipped and cut his arm, Cara called a break.

"We're going to fix those glasses," she told him.

"I'm ok," Ethan mumbled in embarrassment.

"I'm not singling you out," she said. "We all need both hands."

She duct taped the broken frames then used a rubber band as a strap around the back of his head. Ten minutes back into the hike, they faced a rock wall that was over fifteen feet high.

Ethan gasped. "Can't we go around?"

"It's a short cut," Derek explained. "You'll be fine."

"Derek'll go up first," said Mason, "and send down two ropes, one to climb, and the other's your safety. I'll tie the safety around you and as you climb up, Derek will keep tension on the safety while I spot you from below. If you slip on the climb, the safety will hold you 'till you get your footing again, so there's no need to panic."

Derek took a step back to get a good look at Ethan. "Nice fix on the glasses. They look like racing goggles now."

"Yeah?" Ethan asked and somehow felt a little taller.

Derek went up, followed by Cara and John. When it was Ethan's turn, halfway up his sweaty hands slipped so he gripped the rope tighter. When he finally made it to the top, he dropped to the ground exhausted.

"Can't rest here, bud," Derek ordered, giving him a hand up. "Get over where Cara is. Go! John, come help me pull up Alfred."

Derek created a simple pulley by throwing a rope around a tree. Once Mason tied both ends of the rope around Alfred, Derek and John hoisted the man up the cliff by pulling up one side of the

loop while Mason pulled down on the other. Beneath the trees, Cara handed Ethan a cup of water and he wrinkled his nose at the taste.

“What’s *this*?”

“Homemade electrolyte drink,” she said.

“You mean... like E-lyte?” Ethan asked naming a brand he’d seen in an advertisement.

She grinned. “Same ingredients minus the nice flavor. Sorry.”

“Oh, that’s okay, I’ve never actually had any,” Ethan said gulping down the drink. “Just seen it on the Net... but it’s expensive! Who’s got money to buy stuff like that?”

“Corporation employees,” Derek called to Ethan in answer to his question just as he and John pulled the frail man onto solid ground.

“Why would they advertise it for everyone to see, if only Corporation people can afford it?” Ethan wondered.

“Maybe they want people to aspire to work for the Corporation,” Cara suggested as she took the cup from Ethan and poured Alfred a drink.

“And what a *grand* aspiration that is,” Alfred muttered drolly. “Let’s all work for the Corporation so we can buy everything that’s advertised. I don’t need any of it, but if you have it, I have to have it too, to show I’m as good as you. Don’t you wish you had E-lyte, Ethan?”

“What?” Ethan demanded with a scowl. He didn’t like sarcasm directed at him.

“He’s *kidding*, Ethan,” John said, as he pulled up the tail end of his sweatshirt to towel off his face.

“Whoa!” Derek exclaimed, running towards John. “Pull that shirt down!”

Baffled by the urgency, John did as he was told.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?” Derek exclaimed, and then pointed at Ethan. “Do you have a *neon orange* T-shirt too?”

“Oh.” Understanding dawned on both boy’s faces as Ethan lifted the bottom edge of his sweatshirt to reveal a shirt identical to John’s.

“We all have them,” Ethan said. “The guards made us wear them over our jackets whenever we worked outside the compound.”

“I bet they did,” Derek declared, “and I’ll double bet that your Head Mistress told the DM to keep an eye out for those shirts. You might as well send up a flare to tell them you’re here!”

Derek took in a deep breath and let it out. “Just... don’t take your sweatshirts off until I tell you it’s safe, okay?”

“Yeah,” the boys agreed in humble unison.

“There’ve been no drones overhead,” Cara reassured.

Derek nodded. “We dodged a bullet.”

“Drones?” Ethan asked.

“The DM fly them into the mountains to keep an eye on things,” Cara told him, “and depending on their level of desperation, planes and helicopters-”

“And don’t forget the satellites,” Alfred interjected dourly.

There was a scraping sound as a backpack appeared at the cliff’s edge pulled up by Mason from below. Derek ran to help him hoist up the rest of the packs, directing Ethan and John to shuttle them into the woods. Once Mason had made the climb, he gathered up the rope and joined them under the trees.

“Hi,” Cara said, handing him a cup of water. “Come here often?”

He snorted a laugh. “No but I *very clearly* remember seeing *you*, the last time I was here. You don’t remember me?”

“Well, you know... we get a lot of guys passing through.”
 He held his drink up to her and made a toast: “May we meet in this place many times.”
 “Okay, but lets come in July when it’s above freezing at night,” she suggested.
 He touched her hand.
 “I was wondering... is that *camouflage* or dirt all over your face?” she teased.
 He grinned and wiped his face with his sleeve before saying,
 “Good job, everyone. You can all take a twenty-minute siesta... except for Derek. He’s got work to do.”
 “What kind?” Ethan asked.
 “He’s got to find the quickest route to our shelter for the night,” Mason answered.
 Derek pulled an electronic device from his pack and held it in front of him like a divining rod. When he began walking with it, John and Ethan followed him. Leaning over the device to read the touch screen, Ethan asked,
 “Is it a Netcollector?”
 Derek grinned. “For a kid who doesn’t get out much, you know a lot.”
 “I like electronics...” Ethan admitted. Then, sounding mystified, he asked, “How come it says SATComWare Inc. at the bottom? You don’t need SATCOM software in a GPS.”
 “What’s a Netcollector?” John interrupted.
 “It collects signals from all nearby Net sources,” Ethan said, “and adds them together to boost your signal.”
 John looked doubtful. “That wouldn’t work. The nearest Net tower is at the DM base and there’re mountains blocking the signal from here to there.”
 “Maybe they’ve got a satellite link,” Ethan proposed.
 “Only the military has satellites,” John argued.
 “Wait...” Ethan peered closer to read the messaging on the device. “It’s not just a GPS, is it? This is a communication device! Can you send coded messages with this?”
 Derek looked back at Mason and Cara in mute surprise.
 “I think Head Mistress Fish was no match for these two,” Cara commented with amusement.
 “Not a snowball’s chance,” Derek agreed.
 “The device has many capabilities,” Mason intervened. “When satellite feeds are blocked by heavy tree cover, it reverts to a compass.”
 John spoke quietly to Ethan, “I guess the military *aren’t* the only ones with satellites...”
 Ethan whispered back, “Maybe the Resistance hacks into military satellites.”
 “John... Ethan... look up and tell me if you can see the sky,” Mason said.
 Ethan and John did so and both replied, “No.”
 “Today’s lesson: if you can see the sky, the sky can see you,” Mason told them. “Get in the habit of checking your overhead cover.”
 Derek pointed at the two boys. “Pop quiz: What do you do if you hear a heli or a plane?”
 “Don’t move,” they answered.
 “Good. And remember, keep those shirts hidden,” Derek warned.
 “What’s that?” Mason asked.
 “They’re sporting Orphan System Orange under their sweatshirts,” Cara explained wryly.
 “Ah!” Mason cried in mock horror, then laughed. “Well, it’ll be too cold tonight to sleep in sweaty, damp clothes anyway so we’ll retire those shirts for the rest of the journey. We brought a change of clothes for everyone.”

“I say we *burn ‘em*,” Derek declared, and Ethan and John cheered. Looking pleased with himself, Derek went back to programming the GPS and Mason said, “Hiking is going to be a little different for the next few days because of progressively sparser tree cover. We’ll do our part and choose paths and campsites with good cover; *your job* is to continuously look up and make sure you’re hidden from the sky. Today, there’s still one steep climb before we reach our shelter for the night, but once we complete this stretch, starting tomorrow our road will seem easy. Do you think you can manage that today Alfred, if I help you?”

Without hesitation the man grimly replied, “*Yes.*”

“Ethan and John?”

“Yes sir!”

“Then, drink up and grab a catnap. We’ll be leaving soon enough.”

Alfred sat with Cara apart from the others as she packed up the food and water.

“Do you think Ethan’s as smart as Eve?” he asked quietly.

Cara looked at Alfred’s pale face. “I don’t know,” she deflected, too distracted by his haggard appearance to really consider the question.

Being familiar with the hike ahead of them, Cara assessed the group. Half were experienced hikers, but of the three that were not, only Alfred was having real trouble. As soon as she’d finished packing, she pulled Mason aside.

“Are you going to try to make it all the way to the cave today?” she asked.

Mason glanced at Alfred and replied in a low voice, “Yes. We need proper shelter at this altitude and a way to conceal a fire.”

“I’m worried about Alfred,” she admitted.

“All right,” he said. “Let me work with Derek to pick the route.”

Ten minutes later Mason said, “We’re moving out. Are you ready?”

Ethan hopped to his feet and announced,

“Always.”

Derek shouldered his pack and addressed them. “Keep both hands free for the climb, use *fixed* tree roots and rocks for footholds and grips. *Test them first* with part of your weight.”

John watched Ethan put his glasses in their tattered case, wrap the case in a shirt and place the bundle at the top of his pack. Then, before tying it closed, he stuffed a fistful of leaves overtop. John had seen him protect his glasses like this before. He’d sooner crack his skull open for lack of seeing than risk smashing those lenses. John hung back to let Ethan go after Derek, then followed close behind him.

The hardest part of the path that afternoon was short but it was at an incline of about fifty degrees and every step required close attention. When Alfred slipped and suffered a nasty gash on the head, Mason and Cara stayed behind to care for him while the others went on.

“Could happen to any of us,” Mason told Alfred. “Don’t worry, we’ll fix you up.”

After applying antiseptic, Cara wrapped his head first in gauze and then with a cloth made of a spongy material. Mason pointed to the outer bandage and said,

“This will cushion your head if you bump it again.”

Alfred smiled wanly. “The polymer used to make it was discovered in the late, two-thousand-twenties. Initially it was used as a layer of cushioning in clothing for seniors to protect old bones in a fall.”

“Oh,” Mason responded with surprise. “Didn’t know that history. The military uses it for medical purposes like this,” he said as Cara finished taping the bandage in place.

“Arms up,” Mason ordered Alfred, as he wrapped a rope around him under his arms.
“What’s this?” Alfred asked, watching Mason complete the knot.
“A safety,” he answered and then tied the other end around himself, leaving three feet of slack between them.
Alfred’s eyes flashed. “That’s crazy. If I fall, you’ll go down with me.”
“There’s room for us to climb almost side by side on this path,” Mason explained. “With me a half step behind you, I’ll catch you slipping before it gets out of hand.” Mason grabbed the rope like a leash and said, “I’ve got you.”
Alfred stared at him in disbelief and shook his head. “I can’t let you do this.”
Mason put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “No offense, but at this point you weigh about as much as Ethan.”
Alfred burst out with a laugh in spite of himself, and said,
“Alright.”
By the time they were back on the trail again, the afternoon sun was waning. Soon the temperature would drop such that they’d be forced to keep moving to stay warm in their sweat-soaked clothes. Mason didn’t say anything, but Cara knew if they had to, they would carry Alfred.

John looked past Ethan up the mountain and noticed that Derek had stopped to wait for them. Through the leaves of the trees, he could tell the sun was low and he wondered if the others would catch up before dark. Suddenly Ethan slipped and skidded down the path. John dropped to the ground, grabbed a tree as an anchor and used his body to block Ethan’s free-fall. Ethan slammed into him and together they crashed into a tree and stopped.
“Ethan!” John bellowed.
“What!”
“Put your glasses back on!”
“Okay.”
When they reached Derek, ahead of them they saw what looked like a shallow overhang of rock jutting out of the forest.
“Stay here while I check things out,” Derek ordered. “This cave attracts mostly small animals but I heard there’s a cougar hanging around.”
“You mean bobcat?” asked Ethan.
“No, a cougar wandered here from somewhere out west,” Derek replied. “Maybe it was being hunted, or migrated because of the warming... I don’t know, but I’m told it’s here.”
They heard voices below and saw movement on the trail. Derek listened intently for a moment and then said, “It’s Mason. Wait for them and see if they need help with the asset.”
Ethan’s head swiveled around. “The what?”
“Alfred,” Derek corrected himself, as he slid his pistol from its holster, flipped the safety, and unsheathed his knife. “One more thing: on the other side of the cave entrance past the bushes, there’s a cliff that’s a death drop. You fall off it, you die.” Then, gun in hand and knife at the ready, he plunged into the dense brush surrounding the cave.
When Cara reached the top, Mason and the bone-weary Alfred were ten steps behind her.
“Is Derek looking around outside the cave?” Mason asked the boys. When they nodded yes, Mason checked his revolver and planted himself between them and the cave. Seeing this, Cara

loaded her pistol and slid it into the shoulder holster before rummaging through her pack to find Alfred some dry clothes.

“Go behind the bushes there,” she instructed. “Take off *all* your clothes and get into these dry ones, then put your coat *right* back on. John, go with him to help.”

“No,” Alfred resisted irately. Then as an afterthought, he added, “Thanks... I can manage.”

Ethan pointed at her gun. “You know how to use that thing?”

“No, I wear it because it makes me look pretty,” Cara pitched with a straight face.

“Oh, yeah, right! Ha!” Ethan laughed awkwardly and then looked to John for support.

“Dig *yourself* out,” John returned and Cara chuckled as she fixed her eyes on the cave. When Derek re-emerged, he and Mason approached the cave entrance from the side.

“Ready?” Mason asked.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Mason lit a flare and threw it into the cave.

“Why are they doing that?” Ethan asked nervously. “If it’s in there, won’t it rush out at them?”

“There’s a back entrance,” Cara explained. “They’re flushing whatever’s in there out the other end.”

After a few minutes, Mason and Derek entered the cave. They were gone for what seemed to Ethan like forever until Derek popped out.

“We’re sleeping indoors tonight, folks!” he called to them. “And now... I’m gonna go get us a *real* dinner.”

Derek disappeared into the brush just as Mason came out of the cave and rejoined them.

“Did Derek tell you not to go beyond the cave entrance?” Mason asked.

“He said you could walk straight off the mountain!” Ethan exclaimed.

“True,” Mason agreed.

“Makes for a nice view of the sunset, though,” Cara remarked.

Mason grinned. “Also true. Ethan... John... help me move the packs under the overhang, then we’ll clear the cave in stages.”

Ethan looked confused. “I thought you just did that.”

“We were flushing out the cougar,” Mason replied. “Now we’re going to shoo away the smaller animals.”

“You mean like voles and shrews?” Ethan asked.

“And bats,” Cara added. “They probably won’t leave... just go deeper into a crevice, but if we keep a fire going, they’ll mind their own business.”

Mason was looking at Alfred with concern. “Did you give him pain medication?”

“I did. Oh, Alfred! Don’t go to sleep here!” she urged. “Come on, let’s get you inside.”

Once everything was in the cave, Mason lit a wax torch and handed it to Cara. The bright light in the shallow rock chamber revealed an opening that went further into the cliff. Ethan examined the wall.

“What did they do, blast this out?” he asked.

“Yep,” Mason answered absentmindedly as he searched his pack.

Ethan’s eyes grew large. “That’s crazy. The whole thing could have fallen off the mountain.”

“It didn’t,” was Mason’s reply. “Once they cleared the busted pieces, this is what was left.

Well,” he corrected himself. “We’ve been chiseling at it for three years now to get it to its present condition. Last spring we opened up the back entrance, and this spring, we acquired a stray cat.”

Mason drew four devices from his pack that looked like baseballs, but were many-sided rather than smooth. They started flashing different colors of light and when he gave each of them a hard toss to the back of the cave, the balls bounced crazily from surface to surface, lighting the dark space with wild, erratic light. Once the balls stopped bouncing and began to emit a flashing red light, Mason disappeared out the back end of the cave. When he returned, he announced, "All clear. Let's move the supplies to the fire pit. Then, John and Ethan... go out the back way and collect enough firewood to keep us warm through the night. Can you do that?"

"Yes sir," they answered.

After the boys had left and Alfred was wrapped in a second coat, Cara went out front beneath the overhang where Mason was scanning the area with binoculars.

"You okay?" she asked him.

"Sure."

"Don't give me that," she chided playfully. She pointed at his head then leaned her ear close to him. "I can hear something going round and round in there."

Mason glanced over his shoulder into the cave where Alfred was snoring loudly. "Just shaking off the feeling of a close call, I guess."

She studied his face. "Alfred's wound is superficial. More of a scrape, really. There was no serious blow to the head."

He nodded. "I didn't have to push so hard. We could have camped at the base of the cliff today and climbed it in the morning. I wanted to boost morale. I thought if we made it to the cave by tonight, it would lift people's spirits."

"It will," she agreed.

"My task is to keep Alfred alive and well and hidden," he said, "until it's time to take him to the rendezvous point." Then he paused. "He's not looking so well."

"I collected a blood sample from Alfred this morning," she revealed. "Reed has taken it to the GZ camp with the field analyzer. Those instruments aren't very accurate, but they'll catch a severe infection. So... they'll figure it out and if Alfred needs some meds, Reed will bring them to us." She shrugged. "Alfred may just need some good food, a good night's rest and the easier hikes ahead of us."

Mason nodded. "Thank you... that's great."

"Hmmm... then why don't you look relieved?" she asked.

"I took unnecessary risks and could have lost the gamble."

"But you didn't, and no one mutinied," Cara pointed out, "not even Alfred! You must be doing something right to have earned our trust." She put her arms around him. "Wouldn't it be nice if we were all alone right now?"

He smiled, wrapping his arms around her. "We're alone enough."

Not far from where John and Ethan were gathering wood, they could see a bare rock ledge.

"That's the drop," Ethan yelled over the wind.

A continuous gale had developed, blowing straight at them from the ledge. The wind roared in their ears and whipped at the loose ends of their clothing. John's hood kept flapping and hitting his face, until he tore it from its Velcro fastening and shoved it into his pocket. From time to time, a stronger gust of wind slammed against them, threatening to bowl them over.

"Yeah," John yelled back, "and we're not going any closer!"

Ethan pointed at a mountain, its peak shrouded in clouds. "That's gotta' be Mount Washington," he said, his teeth chattering. "Wouldn't want to be up there right now. Crazy, freezing cold storms in the middle of summer, hundred mile'n hour winds that sweep you up like you're a *twig*."

John didn't need anyone to tell him these mountains were treacherous. Though sunset wasn't for hours, the wind was biting cold. Since they'd finished the climb, the temperature had dropped ten degrees and every time the sun slipped behind the clouds, it dropped five more. Cara had been right to insist that the sick man get out of his wet clothes right away. They'd only stopped collecting wood for a few seconds and Ethan was shivering.

"Let's go," John said. "Time to start the fire."

Once the fire was crackling, Cara handed Ethan and John dry clothes. "Hang up your wet stuff," she said, pointing to a clothesline. "Tomorrow when you pack them up," she paused with a wry smile, "bury everything that's orange at the bottom."

"Okay...we will. Oh, wow," Ethan murmured, looking over the clothes. "These're really nice!" Cara nodded. "They're made from a combination of synthetic materials," she said. "The cloth has three layers to accommodate different weather conditions. When the air's chilly, the two inner layers act as insulators to hold in your body heat, and the outer layer creates a barrier to the cold. When the reverse is true, all three layers facilitate evaporation to cool you off."

When John pulled on the clothes, he knew he'd never worn anything so comfortable. He was used to scratchy hand-me-downs that had been washed a thousand times and were so stiff he had to fight with them to get them on and off. Even the color was perfect; gray green was the ideal camouflage in these woods.

"John!" Derek called from outside the back end of the cave. "Come help me prep our dinner. Ethan! Grab the bucket and get some water. There's a stream just down the hill."

Ethan ran outside. "Cara already got water," he told him. "Do you want me to get more?"

"No, not if she has enough," Derek answered.

"Send in the meat," Mason called to him. "We're ready to grill."

"Then... here you go," Derek said and handed Ethan a slab of wood piled high with pieces of meat. "Once these are cooked on both sides, come back for more."

"OK."

"Watch me," Derek said to John, and showed him how to skin the rest of the animal and cut the meat.

"Your turn. Cut up the rest," Derek told him and sat down on a log to supervise John's work.

"I saw how you stopped Ethan from sliding down the trail today," Derek commented.

Not knowing how to answer that, John said nothing.

"Mason told me that a good leader has to know how to protect themselves and their unit at the same. I think you did that today," Derek said.

"Was Mason in the military?" John wondered.

"Yeah," Derek answered, "but he doesn't talk about it. Nobody talks about the African front."

"How come you weren't drafted?" John asked.

"I was, I'm State Militia," Derek revealed. "If a foreign power invades this country I'll be waiting for them, but that's never been the threat. It's our own no-good, lying leaders who're killing us."

Ethan danced from the cave carrying the empty tray. “Stew’s tasting *really good*,” he announced, as John loaded the last batch of meat onto the slab of wood. When Ethan skipped off, Derek called after him,

“Come right back, we have stuff to do before it rains.”

John looked up at the cloudless sky. “What rain?”

Ethan put on the breaks right at the cave entrance and answered for Derek, “Up here, a storm can rise out of a sky like this in *minutes*, with no warning!”

“*Flatlanders*...” Derek muttered. “There’s *plenty* of warning before weather takes a mountain. You just gotta know what to look for.”

Ethan spun around so fast he almost spilled the meat. “Will you teach me what to look for?”

“I will if you don’t drop our dinner,” Derek growled.

“Okay, okay...” Ethan acquiesced, taking great care with the meat as he disappeared inside.

“I need to take this carcass away from the camp,” Derek told John. “It’s our payment to the cougar for use of her house tonight. While I’m gone, I want you to fetch water and wash this prep area *so clean*, an ant can’t smell it.”

As John busied himself with his task, his mind slipped back into the months leading up to their escape from the Center. He remembered how Ethan had argued against going into the mountains to look for the Resistance; he said they weren’t equipped to survive there. Ethan had read meteorological studies on the Presidential Mountains and knew people lost their lives there regularly, not from bears and cougars... from weather. The mountains, Ethan had warned, weren’t dangerous just because bad weather could come on swiftly; it was because the accompanying change in temperature and air pressure was often so extreme, only ancient rock could withstand it. In the end, Ethan only agreed to go because Smithy said the Resistance camp was at the foot of the mountains, not up in them.

Having finished the chore, John went inside and sat by the fire. He looked out the front of the cave and saw that the sun had begun its descent toward what was now a clear view of the mountains. The highest peaks were still capped with snow and the sun blazed brilliantly across them.

“Taste test,” Cara said, handing John a spoon full of thick broth. “Careful, it’s hot.”

“Oh yeah!” he whooped.

She laughed. “All we need now is for everyone to get here so I can start serving. John... Ethan was telling us the reason he had access to the Net was because he did the Head Mistress’s accounting, starting when he was *seven years old*.”

“That’s right,” John agreed and after he answered, he noticed Mason and Alfred exchange glances. Out back, they heard the call of an owl as Derek entered the cave.

“That’s Eve,” Derek announced, as if he’d been expecting her, and a few minutes later Eve walked in holding a jug in the air.

“I’ll trade you Carlos’s wine for some stew,” she offered.

“Deal!” Derek hooted. “Give it here!”

Mason leaned toward Cara and whispered, “Don’t worry, it’s watered down.”

“You mean... like what the boys served the other night?” Cara asked.

He nodded.

Eve waved to Cara and said, “Sorry it took me so long.”

“Hi Eve, no worries!” Cara hailed her and started dishing up the stew.

As Eve sat down, she looked across the fire at Alfred and said, “Hello Freddie,” to which he replied,

“Nice to see you again, cousin.”

Cara dropped the spoon in the pot and shot a shocked look at Mason. He smiled at her as if to say, ‘Well, now you know.’

Cara began filling bowls again and Derek poured the wine as Mason told them what to expect the following day.

“We’ll start out just after daybreak. Our movements will follow the tree line but never above it. We’ll hike until mid-afternoon, set up camp, and go to sleep at sundown because, assuming the weather is right... when the moon rises in the middle of the night, we’re going to cross over the top of the mountain. Once we’re over, the rest of our journey is *literally* downhill. But I must stress, again, how important it is that we stay under cover. People are searching for some of us.” He looked meaningfully at John and Ethan. “Hopefully they have no idea where you are but we don’t want to give them any sightings. And... I’m *starving*! Let’s eat!”

They’d barely finished one serving before Derek jumped up and dashed to the mouth of the cave. A few seconds later, he headed out the back with Eve right behind him.

“Looks like it’s time to drop the tarps,” Mason informed them.

“What?” asked Ethan, already half asleep from the wine.

“Yes! Tarps!” Eve called as she and Derek began pulling the backpacks further in and away from the back entrance.

Derek gave Ethan a little shake. “Wake and learn, my apprentice. We’re about to get some weather.”

Puzzled, John looked out the front end of the cave at the peaceful sunset and watched speechlessly as Mason and Eve pulled a tarp across the opening, tying it to spikes in the wall. Cara and Derek were tying another tarp across the back entrance.

“Let’s drop the tops on both tarps for now so we can watch the storm,” Mason suggested. “We can close them up if rain starts to blow in.”

That’s when John first heard the wind behind the cave. When he peaked out above the tarp, he saw a dark, menacing sky and trees bending in the wind. The sight was confusing because he’d just seen a clear sky out the front, but when he looked back, that too was gone. The shadowy nooks and crevices of the cave had disappeared as if a black curtain had been drawn; the only light left was the fire.

There was a rumble in the distance. Out back, the wind kept changing direction causing the trees to sway one way then another. One moment the tarps were pushed in, the next, they were sucked out.

Cara switched on a flashlight as Mason turned his seat to face the cliff side of the cave. As the rumbling deepened, he leaned back against the rock wall, and said,

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Thunder and Lightning Theater. What you’re about to experience will change your lives... and ruin your ears if you don’t cover them.”

Suddenly the wind roared, rushing by the cave like a freight train. The tarps flapped wildly.

Rumbling shook the earth as the sky pounded the earth with marbles of hail followed by a torrent of rain.

John didn’t know which way to look. The trees out the one end were bent in half by the wind. Out the front, lightning lit up the cliff. Inside the cave, thunder entered every part of his body, vibrating in his bones. With each blinding flash, the world was transformed into a black and white photograph, followed by an ear splitting

CRACK!

“Titans!” Derek yelled. “Titans, big as mountains, are hurling lightning bolts and thunder!” Everyone laughed except Ethan who was envisioning the cave falling off the mountain. Gradually, the rain slowed, the wind calmed and the sound of thunder moved across the valley. Mason pointed at his ears and said, “Your hearing will eventually return to normal but the electro-thunder-therapy has changed you forever.”

“I thought the cave was going to slide into the gorge,” Ethan mumbled, his face still ashen white. “It still could,” Derek laughed and Eve glared at him.

“We test the rock around the cave every spring,” Eve told Ethan. “It’s solid and Derek knows it.”

“I’m just *kidding*,” Derek defended but Eve’s stare was humorless.

“Scaring people isn’t funny,” she said with narrowed eyes.

“All right,” Derek ceded. “Quit the stink eye and help me take down the tarps.”

The rain had stopped and there was a spectacular sunset in full view. The lingering storm clouds created a three-dimensional show that moved like a living thing, a shape shifter bathed in the brilliant colors of the setting sun. John noticed that he had no perspective of size or distance. His brain knew everything in view was vast, but instead of feeling separate and tiny, he sensed he was an integral piece of it.

He wasn’t sure how long he stared at the sunset. Time enough for them to have passed out second servings of stew and wine. He watched as the colors softened and then darkened until they couldn’t be called colors at all. Finally, the sun melted into the peaks and darkness covered the world. When he stepped out of the cave, he saw a dazzling night sky twinkling with diamonds.

“John!” Cara called, “you better get your second helping before Derek takes it!”

When John moved back to the fire circle, Eve was recounting her trip to the wharf. “Your friends are all settled in,” she told him and Ethan. “I think they’ll be happy there.”

Then an eerie cry rose from the forest.

“That’s our kitty cat,” Derek explained. “She’s thanking me for her free meal.”

“How do you know she’s a she?” asked Ethan.

“Derek thinks cats are girls and dogs are boys,” Eve baited.

Derek turned to Ethan and John. “Never let Eve tell you what you’re thinking,” he warned.

“Never let *anyone* tell you what you’re thinking,” Eve returned.

Derek raised his cup. “Hear, hear!” and the two clanked their cups together.

The night was already cold and Derek said it would be much colder. To hold in the heat and ward off the wind, dry tarps went up across the cave entrances leaving an opening at the top to let out the smoke from the fire. Mason told everyone to put on all the dry clothes in the packs and assigned shifts to himself, Derek and Eve to tend the fire.

That night, as Ethan dreamt of wailing cougars John lay awake reveling in the night sounds. The next morning, when John first opened his eyes he saw Derek and Eve leave the cave to scout, and then he dozed off again. When he awoke the second time but hadn’t opened his eyes, he heard Ethan say,

“How come Derek called Mason *sir* when we were down the mountain but now he calls him Mason?”

“Hmmm,” Cara pondered aloud. “Maybe it’s an unspoken acknowledgement of Derek’s ability? Up here, in these mountains, Derek’s in charge.”

“But not really,” proposed Ethan.

“When it comes to Resistance decisions, no... but Mason defers to Derek on everything regarding trails, hunting, and tracking.”

“What about Eve?” Ethan asked. “Does she report to Derek when Mason’s not here?”

“No, Eve reports to Mason when her GZ leaders aren’t present,” Cara answered. “But Eve would be the first to credit Derek for her survival skills in these mountains just as Derek would credit the GZ for teaching him and his boys martial arts.”

John’s eyelids finally came unglued and he saw that the fire pit was cleared of logs, coals, and ash. When he looked around, he saw everything was packed and ready to go. He sat up and noticed that all the backpacks were covered with a grayish green plastic and hanging from each pack was a facemask with goggles. John lifted up the facemask on his pack and saw it was equipped with a filter.

“It’s in case the helicopters drop tear gas,” Ethan whispered to him. “Cara said you put them on like this,” he demonstrated.

John’s mouth dropped open.

“Hopefully we won’t need to use the masks,” Cara said to John, nodding hello to Eve and Derek as they entered the cave.

“*Tear gas?*” John repeated.

“When the DM sees any movement this far up the mountain, they assume it’s people who are up to no good,” Cara explained.

Overhearing that, Derek added, “They gas people off the mountains because they like to keep everyone within arms reach.”

“The DM won’t come up here?” Ethan asked.

“Nope. I don’t know what it is,” Derek said shaking his head, “but as soon as you put those guys on a mountain, they have no sense of direction. Now, explain that to me, will you? The sun rises and sets in the same place every day, how can you not know where you are on a mountain?” John looked out the back of the cave and was surprised to see that it was well after sun up.

Ethan pointed to John’s bag. “I packed your clothes. You’re supposed to take the extra ones you put on last night and give ‘em to Cara.”

“Okay. Thanks. Where’s Mason?” John asked and Ethan answered,

“Dunno.”

John overheard Alfred say to Eve,

“How will we hike over the mountain in the dead of night? It will be so cold.”

“There’s another shelter just over the top so, don’t worry,” she said, “we’ll have a fire going before you cool down. And oh Freddie, I promise it’s worth it. *This* summit in the *moonlight*... is a place where heaven touches the earth.”

Ethan heard her and brightened.

“I can’t wait to see all the different lithophytes up there,” he said.

“They’re beautiful,” Eve agreed.

John was wondering how stuff growing on rocks could be of interest when Mason appeared and told them it was time to go.

“Stay close together,” he said. “Kitty’s watching.”

Six hours later, Derek called for them to halt so John waited with him for the others to catch up. When Derek pulled out a pair of binoculars, John peered up the trail and saw a high, grassy ridge but everywhere else was trees.

“What’s to look at?” John asked.

“Nothing here,” Derek answered vaguely, cleaning the lenses with his shirt.

Ethan had caught up with them and was chattering happily.

“Look at these trees!” he exclaimed. “Aren’t they cool? They remind me of big bonsais!”

John and Derek frowned as they looked around at the stunted, gnarled growth that characterized the timberline.

“I’m not sure these trees feel carefully cultivated,” Eve remarked wryly as she joined them.

“They get buried in snow, battered by hail and blasted with hurricane winds.”

“I know! It’s amazing they survive up here! Look at this, it’s like another planet,” Ethan exclaimed, feeling somehow both elated and humbled by the rugged, windswept scene above the tree line. He knelt down and examined one of the crooked trees. “A Krummholz!”

“Aren’t they adorable?” Eve agreed and she went over to look at it too.

Derek shook his head at them and said to John, “Whatever’s your thing...”

“Sure.”

Once all of them had arrived, Mason congratulated them. “We made great time. Take a break here while Derek and I have a look at what’s over the bluff, but don’t go further up this path; you’d be too exposed. There’s a group of rocks down that trail,” he pointed, “where we’ll set up camp. One thing that’s different about camping this far up the mountain is that only Eve, Derek and I will handle the fire. We have to make sure no smoke rises above the trees.”

Out of curiosity, John followed Mason and Derek into the woods and watched as they pulled camouflaged tarps over themselves and crawled under them to the top of the grassy hill. He noticed that Derek’s binoculars were level and directed out across the ground and Mason’s were pointed at the sky.

Then John went back to the others, and he heard Eve say, “I hear something...”

“What?” Ethan asked.

“Don’t you hear that?” Eve insisted.

“No,” Alfred stated irritably.

“Yes,” Cara answered. “I hear it too.”

“Hear what?” Ethan repeated.

John went back into the woods, and saw Derek and Mason sliding down the slope as fast as they could without losing the tarps. Once they reached the trees, they bundled the tarps as they ran back.

John heard Mason tell Derek, “Go the long way to camp. It’s more protected.”

“Right,” Derek replied, and once he reached the others, he said,

“Put on your masks and come with me. Quick!”

“What’s going on?” Alfred demanded. “Crop dusters over the valley,” Mason answered. “We don’t have much time.”

“Put them on like this,” Cara demonstrated as she had in the cave that morning. “Don’t take them off till Derek or Mason say it’s safe.”

Ethan balked. “*Crop* dusters? There aren’t any crops around here.”

“*We’re* the crops,” Derek hollered. “Masks *on*! Follow me!”

Derek led them through the woods with Mason in the rear, scanning the sky as he walked.

“I knew something wasn’t right,” Eve said through her mask.

“How?” Ethan asked, struggling to tighten his mask.

“It was too quiet,” she replied, then stopped to help him adjust the straps on his mask. “The animals heard the planes and moved down the mountain. They know the planes bring death.”

“What!” Ethan half shrieked.

“Calm down,” she warned. “You could hyperventilate. There, your mask is on now.”

“What do you mean, ‘death’?” Ethan persisted.

“The planes usually just drop tear gas if they spot someone up here and that’s bad enough but they also have a chemical that can arrest your respiratory system in minutes,” said Eve. “Even in dilute concentrations it makes breathing difficult and can cause a heart attack.”

“Why would...” Ethan couldn’t find the words to finish his sentence.

“This is how they treat people they consider a threat,” Eve answered. “Be quiet now. Watch where you’re going.”

Ethan looked frantic but said nothing more.

Soon they reached an area surrounded by huge boulders that were cracked and weather worn. Beneath one outcropping, there was a pile of split wood covered by a tarp. Under a second overhang, a tarp covered the ground inside a fire circle. When Derek removed the ground tarp, he revealed a type of fire pit that neither Ethan nor John had ever seen; a large pit about three feet deep connected by a tunnel to a smaller hole nearby.

“When I come back, I’ll show you how to make a Dakota fire,” Derek promised John and Ethan and then he headed up the trail the way they’d come. Cara and Alfred dropped their packs and left with a bucket to get water and Mason was nowhere in sight.

“You know...” Eve said to Ethan and John, “you can turn back anytime. You don’t *have* to come with us.”

“What’re you saying?” Ethan asked.

“You could go to the fishing village with your friends,” she explained and pointed to the trees.

“If you go down that deer path, it will lead you to a GZ who’s posted on the trail. She’ll take you to your friends if you ask her to.”

“But we’d have to take the memory drug,” John stated flatly.

Eve shrugged. “It wears off.”

“Did Mason tell you to say this?” Ethan accused.

“No,” said Eve, “but he told me if at any time you changed your minds, a GZ should take you to your friends on the coast. You can change your minds at any point but... I’m just saying, if you feel like you’ve had enough, I think it’ll be easier on you if you left *now*.”

Indignant, Ethan demanded, “Why?”

“Because we’re crossing over the mountain tonight and if you decide to leave *after* that, you’ll have to go through all this chemical preparedness again on the return trip.”

The boys were quiet.

“I’ll give you five minutes to decide,” Eve told them. “I’ve got chores to do.”

“Five minutes!” Ethan exclaimed and was going to argue but John grabbed him by the shoulder.

“C’mere Ethan.”

“C’mere where?”

“Just c’mere.”

John guided his friend down the animal path Eve had shown them to a place where they could no longer be heard in the camp. John yanked the mask off his face and leaned against a tree.

“What’re you crazy?” Ethan hissed.

“I can’t talk with the thing on,” John grumbled.

“I’m not taking *mine* off!”

“Suit yourself.”

John looked carefully at the trail. Though it was scarcely two inches wide and barely trodden, he knew he could follow it. They could leave.

“What do you want to do?” he asked.

Ethan sighed and fogged up his mask. "I've been listening to conversations between Cara and Alfred," he said. "I know who he is now."

"Who? How?"

"NetNews," Ethan croaked through his mask. "His dad is the CEO of the Corporation,"

"Oh sheht."

Ethan pointed to the gear on his face. "I know wearing this is crazy, this whole day seems crazy... but I still want to join the Resistance."

John kicked a rotted stump. "Me too, but I can't think why."

"What d'ya mean?"

"Helicopters dropping chemicals on people..." He looked at Ethan. "Did we pick the losing side?"

Ethan sat down on a rock and stared at the ground. After a moment he said, "Oh, wow. Who'd have thought I'd find beryl up here."

John squinted at him. "It's brown rock Ethan."

"It shines. Don't you want to see it?" he asked.

"No," he replied emphatically. "But... I would like to stand on top of this mountain tonight,"

John admitted.

"Yeah, up there with the moon..." Ethan murmured, his voice trailing off. Finally, he spoke again.

"I'd rather risk being with good people than get stuck with people like Fish Face."

"How can you tell these people are good?" asked John.

"Because they care about the right things," Ethan answered.

"How do you know they're not just pretending?"

Ethan snorted. "Why would they bother to pretend with us?"

John shrugged. "Maybe they're crazy."

"Everybody I've ever met is crazy in *some* way and I'd rather be with the good crazies than the *demon* crazies like the Fish." Ethan paused and faced John. "Hey! *I'm* supposed to ask the questions."

John grinned.

They stared in silence at the path leading downward. After a while, Ethan shuffled his feet restlessly and said,

"If I went down that trail, it would feel like I was going backwards."

"Yeah," John agreed.

So Ethan stood up, John put on his mask and they headed up the trail to join the others.