

THE MAZE RUNNER
SOON TO BE A
MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

THE MAZE RUNNER SERIES

COMPLETE COLLECTION

**THE MAZE RUNNER • THE SCORCH TRIALS
THE DEATH CURE • THE KILL ORDER**

**BY NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JAMES DASHNER**

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THE MAZE
RUNNER SERIES
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JAMES DASHNER

DELACORTE PRESS

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Contents

[*Cover*](#)

[*Other Books by This Author*](#)

[*Title Page*](#)

[*Copyright Page*](#)

[**The Maze Runner**](#)

[**The Scorch Trials**](#)

[**The Death Cure**](#)

[**The Kill Order**](#)

[*The Eye of Minds Preview*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

BOOK 1 IN THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES BY

JAMES DASHNER

THE MAZE RUNNER

SOON TO BE A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

THE
MAZE
RUNNER
JAMES
DASHNER

Delacorte Press

For Lynette. This book was a three-year journey,
and you never doubted.

Contents

Master - Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)
[Chapter 40](#)
[Chapter 41](#)
[Chapter 42](#)
[Chapter 43](#)
[Chapter 44](#)
[Chapter 45](#)
[Chapter 46](#)
[Chapter 47](#)
[Chapter 48](#)
[Chapter 49](#)
[Chapter 50](#)
[Chapter 51](#)
[Chapter 52](#)
[Chapter 53](#)
[Chapter 54](#)
[Chapter 55](#)
[Chapter 56](#)
[Chapter 57](#)
[Chapter 58](#)
[Chapter 59](#)
[Chapter 60](#)
[Chapter 61](#)
[Chapter 62](#)
[Epilogue](#)

Acknowledgments

He began his new life standing up, surrounded by cold darkness and stale, dusty air.

Metal ground against metal; a lurching shudder shook the floor beneath him. He fell down at the sudden movement and shuffled backward on his hands and feet, drops of sweat beading on his forehead despite the cool air. His back struck a hard metal wall; he slid along it until he hit the corner of the room. Sinking to the floor, he pulled his legs up tight against his body, hoping his eyes would soon adjust to the darkness.

With another jolt, the room jerked upward like an old lift in a mine shaft.

Harsh sounds of chains and pulleys, like the workings of an ancient steel factory, echoed through the room, bouncing off the walls with a hollow, tinny whine. The lightless elevator swayed back and forth as it ascended, turning the boy's stomach sour with nausea; a smell like burnt oil invaded his senses, making him feel worse. He wanted to cry, but no tears came; he could only sit there, alone, waiting.

My name is Thomas, he thought.

That ... that was the only thing he could remember about his life.

He didn't understand how this could be possible. His mind functioned without flaw, trying to calculate his surroundings and predicament. Knowledge flooded his thoughts, facts and images, memories and details of the world and how it works. He pictured snow on trees, running down a leaf-strewn road, eating a hamburger, the moon casting a pale glow on a grassy meadow, swimming in a lake, a busy city square with hundreds of people bustling about their business.

And yet he didn't know where he came from, or how he'd gotten inside the dark lift, or who his parents were. He didn't even know his last name. Images of people flashed across his mind, but there was no recognition, their faces replaced with haunted smears of color. He couldn't think of one person he knew, or recall a single conversation.

The room continued its ascent, swaying; Thomas grew immune to the ceaseless rattling of the chains that pulled him upward. A long time passed. Minutes stretched into hours, although it was impossible to know for sure because every second seemed an eternity. No. He was smarter than that. Trusting his instincts, he knew he'd been moving for roughly *half* an hour.

Strangely enough, he felt his fear whisked away like a swarm of gnats caught in the wind, replaced by an intense curiosity. He wanted to know where he was and what was happening.

With a groan and then a clonk, the rising room halted; the sudden change jolted Thomas from his huddled position and threw him across the hard floor. As he scrambled to his feet, he felt the room sway less and less until it finally stilled. Everything fell silent.

A minute passed. Two. He looked in every direction but saw only darkness; he felt along the walls again, searching for a way out. But there was nothing, only the cool metal. He groaned in frustration; his echo amplified through the air, like the haunted moan of death. It faded, and silence returned. He screamed, called for help, pounded on the walls with his

fists.

Nothing.

Thomas backed into the corner once again, folded his arms and shivered, and the fear returned. He felt a worrying shudder in his chest, as if his heart wanted to escape, to flee his body.

“Someone ... help ... me!” he screamed; each word ripped his throat raw.

A loud clank rang out above him and he sucked in a startled breath as he looked up. A straight line of light appeared across the ceiling of the room, and Thomas watched as it expanded. A heavy grating sound revealed double sliding doors being forced open. After so long in darkness, the light stabbed his eyes; he looked away, covering his face with both hands.

He heard noises above—voices—and fear squeezed his chest.

“Look at that shank.”

“How old is he?”

“Looks like a klunk in a T-shirt.”

“You’re the klunk, shuck-face.”

“Dude, it smells like feet down there!”

“Hope you enjoyed the one-way trip, Greenie.”

“Ain’t no ticket back, bro.”

Thomas was hit with a wave of confusion, blistered with panic. The voices were odd, tinged with echo; some of the words were completely foreign—others felt familiar. He willed his eyes to adjust as he squinted toward the light and those speaking. At first he could see only shifting shadows, but they soon turned into the shapes of bodies—people bending over the hole in the ceiling, looking down at him, pointing.

And then, as if the lens of a camera had sharpened its focus, the faces cleared. They were boys, all of them—some young, some older. Thomas didn’t know what he’d expected, but seeing those faces puzzled him. They were just teenagers. Kids. Some of his fear melted away, but not enough to calm his racing heart.

Someone lowered a rope from above, the end of it tied into a big loop. Thomas hesitated, then stepped into it with his right foot and clutched the rope as he was yanked toward the sky. Hands reached down, lots of hands, grabbing him by his clothes, pulling him up. The world seemed to spin, a swirling mist of faces and color and light. A storm of emotions wrenches his gut, twisted and pulled; he wanted to scream, cry, throw up. The chorus of voices had grown silent, but someone spoke as they yanked him over the sharp edge of the dark box. And Thomas knew he’d never forget the words.

“Nice to meet ya, shank,” the boy said. “Welcome to the Glade.”

The helping hands didn't stop swarming around him until Thomas stood up straight and had the dust brushed from his shirt and pants. Still dazzled by the light, he staggered a bit. He was consumed with curiosity but still felt too ill to look closely at his surroundings. His new companions said nothing as he swiveled his head around, trying to take it all in.

As he rotated in a slow circle, the other kids snickered and stared; some reached out and poked him with a finger. There had to be at least fifty of them, their clothes smudged and sweaty as if they'd been hard at work, all shapes and sizes and races, their hair of varying lengths. Thomas suddenly felt dizzy, his eyes flickering between the boys and the bizarre place in which he'd found himself.

They stood in a vast courtyard several times the size of a football field, surrounded by four enormous walls made of gray stone and covered in spots with thick ivy. The walls had to be hundreds of feet high and formed a perfect square around them, each side split in the exact middle by an opening as tall as the walls themselves that, from what Thomas could see, led to passages and long corridors beyond.

"Look at the Greenbean," a scratchy voice said; Thomas couldn't see who it came from. "Gonna break his shuck neck checkin' out the new digs." Several boys laughed.

"Shut your hole, Gally," a deeper voice responded.

Thomas focused back in on the dozens of strangers around him. He knew he must look out of it—he felt like he'd been drugged. A tall kid with blond hair and a square jaw sniffed at him, his face devoid of expression. A short, pudgy boy fidgeted back and forth on his feet, looking up at Thomas with wide eyes. A thick, heavily muscled Asian kid folded his arms as he studied Thomas, his tight shirtsleeves rolled up to show off his biceps. A dark-skinned boy frowned—the same one who'd welcomed him. Countless others stared.

"Where am I?" Thomas asked, surprised at hearing his voice for the first time in his salvageable memory. It didn't sound quite right—higher than he would've imagined.

"Nowhere good." This came from the dark-skinned boy. "Just slim yourself nice and calm."

"Which Keeper he gonna get?" someone shouted from the back of the crowd.

"I told ya, shuck-face," a shrill voice responded. "He's a klunk, so he'll be a Slopper—no doubt about it." The kid giggled like he'd just said the funniest thing in history.

Thomas once again felt a pressing ache of confusion—hearing so many words and phrases that didn't make sense. *Shank. Shuck. Keeper. Slopper.* They popped out of the boys' mouths so naturally it seemed odd for him not to understand. It was as if his memory loss had stolen a chunk of his language—it was disorienting.

Different emotions battled for dominance in his mind and heart. Confusion. Curiosity. Panic. Fear. But laced through it all was the dark feeling of utter hopelessness, like the world had ended for him, had been wiped from his memory and replaced with something awful. He wanted to run and hide from these people.

The scratchy-voiced boy was talking. "—even do that much, bet my liver on it." Thomas

still couldn't see his face.

"I said shut your holes!" the dark boy yelled. "Keep yapping and next break'll be cut in half!"

That must be their leader, Thomas realized. Hating how everyone gawked at him, he concentrated on studying the place the boy had called the Glade.

The floor of the courtyard looked like it was made of huge stone blocks, many of them cracked and filled with long grasses and weeds. An odd, dilapidated wooden building near one of the corners of the square contrasted greatly with the gray stone. A few trees surrounded it, their roots like gnarled hands digging into the rock floor for food. Another corner of the compound held gardens—from where he was standing Thomas recognized corn, tomato plants, fruit trees.

Across the courtyard from there stood wooden pens holding sheep and pigs and cows. A large grove of trees filled the final corner; the closest ones looked crippled and close to dying. The sky overhead was cloudless and blue, but Thomas could see no sign of the sun despite the brightness of the day. The creeping shadows of the walls didn't reveal the time or direction—it could be early morning or late afternoon. As he breathed in deeply, trying to settle his nerves, a mixture of smells bombarded him. Freshly turned dirt, manure, pine, something rotten and something sweet. Somehow he knew that these were the smells of a farm.

Thomas looked back at his captors, feeling awkward but desperate to ask questions. *Captors*, he thought. Then, *Why did that word pop into my head?* He scanned their faces, taking in each expression, judging them. One boy's eyes, flared with hatred, stopped him cold. He looked so angry, Thomas wouldn't have been surprised if the kid came at him with a knife. He had black hair, and when they made eye contact, the boy shook his head and turned away, walking toward a greasy iron pole with a wooden bench next to it. A multicolored flag hung limply at the top of the pole, no wind to reveal its pattern.

Shaken, Thomas stared at the boy's back until he turned and took a seat. Thomas quickly looked away.

Suddenly the leader of the group—perhaps he was seventeen—took a step forward. He wore normal clothes: black T-shirt, jeans, tennis shoes, a digital watch. For some reason the clothing here surprised Thomas; it seemed like everyone should be wearing something more menacing—like prison garb. The dark-skinned boy had short-cropped hair, his face clean shaven. But other than the permanent scowl, there was nothing scary about him at all.

"It's a long story, shank," the boy said. "Piece by piece, you'll learn—I'll be takin' you on the Tour tomorrow. Till then ... just don't break anything." He held a hand out. "Name's Alby." He waited, clearly wanting to shake hands.

Thomas refused. Some instinct took over his actions and without saying anything he turned away from Alby and walked to a nearby tree, where he plopped down to sit with his back against the rough bark. Panic swelled inside him once again, almost too much to bear. But he took a deep breath and forced himself to try to accept the situation. *Just go with it*, he thought. *You won't figure out anything if you give in to fear.*

"Then tell me," Thomas called out, struggling to keep his voice even. "Tell me the long story."

Alby glanced at the friends closest to him, rolling his eyes, and Thomas studied the crowd

again. His original estimate had been close—there were probably fifty to sixty of them, ranging from boys in their midteens to young adults like Alby, who seemed to be one of the oldest. At that moment, Thomas realized with a sickening lurch that he had no idea how old *he* was. His heart sank at the thought—he was so lost he didn’t even know his own age.

“Seriously,” he said, giving up on the show of courage. “Where am I?”

Alby walked over to him and sat down cross-legged; the crowd of boys followed and packed in behind. Heads popped up here and there, kids leaning in every direction to get a better look.

“If you ain’t scared,” Alby said, “you ain’t human. Act any different and I’d throw you off the Cliff because it’d mean you’re a psycho.”

“The Cliff?” Thomas asked, blood draining from his face.

“Shuck it,” Alby said, rubbing his eyes. “Ain’t no way to start these conversations, you get me? We don’t kill shanks like you here, I promise. Just try and avoid *being* killed, survive, whatever.”

He paused, and Thomas realized his face must’ve whitened even more when he heard that last part.

“Man,” Alby said, then ran his hands over his short hair as he let out a long sigh. “I ain’t good at this—you’re the first Greenbean since Nick was killed.”

Thomas’s eyes widened, and another boy stepped up and playfully slapped Alby across the head. “Wait for the bloody Tour, Alby,” he said, his voice thick with an odd accent. “Kid’s gonna have a buggin’ heart attack, nothin’ even been heard yet.” He bent down and extended his hand toward Thomas. “Name’s Newt, Greenie, and we’d all be right cheery if ya’d forgive our klunk-for-brains new leader, here.”

Thomas reached out and shook the boy’s hand—he seemed a lot nicer than Alby. Newt was taller than Alby too, but looked to be a year or so younger. His hair was blond and cut long, cascading over his T-shirt. Veins stuck out of his muscled arms.

“Pipe it, shuck-face,” Alby grunted, pulling Newt down to sit next to him. “At least he can understand *half* my words.” There were a few scattered laughs, and then everyone gathered behind Alby and Newt, packing in even tighter, waiting to hear what they said.

Alby spread his arms out, palms up. “This place is called the Glade, all right? It’s where we live, where we eat, where we sleep—we call ourselves the Gladers. That’s all you—”

“Who sent me here?” Thomas demanded, fear finally giving way to anger. “How’d—”

But Alby’s hand shot out before he could finish, grabbing Thomas by the shirt as he leaned forward on his knees. “Get up, shank, get up!” Alby stood, pulling Thomas with him.

Thomas finally got his feet under him, scared all over again. He backed against the tree, trying to get away from Alby, who stayed right in his face.

“No interruptions, boy!” Alby shouted. “Whacker, if we told you everything, you’d die on the spot, right after you klunked your pants. Baggers’d drag you off, and you ain’t no good to us then, are ya?”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” Thomas said slowly, shocked at how steady his voice sounded.

Newt reached out and grabbed Alby by the shoulders. “Alby, lay off a bit. You’re hurtin’ more than helpin’, ya know?”

Alby let go of Thomas’s shirt and stepped back, his chest heaving with breaths. “Ain’t got

time to be nice, Greenbean. Old life's over, new life's begun. Learn the rules quick, listen, don't talk. You get me?"

Thomas looked over at Newt, hoping for help. Everything inside him churned and hurt; the tears that had yet to come burned his eyes.

Newt nodded. "Greenie, you get him, right?" He nodded again.

Thomas fumed, wanted to punch somebody. But he simply said, "Yeah."

"Good that," Alby said. "First Day. That's what today is for you, shank. Night's comin', Runners'll be back soon. The Box came late today, ain't got time for the Tour. Tomorrow morning, right after the wake-up." He turned toward Newt. "Get him a bed, get him to sleep."

"Good that," Newt said.

Alby's eyes returned to Thomas, narrowing. "A few weeks, you'll be happy, shank. You'll be happy and helpin'. None of us knew jack on First Day, you neither. New life begins tomorrow."

Alby turned and pushed his way through the crowd, then headed for the slanted wooden building in the corner. Most of the kids wandered away then, each one giving Thomas a lingering look before they walked off.

Thomas folded his arms, closed his eyes, took a deep breath. Emptiness ate away at his insides, quickly replaced by a sadness that hurt his heart. It was all too much—where was he? What was this place? Was it some kind of prison? If so, why had he been sent here, and for how long? The language was odd, and none of the boys seemed to care whether he lived or died. Tears threatened again to fill his eyes, but he refused to let them come.

"What did I do?" he whispered, not really meaning for anyone to hear him. "What did I do—why'd they send me here?"

Newt clapped him on the shoulder. "Greenie, what you're feelin', we've all felt it. We've all had First Day, come out of that dark box. Things are bad, they are, and they'll get much worse for ya soon, that's the truth. But down the road a piece, you'll be fightin' true and good. I can tell you're not a bloody sissy."

"Is this a prison?" Thomas asked; he dug in the darkness of his thoughts, trying to find a crack to his past.

"Done asked four questions, haven't ya?" Newt replied. "No good answers for ya, not yet, anyway. Best be quiet now, accept the change—morn comes tomorrow."

Thomas said nothing, his head sunk, his eyes staring at the cracked, rocky ground. A line of small-leaved weeds ran along the edge of one of the stone blocks, tiny yellow flowers peeping through as if searching for the sun, long disappeared behind the enormous walls of the Glade.

"Chuck'll be a good fit for ya," Newt said. "Wee little fat shank, but nice sap when all's said and done. Stay here, I'll be back."

Newt had barely finished his sentence when a sudden, piercing scream ripped through the air. High and shrill, the barely human shriek echoed across the stone courtyard; every kid in sight turned to look toward the source. Thomas felt his blood turn to icy slush as he realized that the horrible sound came from the wooden building.

Even Newt had jumped as if startled, his forehead creasing in concern.

"Shuck it," he said. "Can't the bloody Med-jacks handle that boy for ten minutes without

needin' my help?" He shook his head and lightly kicked Thomas on the foot. "Find Chuckie, tell him he's in charge of your sleepin' arrangements." And then he turned and headed in the direction of the building, running.

Thomas slid down the rough face of the tree until he sat on the ground again; he shrank back against the bark and closed his eyes, wishing he could wake up from this terrible, terrible dream.

Thomas sat there for several moments, too overwhelmed to move. He finally forced himself to look over at the haggard building. A group of boys milled around outside, glancing anxiously at the upper windows as if expecting a hideous beast to leap out in an explosion of glass and wood.

A metallic clicking sound from the branches above grabbed his attention, made him look up; a flash of silver and red light caught his eyes just before disappearing around the trunk to the other side. He scrambled to his feet and walked around the tree, craning his neck for a sign of whatever he'd heard, but he saw only bare branches, gray and brown, forking out like skeleton fingers—and looking just as alive.

"That was one of them beetle blades," someone said.

Thomas turned to his right to see a kid standing nearby, short and pudgy, staring at him. He was young—probably the youngest of any in the group he'd seen so far, maybe twelve or thirteen years old. His brown hair hung down over his ears and neck, scraping the tops of his shoulders. Blue eyes shone through an otherwise pitiful face, flabby and flushed.

Thomas nodded at him. "A beetle what?"

"Beetle blade," the boy said, pointing to the top of the tree. "Won't hurt ya unless you're stupid enough to touch one of them." He paused. "Shank." He didn't sound comfortable saying the last word, as if he hadn't quite grasped the slang of the Glade.

Another scream, this one long and nerve-grinding, tore through the air and Thomas's heart lurched. The fear was like icy dew on his skin. "What's going on over there?" he asked, pointing at the building.

"Don't know," the chubby boy replied; his voice still carried the high pitch of childhood. "Ben's in there, sicker than a dog. *They* got him."

"They?" Thomas didn't like the malicious way the boy had said the word.

"Yeah."

"Who are *They*?"

"Better hope you never find out," the kid answered, looking far too comfortable for the situation. He held out his hand. "My name's Chuck. I was the Greenbean until you showed up."

This is my guide for the night? Thomas thought. He couldn't shake his extreme discomfort, and now annoyance crept in as well. Nothing made sense; his head hurt.

"Why is everyone calling me Greenbean?" he asked, shaking Chuck's hand quickly, then letting go.

"Cuz you're the newest Newbie." Chuck pointed at Thomas and laughed. Another scream came from the house, a sound like a starving animal being tortured.

"How can you be laughing?" Thomas asked, horrified by the noise. "It sounds like someone's dying in there."

"He'll be okay. No one dies if they make it back in time to get the Serum. It's all or nothing. Dead or not dead. Just hurts a lot."

This gave Thomas pause. “What hurts a lot?”

Chuck’s eyes wandered as if he wasn’t sure what to say. “Um, gettin’ stung by the Grievers.”

“Grievers?” Thomas was only getting more and more confused. *Stung. Grievers.* The words had a heavy weight of dread to them, and he suddenly wasn’t so sure he wanted to know what Chuck was talking about.

Chuck shrugged, then looked away, eyes rolling.

Thomas sighed in frustration and leaned back against the tree. “Looks like you barely know more than I do,” he said, but he knew it wasn’t true. His memory loss was strange. He mostly remembered the workings of the world—but emptied of specifics, faces, names. Like a book completely intact but missing one word in every dozen, making it a miserable and confusing read. He didn’t even know his age.

“Chuck, how ... old do you think I am?”

The boy scanned him up and down. “I’d say you’re sixteen. And in case you were wondering, five foot nine ... brown hair. Oh, and ugly as fried liver on a stick.” He snorted a laugh.

Thomas was so stunned he’d barely heard the last part. Sixteen? He was *sixteen*? He felt much older than that.

“Are you serious?” He paused, searching for words. “How ...” He didn’t even know what to ask.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be all whacked for a few days, but then you’ll get used to this place. I have. We live here, this is it. Better than living in a pile of klunk.” He squinted, maybe anticipating Thomas’s question. “*Klunk*’s another word for poo. Poo makes a klunk sound when it falls in our pee pots.”

Thomas looked at Chuck, unable to believe he was having this conversation. “That’s nice” was all he could manage. He stood up and walked past Chuck toward the old building; *shack* was a better word for the place. It looked three or four stories high and about to fall down at any minute—a crazy assortment of logs and boards and thick twine and windows seemingly thrown together at random, the massive, ivy-strewn stone walls rising up behind it. As he moved across the courtyard, the distinct smell of firewood and some kind of meat cooking made his stomach grumble. Knowing now that it was just a sick kid doing the screaming made Thomas feel better. Until he thought about what had caused it ...

“What’s your name?” Chuck asked from behind, running to catch up.

“What?”

“Your *name*? You still haven’t told us—and I know you remember that much.”

“Thomas.” He barely heard himself say it—his thoughts had spun in a new direction. If Chuck was right, he’d just discovered a link to the rest of the boys. A common pattern to their memory losses. They all remembered their names. Why not their parents’ names? Why not a friend’s name? Why not their *last* names?

“Nice to meet you, Thomas,” Chuck said. “Don’t you worry, I’ll take care of you. I’ve been here a whole month, and I know the place inside and out. You can count on Chuck, okay?”

Thomas had almost reached the front door of the shack and the small group of boys congregating there when he was hit by a sudden and surprise rush of anger. He turned to

face Chuck. "You can't even *tell* me anything. I wouldn't call that taking care of me." He turned back toward the door, intent on going inside to find some answers. Where this sudden courage and resolve came from, he had no idea.

Chuck shrugged. "Nothin' I say'll do you any good," he said. "I'm basically still a Newbie, too. But I can be your friend—"

"I don't need friends," Thomas interrupted.

He'd reached the door, an ugly slab of sun-faded wood, and he pulled it open to see several stoic-faced boys standing at the foot of a crooked staircase, the steps and railings twisted and angled in all directions. Dark wallpaper covered the walls of the foyer and hallway, half of it peeling off. The only decorations in sight were a dusty vase on a three-legged table and a black-and-white picture of an ancient woman dressed in an old-fashioned white dress. It reminded Thomas of a haunted house from a movie or something. There were even planks of wood missing from the floor.

The place reeked of dust and mildew—a big contrast to the pleasant smells outside. Flickering fluorescent lights shone from the ceiling. He hadn't thought of it yet, but he had to wonder where the electricity came from in a place like the Glade. He stared at the old woman in the picture. Had she lived here once? Taken care of these people?

"Hey, look, it's the Greenbean," one of the older boys called out. With a start, Thomas realized it was the black-haired guy who'd given him the look of death earlier. He looked like he was fifteen or so, tall and skinny. His nose was the size of a small fist and resembled a deformed potato. "This shank probably klunked his pants when he heard old Benny baby scream like a girl. Need a new diaper, shuck-face?"

"My name's Thomas." He had to get away from this guy. Without another word, he made for the stairs, only because they were close, only because he had no idea what to do or say. But the bully stepped in front of him, holding a hand up.

"Hold on there, Greenie." He jerked a thumb in the direction of the upper floor. "Newbies aren't allowed to see someone who's been ... *taken*. Newt and Alby won't allow it."

"What's your problem?" Thomas asked, trying to keep the fear out of his voice, trying not to think what the kid had meant by *taken*. "I don't even know where I am. All I want is some help."

"Listen to me, Greenbean." The boy wrinkled up his face, folded his arms. "I've seen you before. Something's fishy about you showing up here, and I'm gonna find out what."

A surge of heat pulsed through Thomas's veins. "I've never seen you before in my life. I have no idea who you are, and I couldn't care less," he spat. But really, how would he know? And how could this kid remember *him*?

The bully snickered, a short burst of laughter mixed with a phlegm-filled snort. Then his face grew serious, his eyebrows slanting inward. "I've ... *seen* you, shank. Not too many in these parts can say they've been stung." He pointed up the stairs. "I have. I know what old Benny baby's going through. I've been there. And I saw you during the Changing."

He reached out and poked Thomas in the chest. "And I bet your first meal from Frypan that Benny'll say he's seen ya, too."

Thomas refused to break eye contact but decided to say nothing. Panic ate at him once again. Would things ever stop getting worse?

"Griever got ya wettin' yourself?" the boy said through a sneer. "A little scared now?"

Don't wanna get *stung*, do ya?"

There was that word again. *Stung*. Thomas tried not to think about it and pointed up the stairs, from where the moans of the sick kid echoed through the building. "If Newt went up there, then I wanna talk to him."

The boy said nothing, stared at Thomas for several seconds. Then he shook his head. "You know what? You're right, Tommy—I shouldn't be so mean to Newbies. Go on upstairs and I'm sure Alby and Newt'll fill you in. Seriously, go on. I'm sorry."

He lightly slapped Thomas's shoulder, then stepped back, gesturing up the stairs. But Thomas knew the kid was up to something. Losing parts of your memory didn't make you an idiot.

"What's your name?" Thomas asked, stalling for time while he tried to decide if he should go up after all.

"Gally. And don't let anyone fool you. I'm the real leader here, not the two geezer shanks upstairs. Me. You can call me Captain Gally if you want." He smiled for the first time; his teeth matched his disgusting nose. Two or three were missing, and not a single one approached anything close to the color white. His breath escaped just enough for Thomas to get a whiff, reminding him of some horrible memory that was just out of reach. It made his stomach turn.

"Okay," he said, so sick of the guy he wanted to scream, punch him in the face. "Captain Gally it is." He exaggerated a salute, feeling a rush of adrenaline, as he knew he'd just crossed a line.

A few snickers escaped the crowd, and Gally looked around, his face bright red. He peered back at Thomas, hatred furrowing his brow and crinkling his monstrous nose.

"Just go up the stairs," Gally said. "And stay away from me, you little slinthead." He pointed up again but didn't take his eyes off Thomas.

"Fine." Thomas looked around one more time, embarrassed, confused, angry. He felt the heat of blood in his face. No one made a move to stop him from doing as Gally asked, except for Chuck, who stood at the front door, shaking his head.

"You're not supposed to," the younger boy said. "You're a Newbie—you can't go up there."

"Go," said Gally with a sneer. "Go on up."

Thomas regretted having come inside in the first place—but he *did* want to talk to that Newt guy.

He started up the stairs. Each step groaned and creaked under his weight; he might've stopped for fear of falling through the old wood if he weren't leaving such an awkward situation below. Up he went, wincing at every splintered sound. The stairs reached a landing, turned left, then came upon a railed hallway leading to several rooms. Only one door had a light coming through the crack at the bottom.

"The Changing!" Gally shouted from below. "Look forward to it, shuck-face!"

As if the taunting gave Thomas a sudden burst of courage, he walked over to the lit door, ignoring the creaking floorboards and laughter downstairs—ignoring the onslaught of words he didn't understand, suppressing the dreadful feelings they induced. He reached down, turned the brass handle, and opened the door.

Inside the room, Newt and Alby crouched over someone lying on a bed.

Thomas leaned in closer to see what the fuss was all about, but when he got a clear look at the condition of the patient, his heart went cold. He had to fight the bile that surged up his throat.

The look was fast—only a few seconds—but it was enough to haunt him forever. A twisted, pale figure writhing in agony, chest bare and hideous. Tight, rigid cords of sickly green veins webbed across the boy's body and limbs, like ropes under his skin. Purplish bruises covered the kid, red hives, bloody scratches. His bloodshot eyes bulged, darting back and forth. The image had already burned into Thomas's mind before Alby jumped up, blocking the view but not the moans and screams, pushing Thomas out of the room, then slamming the door shut behind them.

"What're you doing up here, Greenie!" Alby yelled, his lips taut with anger, eyes on fire.

Thomas felt weak. "I ... uh ... want some answers," he murmured, but he couldn't put any strength in his words—felt himself give up inside. What was wrong with that kid? Thomas slouched against the railing in the hallway and stared at the floor, not sure what to do next.

"Get your runtcheeks down those stairs, right now," Alby ordered. "Chuck'll help you. If I see you again before tomorrow morning, you ain't reachin' another one alive. I'll throw you off the Cliff myself, you get me?"

Thomas was humiliated and scared. He felt like he'd shrunk to the size of a small rat. Without saying a word, he pushed past Alby and headed down the creaky steps, going as fast as he dared. Ignoring the gaping stares of everyone at the bottom—especially Gally—he walked out the door, pulling Chuck by the arm as he did so.

Thomas hated these people. He hated all of them. Except Chuck. "Get me away from these guys," Thomas said. He realized that Chuck might actually be his only friend in the world.

"You got it," Chuck replied, his voice chipper, as if thrilled to be needed. "But first we should get you some food from Frypan."

"I don't know if I can ever eat again." Not after what he'd just seen.

Chuck nodded. "Yeah, you will. I'll meet you at the same tree as before. Ten minutes."

Thomas was more than happy to get away from the house, and headed back toward the tree. He'd only known what it was like to be alive here for a short while and he already wanted it to end. He wished for all the world he could remember something about his previous life. Anything. His mom, his dad, a friend, his school, a hobby. A girl.

He blinked hard several times, trying to get the image of what he'd just seen in the shack out of his mind.

The Changing. Gally had called it the Changing.

It wasn't cold, but Thomas shuddered once again.

CHAPTER 4

Thomas leaned against the tree as he waited for Chuck. He scanned the compound of the Glade, this new place of nightmares where he seemed destined to live. The shadows from the walls had lengthened considerably, already creeping up the sides of the ivy-covered stone faces on the other side.

At least this helped Thomas know directions—the wooden building crouched in the northwest corner, wedged in a darkening patch of shadow, the grove of trees in the southwest. The farm area, where a few workers were still picking their way through the fields, spread across the entire northeast quarter of the Glade. The animals were in the southeast corner, mooing and crowing and baying.

In the exact middle of the courtyard, the still-gaping hole of the Box lay open, as if inviting him to jump back in and go home. Near that, maybe twenty feet to the south, stood a squat building made of rough concrete blocks, a menacing iron door its only entrance—there were no windows. A large round handle resembling a steel steering wheel marked the only way to open the door, just like something within a submarine. Despite what he'd just seen, Thomas didn't know which he felt more strongly—curiosity to know what was inside, or dread at finding out.

Thomas had just moved his attention to the four vast openings in the middle of the main walls of the Glade when Chuck arrived, a couple of sandwiches cradled in his arms, along with apples and two metal cups of water. The sense of relief that flooded through Thomas surprised him—he wasn't *completely* alone in this place.

"Frypan wasn't too happy about me invading his kitchen before suppertime," Chuck said, sitting down next to the tree, motioning to Thomas to do the same. He did, grabbed the sandwich, but hesitated, the writhing, monstrous image of what he'd seen in the shack popping back into his mind. Soon, though, his hunger won out and he took a huge bite. The wonderful tastes of ham and cheese and mayonnaise filled his mouth.

"Ah, man," Thomas mumbled through a mouthful. "I was starving."

"Told ya." Chuck chomped into his own sandwich.

After another couple of bites, Thomas finally asked the question that had been bothering him. "What's actually *wrong* with that Ben guy? He doesn't even look human anymore."

Chuck glanced over at the house. "Don't really know," he muttered absently. "I didn't see him."

Thomas could tell the boy was being less than honest but decided not to press him. "Well, you don't want to see him, trust me." He continued to eat, munching on the apples as he studied the huge breaks in the walls. Though it was hard to make out from where he sat, there was something odd about the stone edges of the exits to the outside corridors. He felt an uncomfortable sense of vertigo looking at the towering walls, as if he hovered above them instead of sitting at their base.

"What's out there?" he asked, finally breaking the silence. "Is this part of a huge castle or something?"

Chuck hesitated. Looked uncomfortable. “Um, I’ve never been outside the Glade.”

Thomas paused. “You’re hiding something,” he finally replied, finishing off his last bite and taking a long swig of water. The frustration at getting no answers from anyone was starting to grind his nerves. It only made it worse to think that even if he *did* get answers, he wouldn’t know if he’d be getting the truth. “Why are you guys so secretive?”

“That’s just the way it is. Things are really weird around here, and most of us don’t know everything. *Half* of everything.”

It bothered Thomas that Chuck didn’t seem to care about what he’d just said. That he seemed indifferent to having his life taken away from him. What was wrong with these people? Thomas got to his feet and started walking toward the eastern opening. “Well, no one said I couldn’t look around.” He needed to learn something or he was going to lose his mind.

“Whoa, wait!” Chuck cried, running to catch up. “Be careful, those puppies are about to close.” He already sounded out of breath.

“Close?” Thomas repeated. “What are you talking about?”

“The Doors, you shank.”

“Doors? I don’t see any doors.” Thomas knew Chuck wasn’t just making stuff up—he knew he was missing something obvious. He grew uneasy and realized he’d slowed his pace, not so eager to reach the walls anymore.

“What do you call those big openings?” Chuck pointed up at the enormously tall gaps in the walls. They were only thirty feet away now.

“I’d call them *big openings*,” Thomas said, trying to counter his discomfort with sarcasm and disappointed that it wasn’t working.

“Well, they’re *doors*. And they close up every night.”

Thomas stopped, thinking Chuck had to have said something wrong. He looked up, looked side to side, examined the massive slabs of stone as the uneasy feeling blossomed into outright dread. “What do you mean, they *close*?”

“Just see for yourself in a minute. The Runners’ll be back soon; then those big walls are going to *move* until the gaps are closed.”

“You’re jacked in the head,” Thomas muttered. He couldn’t see how the mammoth walls could possibly be mobile—felt so sure of it he relaxed, thinking Chuck was just playing a trick on him.

They reached the huge split that led outside to more stone pathways. Thomas gaped, his mind emptying of thought as he saw it all firsthand.

“This is called the East Door,” Chuck said, as if proudly revealing a piece of art he’d created.

Thomas barely heard him, shocked by how much bigger it was up close. At least twenty feet across, the break in the wall went all the way to the top, far above. The edges that bordered the vast opening were smooth, except for one odd, repeating pattern on both sides. On the left side of the East Door, deep holes several inches in diameter and spaced a foot apart were bored into the rock, beginning near the ground and continuing all the way up.

On the right side of the Door, foot-long rods jutted out from the wall edge, also several inches in diameter, in the same pattern as the holes facing them on the other side. The

purpose was obvious.

"Are you kidding?" Thomas asked, the dread slamming back into his gut. "You weren't playing with me? The walls really *move*?"

"What else would I have meant?"

Thomas had a hard time wrapping his mind around the possibility. "I don't know. I figured there was a door that swung shut or a little mini-wall that slid out of the big one. How could these walls move? They're huge, and they look like they've been standing here for a thousand years." And the idea of those walls closing and trapping him inside this place they called the Glade was downright terrifying.

Chuck threw his arms up, clearly frustrated. "I don't know, they just move. Makes one heck of a grinding noise. Same thing happens out in the Maze—those walls shift every night, too."

Thomas, his attention suddenly snapped up by a new detail, turned to face the younger boy. "What did you just say?"

"Huh?"

"You just called it a maze—you said, 'same thing happens out in the *maze*.'"

Chuck's face reddened. "I'm done with you. I'm done." He walked back toward the tree they'd just left.

Thomas ignored him, more interested than ever in the outside of the Glade. A *maze*? In front of him, through the East Door, he could make out passages leading to the left, to the right, and straight ahead. And the walls of the corridors were similar to those that surrounded the Glade, the ground made of the same massive stone blocks as in the courtyard. The ivy seemed even thicker out there. In the distance, more breaks in the walls led to other paths, and farther down, maybe a hundred yards or so away, the straight passage came to a dead end.

"Looks like a maze," Thomas whispered, almost laughing to himself. As if things couldn't have gotten any stranger. They'd wiped his memory and put him inside a gigantic maze. It was all so crazy it really did seem funny.

His heart skipped a beat when a boy unexpectedly appeared around a corner up ahead, entering the main passage from one of the offshoots to the right, running toward him and the Glade. Covered in sweat, his face red, clothes sticking to his body, the boy didn't slow, hardly glancing at Thomas as he went past. He headed straight for the squat concrete building located near the Box.

Thomas turned as he passed, his eyes riveted to the exhausted runner, unsure why this new development surprised him so much. Why *wouldn't* people go out and search the maze? Then he realized others were entering through the remaining three Glade openings, all of them running and looking as ragged as the guy who'd just whisked by him. There couldn't be much good about the maze if these guys came back looking so weary and worn.

He watched, curious, as they met at the big iron door of the small building; one of the boys turned the rusty wheel handle, grunting with the effort. Chuck had said something about runners earlier. What had they been doing out there?

The big door finally popped open, and with a deafening squeal of metal against metal, the boys swung it wide. They disappeared inside, pulling it shut behind them with a loud clonk. Thomas stared, his mind churning to come up with any possible explanation for

what he'd just witnessed. Nothing developed, but something about that creepy old building gave him goose bumps, a disquieting chill.

Someone tugged on his sleeve, breaking him from his thoughts; Chuck had come back.

Before Thomas had a chance to think, questions were rushing out of his mouth. "Who are those guys and what were they doing? What's in that building?" He wheeled around and pointed out the East Door. "And why do you live inside a freaking maze?" He felt a rattling pressure of uncertainty, making his head splinter with pain.

"I'm not saying another word," Chuck replied, a new authority filling his voice. "I think you should get to bed early—you'll need your sleep. Ah"—he stopped, held up a finger, pricking up his right ear—"it's about to happen."

"What?" Thomas asked, thinking it kind of strange that Chuck was suddenly acting like an adult instead of the little kid desperate for a friend he'd been only moments earlier.

A loud boom exploded through the air, making Thomas jump. It was followed by a horrible crunching, grinding sound. He stumbled backward, fell to the ground. It felt as if the whole earth shook; he looked around, panicked. The walls were closing. The walls were *really* closing—trapping him inside the Glade. An onrushing sense of claustrophobia stifled him, compressed his lungs, as if water filled their cavities.

"Calm down, Greenie," Chuck yelled over the noise. "It's just the walls!"

Thomas barely heard him, too fascinated, too shaken by the closing of the Doors. He scrambled to his feet and took a few trembling steps back for a better view, finding it hard to believe what his eyes were seeing.

The enormous stone wall to the right of them seemed to defy every known law of physics as it slid along the ground, throwing sparks and dust as it moved, rock against rock. The crunching sound rattled his bones. Thomas realized that only *that* wall was moving, heading for its neighbor to the left, ready to seal shut with its protruding rods slipping into the drilled holes across from it. He looked around at the other openings. It felt like his head was spinning faster than his body, and his stomach flipped over with the dizziness. On all four sides of the Glade, only the right walls were moving, toward the left, closing the gap of the Doors.

Impossible, he thought. *How can they do that?* He fought the urge to run out there, slip past the moving slabs of rock before they shut, flee the Glade. Common sense won out—the maze held even more unknowns than his situation inside.

He tried to picture in his mind how the structure of it all worked. Massive stone walls, hundreds of feet high, moving like sliding glass doors—an image from his past life that flashed through his thoughts. He tried to grasp the memory, hold on to it, complete the picture with faces, names, a place, but it faded into obscurity. A pang of sadness pricked through his other swirling emotions.

He watched as the right wall reached the end of its journey, its connecting rods finding their mark and entering without a glitch. An echoing boom rumbled across the Glade as all four Doors sealed shut for the night. Thomas felt one final moment of trepidation, a quick slice of fear through his body, and then it vanished.

A surprising sense of calm eased his nerves; he let out a long sigh of relief. "Wow," he said, feeling dumb at such a monumental understatement.

"Ain't nothin', as Alby would say," Chuck murmured. "You kind of get used to it after a

while.”

Thomas looked around one more time, the *feel* of the place completely different now that all the walls were solid with no way out. He tried to imagine the purpose of such a thing, and he didn’t know which guess was worse—that they were being sealed *in* or that they were being protected from something *out there*. The thought ended his brief moment of calm, stirring in his mind a million possibilities of what might live in the maze outside, all of them terrifying. Fear gripped him once again.

“Come *on*,” Chuck said, pulling at Thomas’s sleeve a second time. “Trust me, when nighttime strikes, you want to be in *bed*.”

Thomas knew he had no other choice. He did his best to suppress everything he was feeling and followed.

CHAPTER 5

They ended up near the back of the Homestead—that was what Chuck called the leaning structure of wood and windows—in a dark shadow between the building and the stone wall behind it.

“Where are we going?” Thomas asked, still feeling the weight of seeing those walls close, thinking about the maze, the confusion, the fear. He told himself to stop or he’d drive himself crazy. Trying to grasp a sense of normalcy, he made a weak attempt at a joke. “If you’re looking for a goodnight kiss, forget it.”

Chuck didn’t miss a beat. “Just shut up and stay close.”

Thomas let out a big breath and shrugged before following the younger boy along the back of the building. They tiptoed until they came upon a small, dusty window, a soft beam of light shining through onto the stone and ivy. Thomas heard someone moving around inside.

“The bathroom,” Chuck whispered.

“So?” A thread of unease stitched along Thomas’s skin.

“I love doing this to people. Gives me great pleasure before bedtime.”

“Doing what?” Something told Thomas Chuck was up to no good. “Maybe I should—”

“Just shut your mouth and watch.” Chuck quietly stepped up onto a big wooden box that sat right under the window. He crouched so that his head was positioned just below where the person on the inside would be able to see him. Then he reached up with his hand and lightly tapped on the glass.

“This is stupid,” Thomas whispered. There couldn’t possibly be a worse time to play a joke—Newt or Alby could be in there. “I don’t wanna get in trouble—I just got here!”

Chuck suppressed a laugh by putting his hand over his mouth. Ignoring Thomas, he reached up and tapped the window again.

A shadow crossed the light; then the window slid open. Thomas jumped to hide, pressing himself against the back of the building as hard as he could. He just couldn’t believe he’d been suckered into playing a practical joke on somebody. The angle of vision from the window protected him for the moment, but he knew he and Chuck would be seen if whoever was in there pushed his head outside to get a better look.

“Who’s that!” yelled the boy from the bathroom, his voice scratchy and laced with anger. Thomas had to hold in a gasp when he realized it was Gally—he *knew* that voice already.

Without warning, Chuck suddenly popped his head up toward the window and screamed at the top of his lungs. A loud crash from inside revealed that the trick had worked—and the litany of swearwords following it let them know Gally was none too happy about it. Thomas was struck with an odd mix of horror and embarrassment.

“I’m gonna kill you, shuck-face!” Gally yelled, but Chuck was already off the box and running toward the open Glade. Thomas froze as he heard Gally open the door inside and run out of the bathroom.

Thomas finally snapped out of his daze and took off after his new—and only—friend.

He'd just rounded the corner when Gally came screaming out of the Homestead, looking like a ferocious beast on the loose.

He immediately pointed at Thomas. "Come here!" he yelled.

Thomas's heart sank in surrender. Everything seemed to indicate that he'd be getting a fist in the face. "It wasn't me, I swear," he said, though as he stood there, he sized the boy up and realized he shouldn't be so terrified after all. Gally wasn't that big—Thomas could actually take him if he had to.

"Wasn't you?" Gally snarled. He ambled up to Thomas slowly and stopped right in front of him. "Then how do you know there was something you didn't do?"

Thomas didn't say anything. He was definitely uncomfortable but not nearly as scared as a few moments earlier.

"I'm not a dong, Greenie," Gally spat. "I saw Chuck's fat face in the window." He pointed again, this time right at Thomas's chest. "But you better decide right quick who you want as your friends and enemies, hear me? One more trick like that—I don't care if it's your sissy idea or not—there'll be blood spilled. You got that, Newbie?" But before Thomas could answer Gally'd already turned to walk away.

Thomas just wanted this episode over. "Sorry," he muttered, wincing at how stupid it sounded.

"I know you," Gally added without looking back. "I saw you in the Changing, and I'm gonna figure out who you are."

Thomas watched as the bully disappeared back into the Homestead. He couldn't remember much, but something told him he'd never disliked someone so strongly. He was surprised by how much he truly hated the guy. He really, really hated him. He turned to see Chuck standing there, staring at the ground, clearly embarrassed. "Thanks a lot, *buddy*."

"Sorry—if I'd known it was Gally, I never would've done it, I swear."

Surprising himself, Thomas laughed. An hour ago, he'd thought he'd never hear such a sound come out of his mouth again.

Chuck looked closely at Thomas and slowly broke into an uneasy grin. "What?"

Thomas shook his head. "Don't be sorry. The ... shank deserved it, and I don't even know what a shank is. That was awesome." He felt much better.

A couple of hours later, Thomas was lying in a soft sleeping bag next to Chuck on a bed of grass near the gardens. It was a wide lawn that he hadn't noticed before, and quite a few of the group chose it as their bedtime spot. Thomas thought that was strange, but apparently there wasn't enough room inside the Homestead. At least it was warm. Which made him wonder for the millionth time *where* they were. His mind had a hard time grasping names of places, or remembering countries or rulers, how the world was organized. And none of the kids in the Glade had a clue, either—at least, they weren't sharing if they did.

He lay in silence for the longest time, looking at the stars and listening to the soft murmurs of various conversations drifting across the Glade. Sleep felt miles away, and he couldn't shake the despair and hopelessness that coursed through his body and mind—the temporary joy of Chuck's trick on Gally had long since faded away. It'd been one endless—and strange—day.

It was just so ... weird. He remembered lots of little things about life—eating, clothes,

studying, playing, general images of the makeup of the world. But any detail that would fill in the picture to create a true and complete memory had been erased somehow. It was like looking at an image through a foot of muddy water. More than anything else, perhaps, he felt ... sad.

Chuck interrupted his thoughts. "Well, Greenie, you survived First Day."

"Barely." *Not now, Chuck*, he wanted to say. *I'm not in the mood.*

Chuck pulled himself up to lean on an elbow, looking at Thomas. "You'll learn a lot in the next couple of days, start getting used to things. Good that?"

"Um, yeah, good that, I guess. Where'd all these weird words and phrases come from, anyway?" It seemed like they'd taken some other language and melded it with his own.

Chuck flopped back down with a heavy flump. "I don't know—I've only been here a month, remember?"

Thomas wondered about Chuck, whether he knew more than he let on. He was a quirky kid, funny, and he seemed innocent, but who was to say? Really he was just as mysterious as everything else in the Glade.

A few minutes passed, and Thomas felt the long day finally catch up to him, the leaden edge of sleep crossing over his mind. But—like a fist had shoved it in his brain and let go—a thought popped into his head. One that he didn't expect, and he wasn't sure from where it came.

Suddenly, the Glade, the walls, the Maze—it all seemed ... familiar. Comfortable. A warmth of calmness spread through his chest, and for the first time since he'd found himself there, he didn't feel like the Glade was the worst place in the universe. He stilled, felt his eyes widen, his breathing stop for a long moment. *What just happened?* he thought. *What changed?* Ironically, the feeling that things would be okay made him slightly uneasy.

Not quite understanding how, he knew what he needed to do. He didn't get it. The feeling—the epiphany—was a strange one, foreign and familiar at the same time. But it felt ... right.

"I want to be one of those guys that goes out there," he said aloud, not knowing if Chuck was still awake. "Inside the Maze."

"Huh?" was the response from Chuck. Thomas could hear a tinge of annoyance in his voice.

"Runners," Thomas said, wishing he knew where this was coming from. "Whatever they're doing out there, I want in."

"You don't even know what you're talking about," Chuck grumbled, and rolled over. "Go to sleep."

Thomas felt a new surge of confidence, even though he truly *didn't* know what he was talking about. "I want to be a Runner."

Chuck turned back and got up on his elbow. "You can forget that little thought right now."

Thomas wondered at Chuck's reaction, but pressed on. "Don't try to—"

"Thomas. Newbie. My new friend. Forget it."

"I'll tell Alby tomorrow." *A Runner*, Thomas thought. *I don't even know what that means. Have I gone completely insane?*

Chuck lay down with a laugh. "You're a piece of klunk. Go to sleep."

But Thomas couldn't quit. "Something out there—it feels familiar."

"Go ... to ... sleep."

Then it hit Thomas—he felt like several pieces of a puzzle had been put together. He didn't know what the ultimate picture would be, but his next words almost felt like they were coming from someone else. "Chuck, I ... I think I've *been* here before."

He heard his friend sit up, heard the intake of breath. But Thomas rolled over and refused to say another word, worried he'd mess up this new sense of being encouraged, eradicate the reassuring calm that filled his heart.

Sleep came much more easily than he'd expected.

CHAPTER 6

Someone shook Thomas awake. His eyes snapped open to see a too-close face staring down at him, everything around them still shadowed by the darkness of early morning. He opened his mouth to speak but a cold hand clamped down on it, gripping it shut. Panic flared until he saw who it was.

“Shh, Greenie. Don’t wanna be wakin’ Chuckie, now, do we?”

It was Newt—the guy who seemed to be second in command; the air reeked of his morning breath.

Though Thomas was surprised, any alarm melted away immediately. He couldn’t help being curious, wondering what this boy wanted with him. Thomas nodded, doing his best to say yes with his eyes, until Newt finally took his hand away, then leaned back on his heels.

“Come on, Greenie,” the tall boy whispered as he stood. He reached down and helped Thomas to his feet—he was so strong it felt like he could rip Thomas’s arm off. “Supposed to show ya somethin’ before the wake-up.”

Any lingering haze of sleep had already vanished from Thomas’s mind. “Okay,” he said simply, ready to follow. He knew he should hold *some* suspicion, having no reason to trust anyone yet, but the curiosity won out. He quickly leaned over and slipped on his shoes. “Where are we going?”

“Just follow me. And stay close.”

They snuck their way through the tightly strewn pack of sleeping bodies, Thomas almost tripping several times. He stepped on someone’s hand, earning a sharp cry of pain in return, then a punch on the calf.

“Sorry,” he whispered, ignoring a dirty look from Newt.

Once they left the lawn area and stepped onto the hard gray stone of the courtyard floor, Newt broke into a run, heading for the western wall. Thomas hesitated at first, wondering why he needed to run, but snapped out of it quickly and followed at the same pace.

The light was dim, but any obstructions loomed as darker shadows and he was able to make his way quickly along. He stopped when Newt did, right next to the massive wall towering above them like a skyscraper—another random image that floated in the murky pool of his memory wipe. Thomas noticed small red lights flashing here and there along the wall’s face, moving about, stopping, turning off and on.

“What are those?” he whispered as loudly as he dared, wondering if his voice sounded as shaky as he felt. The twinkling red glow of the lights held an undercurrent of warning.

Newt stood just a couple of feet in front of the thick curtain of ivy on the wall. “When you bloody need to know, you’ll know, Greenie.”

“Well, it’s kind of stupid to send me to a place where nothing makes sense and not answer my questions.” Thomas paused, surprised at himself. “*Shank*,” he added, throwing all the sarcasm he could into the syllable.

Newt broke out in a laugh, but quickly cut it off. “I like you, Greenie. Now shut it and let me show ya somethin’.”

Newt stepped forward and dug his hands into the thick ivy, spreading several vines away from the wall to reveal a dust-frosted window, a square about two feet wide. It was dark at the moment, as if it had been painted black.

"What're we looking for?" Thomas whispered.

"Hold your undies, boy. One'll be comin' along soon enough."

A minute passed, then two. Several more. Thomas fidgeted on his feet, wondering how Newt could stand there, perfectly patient and still, staring into nothing but darkness.

Then it changed.

Glimmers of an eerie light shone through the window; it cast a wavering spectrum of colors on Newt's body and face, as if he stood next to a lighted swimming pool. Thomas grew perfectly still, squinting, trying to make out what was on the other side. A thick lump grew in his throat. *What is that?* he thought.

"Out there's the Maze," Newt whispered, eyes wide as if in a trance. "Everything we do—our whole life, Greenie—revolves around the Maze. Every lovin' second of every lovin' day we spend in honor of the Maze, tryin' to solve somethin' that's not shown us it has a bloody solution, ya know? And we want to show ya why it's not to be messed with. Show ya why them buggin' walls close shut every night. Show ya why you should never, never find your butt out there."

Newt stepped back, still holding on to the ivy vines. He gestured for Thomas to take his place and look through the window.

Thomas did, leaning forward until his nose touched the cool surface of the glass. It took a second for his eyes to focus on the moving object on the other side, to look past the grime and dust and see what Newt wanted him to see. And when he did, he felt his breath catch in his throat, like an icy wind had blown down there and frozen the air solid.

A large, bulbous creature the size of a cow but with no distinct shape twisted and seethed along the ground in the corridor outside. It climbed the opposite wall, then leaped at the thick-glassed window with a loud thump. Thomas shrieked before he could stop himself, jerked away from the window—but the thing bounced backward, leaving the glass undamaged.

Thomas sucked in two huge breaths and leaned in once again. It was too dark to make out clearly, but odd lights flashed from an unknown source, revealing blurs of silver spikes and glistening flesh. Wicked instrument-tipped appendages protruded from its body like arms: a saw blade, a set of shears, long rods whose purpose could only be guessed.

The creature was a horrific mix of animal and machine, and seemed to realize it was being observed, seemed to know what lay inside the walls of the Glade, seemed to want to get inside and feast on human flesh. Thomas felt an icy terror blossom in his chest, expand like a tumor, making it hard to breathe. Even with the memory wipe, he felt sure he'd never seen something so truly awful.

He stepped back, the courage he'd felt the previous evening melting away.

"What is that thing?" he asked. Something shivered in his gut, and he wondered if he'd ever be able to eat again.

"Grievers, we call 'em," Newt answered. "Nasty bugger, eh? Just be glad the Grievers only come *out* at night. Be thankful for these walls."

Thomas swallowed, wondering how he could ever go out there. His desire to become a

Runner had taken a major blow. But he had to do it. Somehow he *knew* he had to do it. It was such an odd thing to feel, especially after what he'd just seen.

Newt looked at the window absently. "Now you know what bloody lurks in the Maze, my friend. Now you know this isn't joke time. You've been sent to the Glade, Greenie, and we'll be expectin' ya to survive and help us do what we've been sent here to do."

"And what's that?" Thomas asked, even though he was terrified to hear the answer.

Newt turned to look him dead in the eye. The first traces of dawn had crept up on them, and Thomas could see every detail of Newt's face, his skin tight, his brow creased.

"Find our way out, Greenie," Newt said. "Solve the buggin' Maze and find our way home."

A couple of hours later, the doors having reopened, rumbling and grumbling and shaking the ground until they were finished, Thomas sat at a worn, tilted picnic table outside the Homestead. All he could think about was the Grievers, what their purpose could be, what they did out there during the night. What it would be like to be attacked by something so terrible.

He tried to get the image out of his head, move on to something else. The Runners. They'd just left without saying a word to anybody, bolting into the Maze at full speed and disappearing around corners. He pictured them in his mind as he picked at his eggs and bacon with a fork, speaking to no one, not even Chuck, who ate silently next to him. The poor guy had exhausted himself trying to start a conversation with Thomas, who'd refused to respond. All he wanted was to be left alone.

He just didn't get it; his brain was on overload trying to compute the sheer impossibility of the situation. How could a maze, with walls so massive and tall, be so big that dozens of kids hadn't been able to solve it after who knew how long trying? How could such a structure exist? And more importantly, *why*? What could possibly be the purpose of such a thing? Why were they all there? How *long* had they been there?

Try as he might to avoid it, his mind still kept wandering back to the image of the vicious Grievers. Its phantom brother seemed to leap at him every time he blinked or rubbed his eyes.

Thomas knew he was a smart kid—he somehow felt it in his bones. But nothing about this place made any sense. Except for one thing. He was supposed to be a Runner. Why did he feel that so strongly? And even now, after seeing what lived in the maze?

A tap on his shoulder jarred him from his thoughts; he looked up to see Alby standing behind him, arms folded.

"Ain't you lookin' fresh?" Alby said. "Get a nice view out the window this morning?"

Thomas stood, hoping the time for answers had come—or maybe hoping for a distraction from his gloomy thoughts. "Enough to make me want to learn about this place," he said, hoping to avoid provoking the temper he'd seen flare in this guy the day before.

Alby nodded. "Me and you, shank. The Tour begins now." He started to move but then stopped, holding up a finger. "Ain't no questions till the end, you get me? Ain't got time to jaw with you all day."

"But ..." Thomas stopped when Alby's eyebrows shot up. Why did the guy have to be such a jerk? "But tell me everything—I wanna know everything." He'd decided the night

before not to tell anyone else how strangely familiar the place seemed, the odd feeling that he'd been there before—that he could *remember* things about it. Sharing that seemed like a very bad idea.

"I'll tell ya what I wanna tell ya, Greenie. Let's go."

"Can I come?" Chuck asked from the table.

Alby reached down and tweaked the boy's ear.

"Ow!" Chuck shrieked.

"Ain't you got a job, slinthead?" Alby asked. "Lots of sloppin' to do?"

Chuck rolled his eyes, then looked at Thomas. "Have fun."

"I'll try." He suddenly felt sorry for Chuck, wished people would treat the kid better. But there was nothing he could do about it—it was time to go.

He walked away with Alby, hoping the Tour had officially begun.

CHAPTER 7

They started at the Box, which was closed at the moment—double doors of metal lying flat on the ground, covered in white paint, faded and cracked. The day had brightened considerably, the shadows stretching in the opposite direction from what Thomas had seen yesterday. He still hadn't spotted the sun, but it looked like it was about to pop over the eastern wall at any minute.

Alby pointed down at the doors. "This here's the Box. Once a month, we get a Newbie like you, never fails. Once a week, we get supplies, clothes, some food. Ain't needin' a lot—pretty much run ourselves in the Glade."

Thomas nodded, his whole body itching with the desire to ask questions. *I need some tape to put over my mouth*, he thought.

"We don't know jack about the Box, you get me?" Alby continued. "Where it came from, how it gets here, who's in charge. The shanks that sent us here ain't told us nothin'. We got all the electricity we need, grow and raise most of our food, get clothes and such. Tried to send a slinthead Greenie back in the Box one time—thing wouldn't move till we took him out."

Thomas wondered what lay under the doors when the Box wasn't there, but held his tongue. He felt such a mixture of emotions—curiosity, frustration, wonder—all laced with the lingering horror of seeing the Griever that morning.

Alby kept talking, never bothering to look Thomas in the eye. "Glade's cut into four sections." He held up his fingers as he counted off the next four words. "Gardens, Blood House, Homestead, Deadheads. You got that?"

Thomas hesitated, then shook his head, confused.

Alby's eyelids fluttered briefly as he continued; he looked like he could think of a thousand things he'd rather be doing right then. He pointed to the northeast corner, where the fields and fruit trees were located. "Gardens—where we grow the crops. Water's pumped in through pipes in the ground—always has been, or we'd have starved to death a long time ago. Never rains here. Never." He pointed to the southeast corner, at the animal pens and barn. "Blood House—where we raise and slaughter animals." He pointed at the pitiful living quarters. "Homestead—stupid place is twice as big than when the first of us got here because we keep addin' to it when they send us wood and klunk. Ain't pretty, but it works. Most of us sleep outside anyway."

Thomas felt dizzy. So many questions splintered his mind he couldn't keep them straight.

Alby pointed to the southwest corner, the forest area fronted with several sickly trees and benches. "Call that the Deadheads. Graveyard's back in that corner, in the thicker woods. Ain't much else. You can go there to sit and rest, hang out, whatever." He cleared his throat, as if wanting to change subjects. "You'll spend the next two weeks working one day apiece for our different job Keepers—until we know what you're best at. Slopper, Bricknick, Bagger, Track-hoe—somethin'll stick, always does. Come on."

Alby walked toward the South Door, located between what he'd called the Deadheads

and the Blood House. Thomas followed, wrinkling his nose up at the sudden smell of dirt and manure coming from the animal pens. *Graveyard?* he thought. *Why do they need a graveyard in a place full of teenagers?* That disturbed him even more than not knowing some of the words Alby kept saying—words like *Slopper* and *Bagger*—that didn’t sound so good. He came as close to interrupting Alby as he’d done so far, but willed his mouth shut.

Frustrated, he turned his attention to the pens in the Blood House area.

Several cows nibbled and chewed at a trough full of greenish hay. Pigs lounged in a muddy pit, an occasionally flickering tail the only sign they were alive. Another pen held sheep, and there were chicken coops and turkey cages as well. Workers bustled about the area, looking as if they’d spent their whole lives on a farm.

Why do I remember these animals? Thomas wondered. Nothing about them seemed new or interesting—he knew what they were called, what they normally ate, what they looked like. Why was stuff like that still lodged in his memory, but not *where* he’d seen animals before, or with whom? His memory loss was baffling in its complexity.

Alby pointed to the large barn in the back corner, its red paint long faded to a dull rust color. “Back there’s where the Slicers work. Nasty stuff, that. Nasty. If you like blood, you can be a Slicer.”

Thomas shook his head. Slicer didn’t sound good at all. As they kept walking, he focused his attention on the other side of the Glade, the section Alby had called the Deadheads. The trees grew thicker and denser the farther back in the corner they went, more alive and full of leaves. Dark shadows filled the depths of the wooded area, despite the time of day. Thomas looked up, squinting to see that the sun was finally visible, though it looked odd—more orange than it should be. It hit him that this was yet another example of the odd selective memory in his mind.

He returned his gaze to the Deadheads, a glowing disk still floating in his vision. Blinking to clear it away, he suddenly caught the red lights again, flickering and skittering about deep in the darkness of the woods. *What are those things?* he wondered, irritated that Alby hadn’t answered him earlier. The secrecy was very annoying.

Alby stopped walking, and Thomas was surprised to see they’d reached the South Door; the two walls bracketing the exit towered above them. The thick slabs of gray stone were cracked and covered in ivy, as ancient as anything Thomas could imagine. He craned his neck to see the top of the walls far above; his mind spun with the odd sensation that he was looking *down*, not up. He staggered back a step, awed once again by the structure of his new home, then finally returned his attention to Alby, who had his back to the exit.

“Out there’s the Maze.” Alby jabbed a thumb over his shoulder, then paused. Thomas stared in that direction, through the gap in the walls that served as an exit from the Glade. The corridors out there looked much the same as the ones he’d seen from the window by the East Door early that morning. This thought gave him a chill, made him wonder if a Griever might come charging toward them at any minute. He took a step backward before realizing what he was doing. *Calm down*, he chided himself, embarrassed.

Alby continued. “Two years, I’ve been here. Ain’t none been here longer. The few before me are already dead.” Thomas felt his eyes widen, his heart quicken. “Two years we’ve tried to solve this thing, no luck. Shuckin’ walls move out there at night just as much as these here doors. Mappin’ it out ain’t easy, ain’t easy nohow.” He nodded toward the

concrete-blocked building into which the Runners had disappeared the night before.

Another stab of pain sliced through Thomas's head—there were too many things to compute at once. They'd been here two years? The walls moved out in the Maze? How many had died? He stepped forward, wanting to see the Maze for himself, as if the answers were printed on the walls out there.

Alby held out a hand and pushed Thomas in the chest, sent him stumbling backward. "Ain't no goin' out there, shank."

Thomas had to suppress his pride. "Why not?"

"You think I sent Newt to ya before the wake-up just for kicks? Freak, that's the Number One Rule, the only one you'll never be forgiven for breaking. Ain't nobody—*nobody*—allowed in the Maze except the Runners. Break that rule, and if you ain't killed by the Grievers, we'll kill you ourselves, you get me?"

Thomas nodded, grumbling inside, sure that Alby was exaggerating. Hoping that he was. Either way, if he'd had any doubt about what he'd told Chuck the night before, it had now completely vanished. He wanted to be a Runner. He *would* be a Runner. Deep inside he knew he had to go out there, into the Maze. Despite everything he'd learned and witnessed firsthand, it called to him as much as hunger or thirst.

A movement up on the left wall of the South Door caught his attention. Startled, he reacted quickly, looking just in time to see a flash of silver. A patch of ivy shook as the thing disappeared into it.

Thomas pointed up at the wall. "What was that?" he asked before he could be shut down again.

Alby didn't bother looking. "No questions till the end, shank. How many times I gotta tell ya?" He paused, then let out a sigh. "Beetle blades—it's how the Creators watch us. You better not—"

He was cut off by a booming, ringing alarm that sounded from all directions. Thomas clamped his hands to his ears, looking around as the siren blared, his heart about to thump its way out of his chest. But when he focused back on Alby, he stopped.

Alby wasn't acting scared—he appeared ... confused. Surprised. The alarm clanged through the air.

"What's going on?" Thomas asked. Relief flooded his chest that his tour guide didn't seem to think the world was about to end—but even so, Thomas was getting tired of being hit by waves of panic.

"That's weird" was all Alby said as he scanned the Glade, squinting. Thomas noticed people in the Blood House pens glancing around, apparently just as confused. One shouted to Alby, a short, skinny kid drenched in mud.

"What's up with that?" the boy asked, looking to Thomas for some reason.

"I don't know," Alby murmured back in a distant voice.

But Thomas couldn't stand it anymore. "Alby! What's going on?"

"The Box, shuck-face, the Box!" was all Alby said before he set off for the middle of the Glade at a brisk pace that almost looked to Thomas like panic.

"What about it?" Thomas demanded, hurrying to catch up. *Talk to me!* he wanted to scream at him.

But Alby didn't answer or slow down, and as they got closer to the box Thomas could see

that dozens of kids were running around the courtyard. He spotted Newt and called to him, trying to suppress his rising fear, telling himself things would be okay, that there had to be a reasonable explanation.

"Newt, what's going on!" he yelled.

Newt glanced over at him, then nodded and walked over, strangely calm in the middle of the chaos. He swatted Thomas on the back. "Means a bloody Newbie's comin' up in the Box." He paused as if expecting Thomas to be impressed. "Right now."

"So?" As Thomas looked more closely at Newt, he realized that what he'd mistaken for calm was actually disbelief—maybe even excitement.

"So?" Newt replied, his jaw dropping slightly. "Greenie, we've never had two Newbies show up in the same *month*, much less two days in a row."

And with that, he ran off toward the Homestead.

The alarm finally stopped after blaring for a full two minutes. A crowd was gathered in the middle of the courtyard around the steel doors through which Thomas was startled to realize he'd arrived just yesterday. *Yesterday?* he thought. *Was that really just yesterday?*

Someone tapped him on the elbow; he looked over to see Chuck by his side again.

"How goes it, Greenbean?" Chuck asked.

"Fine," he replied, even though nothing could've been further from the truth. He pointed toward the doors of the Box. "Why is everyone freaking out? Isn't this how you all got here?"

Chuck shrugged. "I don't know—guess it's always been real regular-like. One a month, every month, same day. Maybe whoever's in charge realized you were nothing but a big mistake, sent someone to replace you." He giggled as he elbowed Thomas in the ribs, a high-pitched snicker that inexplicably made Thomas like him more.

Thomas shot his new friend a fake glare. "You're annoying. Seriously."

"Yeah, but we're buddies, now, right?" Chuck fully laughed this time, a squeaky sort of snort.

"Looks like you're not giving me much choice on that one." But truth was, he needed a friend, and Chuck would do just fine.

The kid folded his arms, looking very satisfied. "Glad that's settled, Greenie. Everyone needs a buddy in this place."

Thomas grabbed Chuck by the collar, joking around. "Okay, *buddy*, then call me by my name. Thomas. Or I'll throw you down the hole after the Box leaves." That triggered a thought in his head as he released Chuck. "Wait a minute, have you guys ever—"

"Tried it," Chuck interrupted before Thomas could finish.

"Tried what?"

"Going down in the Box after it makes a delivery," Chuck answered. "It won't do it. Won't go down until it's completely empty."

Thomas remembered Alby telling him that very thing. "I already knew that, but what about—"

"Tried it."

Thomas had to suppress a groan—this was getting irritating. "Man you're hard to talk to. Tried what?"

"Going through the hole *after* the Box goes down. Can't. Doors will open, but there's just emptiness, blackness, nothing. No ropes, nada. Can't do it."

How could that be possible? "Did you—"

"Tried it."

Thomas did groan this time. "Okay, what?"

"We threw some things into the hole. Never heard them land. It goes on for a long time."

Thomas paused before he replied, not wanting to be cut off again. "What are you, a mind reader or something?" He threw as much sarcasm as he could into the comment.

"Just brilliant, that's all." Chuck winked.

"Chuck, never wink at me again." Thomas said it with a smile. Chuck was a little annoying, but there was something about him that made things seem less terrible. Thomas took a deep breath and looked back toward the crowd around the hole. "So, how long until the delivery gets here?"

"Usually takes about half an hour after the alarm."

Thomas thought for a second. There had to be something they hadn't tried. "You're sure about the hole? Have you ever ..." He paused, waiting for the interruption, but none came. "Have you ever tried making a rope?"

"Yeah, they did. With the ivy. Longest one they could possibly make. Let's just say that little experiment didn't go so well."

"What do you mean?" *What now?* Thomas thought.

"I wasn't here, but I heard the kid who volunteered to do it had only gone down about ten feet when something swooshed through the air and cut him clean in half."

"What?" Thomas laughed. "I don't believe that for a second."

"Oh, yeah, smart guy? I've seen the sucker's bones. Cut in half like a knife through whipped cream. They keep him in a box to remind future kids not to be so stupid."

Thomas waited for Chuck to laugh or smile, thinking it had to be a joke—who ever heard of someone being cut in half? But it never came. "You're serious?"

Chuck just stared back at him. "I don't lie, Gree—uh, Thomas. Come on, let's go over and see who's coming up. I can't believe you only have to be the Greenbean for one day. Klunkhead."

As they walked over, Thomas asked the one question he hadn't posed yet. "How do you know it's not just supplies or whatever?"

"The alarm doesn't go off when that happens," Chuck answered, simply. "The supplies come up at the same time every week. Hey, look." Chuck stopped and pointed to someone in the crowd. It was Gally, staring dead at them.

"Shuck it," Chuck said. "He does *not* like you, man."

"Yeah," Thomas muttered. "Figured that out already." And the feeling was mutual.

Chuck nudged Thomas with his elbow and the boys resumed their walk to the edge of the crowd, then waited in silence; any questions Thomas had were forgotten. He'd lost the urge to talk after seeing Gally.

Chuck apparently hadn't. "Why don't you go ask him what his problem is?" he asked, trying to sound tough.

Thomas wanted to think he was brave enough, but that currently sounded like the worst idea in history. "Well, for one, he has a lot more allies than I do. Not a good person to pick a fight with."

"Yeah, but you're smarter. And I bet you're quicker. You could take him and all his buddies."

One of the boys standing in front of them looked back over his shoulder, annoyance crossing his face.

Must be a friend of Gally's, Thomas thought. "Would you shut it?" he hissed at Chuck.

A door closed behind them; Thomas turned to see Alby and Newt heading over from the Homestead. They both looked exhausted.

Seeing them brought Ben back to his mind—along with the horrific image of him writhing in bed. “Chuck, man, you gotta tell me what this whole Changing business is. What have they been *doing* in there with that poor Ben kid?”

Chuck shrugged. “Don’t know the details. The Grievers do bad things to you, make your whole body go through something awful. When it’s over, you’re ... different.”

Thomas sensed a chance to finally have a solid answer. “Different? What do you mean? And what does it have to do with the Grievers? Is that what Gally meant by ‘being stung’?”

“Shh.” Chuck held a finger to his mouth.

Thomas almost screamed in frustration, but he kept quiet. He resolved to make Chuck tell him later, whether the guy wanted to or not.

Alby and Newt had reached the crowd and pushed themselves to the front, standing right over the doors that led to the Box. Everyone quieted, and for the first time, Thomas noted the grinds and rattles of the rising lift, reminding him of his own nightmarish trip the day before. Sadness washed over him, almost as if he were reliving those few terrible minutes of awakening in darkness to the memory loss. He felt sorry for whoever this new kid was, going through the same things.

A muffled boom announced that the bizarre elevator had arrived.

Thomas watched in anticipation as Newt and Alby took positions on opposite sides of the shaft doors—a crack split the metal square right down the middle. Simple hook-handles were attached on both sides, and together they yanked them apart. With a metallic scrape the doors were opened, and a puff of dust from the surrounding stone rose into the air.

Complete silence settled over the Gladers. As Newt leaned over to get a better look into the Box, the faint bleating of a goat in the distance echoed across the courtyard. Thomas leaned forward as far as he possibly could, hoping to get a glance at the newcomer.

With a sudden jerk, Newt pushed himself back into an upright position, his face scrunched up in confusion. “Holy ...,” he breathed, looking around at nothing in particular.

By this time, Alby had gotten a good look as well, with a similar reaction. “No way,” he murmured, almost in a trance.

A chorus of questions filled the air as everyone began pushing forward to get a look into the small opening. *What do they see down there?* Thomas wondered. *What do they see!* He felt a sliver of muted fear, similar to what he’d experienced that morning when he stepped toward the window to see the Griever.

“Hold on!” Alby yelled, silencing everyone. “Just hold on!”

“Well, what’s wrong?” someone yelled back.

Alby stood up. “Two Newbies in two days,” he said, almost in a whisper. “Now this. Two years, nothing different, now this.” Then, for some reason, he looked straight at Thomas. “What’s goin’ on here, Greenie?”

Thomas stared back, confused, his face turning bright red, his gut clenching. “How am I supposed to know?”

“Why don’t you just tell us what the shuck is down there, Alby?” Gally called out. There were more murmurs and another surge forward.

“You shanks shut up!” Alby yelled. “Tell ’em, Newt.”

Newt looked down in the Box one more time, then faced the crowd, gravely.

“It’s a girl,” he said.

Everyone started talking at once; Thomas only caught pieces here and there.

"A girl?"

"I got dibs!"

"What's she look like?"

"How old is she?"

Thomas was drowning in a sea of confusion. A *girl*? He hadn't even thought about why the Glade only had boys, no girls. Hadn't even had the chance to notice, really. *Who is she?* he wondered. *Why*—

Newt shushed them again. "That's not bloody half of it," he said, then pointed down into the Box. "I think she's dead."

A couple of boys grabbed some ropes made from ivy vines and lowered Alby and Newt into the Box so they could retrieve the girl's body. A mood of reserved shock had come over most of the Gladers, who were milling about with solemn faces, kicking loose rocks and not saying much at all. No one dared admit they couldn't wait to see the girl, but Thomas assumed they were all just as curious as he was.

Gally was one of the boys holding on to the ropes, ready to hoist her, Alby, and Newt out of the Box. Thomas watched him closely. His eyes were laced with something dark—almost a sick fascination. A gleam that made Thomas suddenly more scared of him than he'd been minutes earlier.

From deep in the shaft came Alby's voice shouting that they were ready, and Gally and a couple of others started pulling up on the rope. A few grunts later and the girl's lifeless body was dragged out, across the edge of the door and onto one of the stone blocks making up the ground of the Glade. Everyone immediately ran forward, forming a packed crowd around her, a palpable excitement hovering in the air. But Thomas stayed back. The eerie silence gave him the creeps, as if they'd just opened up a recently laid tomb.

Despite his own curiosity, Thomas didn't bother trying to force his way through to get a look—the bodies were too tightly squeezed together. But he *had* caught a glimpse of her before being blocked off. She was thin, but not too small. Maybe five and a half feet tall, from what he could tell. She looked like she could be fifteen or sixteen years old, and her hair was tar black. But the thing that had really stood out to him was her skin: pale, white as pearls.

Newt and Alby scrambled out of the Box after her, then forced their way through to the girl's lifeless body, the crowd re-forming behind to cut them off from Thomas's view. Only a few seconds later, the group parted again, and Newt was pointing straight at Thomas.

"Greenie, get over here," he said, not bothering to be polite about it.

Thomas's heart jumped into his throat; his hands started to sweat. What did they want him for? Things just kept getting worse and worse. He forced himself to walk forward, trying to seem innocent without acting like someone who was guilty who was trying to act innocent. *Oh, calm it*, he told himself. *You haven't done anything wrong*. But he had a strange feeling that maybe he had without realizing it.

The boys lining the path to Newt and the girl glared at him as he walked past, as if he were responsible for the entire mess of the Maze and the Glade and the Grievers. Thomas refused to make eye contact with any of them, afraid of looking guilty.

He approached Newt and Alby, who both knelt beside the girl. Thomas, not wanting to meet their stares, concentrated on the girl; despite her paleness, she was really pretty. More than pretty. Beautiful. Silky hair, flawless skin, perfect lips, long legs. It made him sick to think that way about a dead girl, but he couldn't look away. *Won't be that way for long*, he thought with a queasy twist in his stomach. *She'll start rotting soon*. He was surprised at having such a morbid thought.

"You know this girl, shank?" Alby asked, sounding ticked off.

Thomas was shocked by the question. "Know her? Of course I don't know her. I don't know anyone. Except for you guys."

"That's not ..." Alby began, then stopped with a frustrated sigh. "I meant does she *look familiar* at all? Any kind of feelin' you've seen her before?"

"No. Nothing." Thomas shifted, looked down at his feet, then back at the girl.

Alby's forehead creased. "You're sure?" He looked like he didn't believe a word Thomas said, seemed almost angry.

What could he possibly think I have to do with this? Thomas thought. He met Alby's glare evenly and answered the only way he knew how. "Yes. Why?"

"Shuck it," Alby muttered, looking back down at the girl. "Can't be a coincidence. Two days, two Greenies, one alive, one dead."

Then Alby's words started to make sense and panic flared in Thomas. "You don't think I ..." He couldn't even finish the sentence.

"Slim it, Greenie," Newt said. "We're not sayin' you bloody killed the girl."

Thomas's mind was spinning. He was sure he'd never seen her before—but then the slightest hint of doubt crept into his mind. "I swear she doesn't look familiar at all," he said anyway. He'd had enough accusations.

"Are you—"

Before Newt could finish, the girl shot up into a sitting position. As she sucked in a huge breath, her eyes snapped open and she blinked, looking around at the crowd surrounding her. Alby cried out and fell backward. Newt gasped and jumped up, stumbling away from her. Thomas didn't move, his gaze locked on the girl, frozen in fear.

Burning blue eyes darted back and forth as she took deep breaths. Her pink lips trembled as she mumbled something over and over, indecipherable. Then she spoke one sentence—her voice hollow and haunted, but clear.

"Everything is going to change."

Thomas stared in wonder as her eyes rolled up into her head and she fell back to the ground. Her right fist shot into the air as she landed, staying rigid after she grew still, pointing toward the sky. Clutched in her hand was a wadded piece of paper.

Thomas tried to swallow but his mouth was too dry. Newt ran forward and pulled her fingers apart, grabbing the paper. With shaking hands he unfolded it, then dropped to his knees, spreading out the note on the ground. Thomas moved up behind him to get a look.

Scrawled across the paper in thick black letters were five words:

She's the last one.

Ever.

CHAPTER 9

An odd moment of complete silence hung over the Glade. It was as if a supernatural wind had swept through the place and sucked out all sound. Newt had read the message aloud for those who couldn't see the paper, but instead of erupting in confusion, the Gladers all stood dumbfounded.

Thomas would've expected shouts and questions, arguments. But no one said a word; all eyes were glued to the girl, now lying there as if asleep, her chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. Contrary to their original conclusion, she was very much alive.

Newt stood, and Thomas hoped for an explanation, a voice of reason, a calming presence. But all he did was crumple the note in his fist, veins popping from his skin as he squeezed it, and Thomas's heart sank. He wasn't sure why, but the situation made him very uneasy.

Alby cupped his hands around his mouth. "Med-jacks!"

Thomas wondered what that word meant—he knew he'd heard it before—but then he was abruptly knocked aside. Two older boys were pushing their way through the crowd—one was tall with a buzz cut, his nose the size of a fat lemon. The other was short and actually had gray hair already conquering the black on the sides of his head. Thomas could only hope they'd make some sense of everything.

"So what do we do with her?" the taller one asked, his voice much higher pitched than Thomas expected.

"How should I know?" Alby said. "You two shanks are the Med-jacks—figure it out."

Med-jacks, Thomas repeated in his head, a light going off. *They must be the closest thing they have to doctors*. The short one was already on the ground, kneeling beside the girl, feeling for her pulse and leaning over to listen to her heartbeat.

"Who said Clint had first shot at her?" someone yelled from the crowd. There were several barks of laughter. "I'm next!"

How can they joke around? Thomas thought. *The girl's half dead.* He felt sick inside.

Alby's eyes narrowed; his mouth pulled into a tight grin that didn't look like it had anything to do with humor. "If anybody touches this girl," Alby said, "you're gonna spend the night sleepin' with the Grievers in the Maze. Banished, no questions." He paused, turning in a slow circle as if he wanted every person to see his face. "Ain't nobody better touch her! Nobody!"

It was the first time Thomas had actually liked hearing something come out of Alby's mouth.

The short guy who'd been referred to as a Med-jack—*Clint*, if the spectator had been correct—stood up from his examination. "She seems fine. Breathing okay, normal heartbeat. Though it's a bit slow. Your guess is as good as mine, but I'd say she's in a coma. Jeff, let's take her to the Homestead."

His partner, Jeff, stepped over to grab her by the arms while Clint took hold of her feet. Thomas wished he could do more than watch—with every passing second, he doubted more

and more that what he'd said earlier was true. She *did* seem familiar; he felt a connection to her, though it was impossible to grasp in his mind. The idea made him nervous, and he looked around, as if someone might've heard his thoughts.

"On the count of three," Jeff, the taller Med-jack, was saying, his tall frame looking ridiculous bent in half, like a praying mantis. "One ... two ... three!"

They lifted her with a quick jerk, almost throwing her up in the air—she was obviously a lot lighter than they'd thought—and Thomas almost shouted at them to be more careful.

"Guess we'll have to see what she does," Jeff said to no one in particular. "We can feed her soupy stuff if she doesn't wake up soon."

"Just watch her closely," Newt said. "Must be something special about her or they wouldn't have sent her here."

Thomas's gut clenched. He knew that he and the girl were connected somehow. They'd come a day apart, she seemed familiar, he had a consuming urge to become a Runner despite learning so many terrible things.... What did it all mean?

Alby leaned over to look in her face once more before they carried her off. "Put her next to Ben's room, and keep a watch on her day and night. Nothin' better happen without me knowing about it. I don't care if she talks in her sleep or takes a klunk—you come tell me."

"Yeah," Jeff muttered; then he and Clint shuffled off to the Homestead, the girl's body bouncing as they went, and the other Gladers finally started to talk about it, scattering as theories bubbled through the air.

Thomas watched all this in mute contemplation. This strange connection he felt wasn't his alone. The not-so-veiled accusations thrown at him only a few minutes before proved that the others suspected something, too, but what? He was already completely confused—being blamed for things only made him feel worse. As if reading his thoughts, Alby walked over and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"You ain't never seen her before?" he asked.

Thomas hesitated before he answered. "Not ... no, not that I remember." He hoped his shaky voice didn't betray his doubts. What if he *did* know her somehow? What would that mean?

"You're sure?" Newt prodded, standing right behind Alby.

"I ... no, I don't think so. Why are you grilling me like this?" All Thomas wanted right then was for night to fall, so he could be alone, go to sleep.

Alby shook his head, then turned back to Newt, releasing his grip on Thomas's shoulder. "Something's whacked. Call a Gathering."

He said it quietly enough that Thomas didn't think anyone else heard, but it sounded ominous. Then the leader and Newt walked off, and Thomas was relieved to see Chuck coming his way.

"Chuck, what's a Gathering?"

He looked proud to know the answer. "It's when the Keepers meet—they only call one when something weird or terrible happens."

"Well, I guess today fits both of those categories pretty well." Thomas's stomach rumbled, interrupting his thoughts. "I didn't finish my breakfast—can we get something somewhere? I'm starving."

Chuck looked up at him, his eyebrows raised. "Seeing that chick wig out made you

hungry? You must be more psycho than I thought.”

Thomas sighed. “Just get me some food.”

The kitchen was small but had everything one needed to make a hearty meal. A big oven, a microwave, a dishwasher, a couple of tables. It seemed old and run-down but clean. Seeing the appliances and the familiar layout made Thomas feel as if memories—real, solid memories—were right on the edge of his mind. But again, the essential parts were missing—names, faces, places, events. It was maddening.

“Take a seat,” Chuck said. “I’ll get you something—but I swear this is the last time. Just be glad Frypan isn’t around—he hates it when we raid his fridge.”

Thomas was relieved they were alone. As Chuck fumbled about with dishes and things from the fridge, Thomas pulled out a wooden chair from a small plastic table and sat down. “This is crazy. How can this be for real? Somebody sent us here. Somebody evil.”

Chuck paused. “Quit complaining. Just accept it and don’t think about it.”

“Yeah, right.” Thomas looked out a window. This seemed a good time to bring up one of the million questions bouncing through his brain. “So where does the electricity come from?”

“Who cares? I’ll take it.”

What a surprise, Thomas thought. No answer.

Chuck brought two plates with sandwiches and carrots over to the table. The bread was thick and white, the carrots a sparkling, bright orange. Thomas’s stomach begged him to hurry; he picked up his sandwich and started devouring it.

“Oh, man,” he mumbled with a full mouth. “At least the food is good.”

Thomas was able to eat the rest of his meal without another word from Chuck. And he was lucky that the kid didn’t feel like talking, because despite the complete weirdness of everything that had happened within Thomas’s known reach of memory, he felt calm again. His stomach full, his energy replenished, his mind thankful for a few moments of silence, he decided that from then on he’d quit whining and deal with things.

After his last bite, Thomas sat back in his chair. “So, Chuck,” he said as he wiped his mouth with a napkin. “What do I have to do to become a Runner?”

“Not that again.” Chuck looked up from his plate, where he’d been picking at the crumbs. He let out a low, gurgly burp that made Thomas cringe.

“Alby said I’d start my trials soon with the different Keepers. So, when do I get a shot with the Runners?” Thomas waited patiently to get some sort of actual information from Chuck.

Chuck rolled his eyes dramatically, leaving no doubt as to how stupid an idea he thought that would be. “They should be back in a few hours. Why don’t you ask *them*?”

Thomas ignored the sarcasm, digging deeper. “What do they do when they get back every night? What’s up with the concrete building?”

“Maps. They meet right when they get back, before they forget anything.”

Maps? Thomas was confused. “But if they’re trying to make a map, don’t they have paper to write on while they’re out there?” Maps. This intrigued him more than anything else he’d heard in a while. It was the first thing suggesting a potential solution to their predicament.

"Of course they do, but there's still stuff they need to talk about and discuss and analyze and all that klunk. Plus"—the boy rolled his eyes—"they spend most of their time running, not writing. That's why they're called *Runners*."

Thomas thought about the Runners and the maps. Could the Maze really be so massively huge that even after two years they still hadn't found a way out? It seemed impossible. But then, he remembered what Alby said about the moving walls. What if all of them were sentenced to live here until they died?

Sentenced. The word made him feel a rush of panic, and the spark of hope the meal had brought him fizzled with a silent hiss.

"Chuck, what if we're all criminals? I mean—what if we're murderers or something?"

"Huh?" Chuck looked up at him as if he were a crazy person. "Where did that happy thought come from?"

"Think about it. Our memories are wiped. We live inside a place that seems to have no way out, surrounded by bloodthirsty monster-guards. Doesn't that sound like a prison to you?" As he said it out loud, it sounded more and more possible. Nausea trickled into his chest.

"I'm probably twelve years old, dude." Chuck pointed to his chest. "At the most, thirteen. You really think I did something that would send me to prison for the rest of my life?"

"I don't care what you did or didn't do. Either way, you *have* been sent to a prison. Does this seem like a vacation to you?" *Oh, man*, Thomas thought. *Please let me be wrong*.

Chuck thought for a moment. "I don't know. It's better than—"

"Yeah, I know, living in pile of klunk." Thomas stood up and pushed his chair back under the table. He liked Chuck, but trying to have an intelligent conversation with him was impossible. Not to mention frustrating and irritating. "Go make yourself another sandwich—I'm going exploring. See ya tonight."

He stepped out of the kitchen and into the courtyard before Chuck could offer to join him. The Glade had gone back to business as usual—people working the jobs, the doors of the Box closed, sun shining down. Any signs of a crazed girl bearing notes of doom had disappeared.

Having had his tour cut short, he decided to take a walk around the Glade on his own and get a better look and feel for the place. He headed out for the northeast corner, toward the big rows of tall green cornstalks that looked ready to harvest. There was other stuff, too: tomatoes, lettuce, peas, a lot more that Thomas didn't recognize.

He took a deep breath, loving the fresh whiff of dirt and growing plants. He was almost positive the smell would bring back some sort of pleasant memory, but nothing came. As he got closer, he saw that several boys were weeding and picking in the small fields. One waved at him with a smile. An actual smile.

Maybe this place won't be so bad after all, Thomas thought. *Not everyone here could be a jerk*. He took another deep breath of the pleasant air and pulled himself out of his thoughts—there was a lot more he wanted to see.

Next was the southeast corner, where shabbily built wooden fences held in several cows, goats, sheep, and pigs. No horses, though. *That sucks*, Thomas thought. *Riders* would definitely be faster than *Runners*. As he approached, he figured he must've dealt with animals in his life before the Glade. Their smell, their sound—they seemed very familiar to

him.

The smell wasn't quite as nice as the crops, but still, he imagined it could've been a lot worse. As he explored the area, he realized more and more how well the Gladers kept up the place, how clean it was. He was impressed by how organized they must be, how hard they all must work. He could only imagine how truly horrific a place like this could be if everyone went lazy and stupid.

Finally, he made it to the southwest quarter, near the forest.

He was approaching the sparse, skeletal trees in front of the denser woods when he was startled by a blur of movement at his feet, followed by a hurried set of clacking sounds. He looked down just in time to see the sun flash off something metallic—a toy rat—scurrying past him and toward the small forest. The thing was already ten feet away by the time he realized it wasn't a rat at all—it was more like a lizard, with at least six legs scuttling the long silver torso along.

A beetle blade. *It's how they watch us*, Alby had said.

He caught a gleam of red light sweeping the ground in front of the creature as if it came from its eyes. Logic told him it had to be his mind playing tricks on him, but he swore he saw the word *WICKED* scrawled down its rounded back in large green letters. Something so strange had to be investigated.

Thomas sprinted after the scurrying spy, and in a matter of seconds he entered the thick copse of trees and the world became dark.

He couldn't believe how quickly the light disappeared. From the Glade proper, the forest didn't look that big, maybe a couple of acres. Yet the trees were tall with sturdy trunks, packed tightly together, the canopy up above thick with leaves. The air around him had a greenish, muted hue, as if only several minutes of twilight remained in the day.

It was somehow beautiful and creepy, all at once.

Moving as fast as he could, Thomas crashed through the heavy foliage, thin branches slapping at his face. He ducked to avoid a low-hanging limb, almost falling. Reaching out, he caught hold of a branch and swung himself forward to regain his balance. A thick bed of leaves and fallen twigs crunched underneath him.

All the while, his eyes stayed riveted on the beetle blade scuttling across the forest floor. Deeper it went, its red light glowing brighter as the surroundings darkened.

Thomas had charged thirty or forty feet into the woods, dodging and ducking and losing ground with every second, when the beetle blade jumped onto a particularly large tree and scooted up its trunk. But by the time Thomas reached the tree, any sign of the creature had vanished. It had disappeared deep within the foliage—almost as if it had never existed.

He'd lost the sucker.

"Shuck it," Thomas whispered, almost as a joke. Almost. As strange as it seemed, the word felt natural on his lips, like he was already morphing into a Glader.

A twig snapped somewhere to his right and he jerked his head in that direction. He stilled his breath, listened.

Another snap, this time louder, almost like someone had broken a stick over their knee.

"Who's there?" Thomas yelled out, a tingle of fear shooting across his shoulders. His voice bounced off the canopy of leaves above him, echoing through the air. He stayed frozen, rooted to the spot as all grew silent, except for the whistling song of a few birds in the distance. But no one answered his call. Nor did he hear any more sounds from that direction.

Without really thinking it through, Thomas headed toward the noise he'd heard. Not bothering to hide his progress, he pushed aside branches as he walked, letting them whip back to position when he passed. He squinted, willed his eyes to work in the growing darkness, wishing he had a flashlight. He thought about flashlights and his memory. Once again, he remembered a tangible thing from his past, but couldn't assign it to any specific time or place, couldn't associate it with any other person or event. Frustrating.

"Anybody there?" he asked again, feeling a little calmer since the noise hadn't repeated. It was probably just an animal, maybe another beetle blade. Just in case, he called out, "It's me, Thomas. The new guy. Well, second-newest guy."

He winced and shook his head, hoping now that no one *was* there. He sounded like a complete idiot.

Again, no reply.

He stepped around a large oak and pulled up short. An icy shiver ran down his back.

He'd reached the graveyard.

The clearing was small, maybe thirty square feet, and covered with a thick layer of leafy weeds growing close to the ground. Thomas could see several clumsily prepared wooden crosses poking through this growth, their horizontal pieces lashed to the upright ones with a splintery twine. The grave markers had been painted white, but by someone in an obvious hurry—gelled globs covered them and bare streaks of wood showed through. Names had been carved into the wood.

Thomas stepped up, hesitantly, to the closest one and knelt down to get a look. The light was so dull now that he almost felt as if he were looking through black mist. Even the birds had quieted, like they'd gone to bed for the night, and the sound of insects was barely noticeable, or at least much less than normal. For the first time, Thomas realized how humid it was in the woods, the damp air already beading sweat on his forehead, the backs of his hands.

He leaned closer to the first cross. It looked fresh and bore the name Stephen—the *n* extra small and right at the edge because the carver hadn't estimated well how much room he'd need.

Stephen, Thomas thought, feeling an unexpected but detached sorrow. What's your story? Chuck annoy you to death?

He stood and walked over to another cross, this one almost completely overgrown with weeds, the ground firm at its base. Whoever it was, he must've been one of the first to die, because his grave looked the oldest. The name was George.

Thomas looked around and saw there were a dozen or so other graves. A couple of them appeared to be just as fresh as the first one he'd examined. A silvery glint caught his attention. It was different from the scuttling beetle that had led him to the forest, but just as odd. He moved through the markers until he got to a grave covered with a sheet of grimy plastic or glass, its edges slimed with filth. He squinted, trying to make out what was on the other side, then gasped when it came into focus. It was a window into another grave—one that had the dusty remnants of a rotting body.

Completely creeped out, Thomas leaned closer to get a better look anyway, curious. The tomb was smaller than usual—only the top *half* of the deceased person lay inside. He remembered Chuck's story about the boy who'd tried to rappel down the dark hole of the Box after it had descended, only to be cut in two by something slicing through the air. Words were etched on the glass; Thomas could barely read them:

**Let this half-shank be a warning to all:
You can't escape through the Box Hole.**

Thomas felt the odd urge to snicker—it seemed too ridiculous to be true. But he was also disgusted with himself for being so shallow and glib. Shaking his head, he had stepped aside to read more names of the dead when another twig broke, this time straight in front of him, right behind the trees on the other side of the graveyard.

Then another snap. Then another. Coming closer. And the darkness was thick.

"Who's out there?" he called, his voice shaky and hollow—it sounded as if he were speaking inside an insulated tunnel. "Seriously, this is stupid." He hated to admit to himself just how terrified he was.

Instead of answering, the person gave up all pretense of stealth and started running, crashing through the forest line around the clearing of the graveyard, circling toward the spot where Thomas stood. He froze, panic overtaking him. Now only a few feet away, the visitor grew louder and louder until Thomas caught a shadowed glimpse of a skinny boy limping along in a strange, lilting run.

"Who the he—"

The boy burst through the trees before Thomas could finish. He saw only a flash of pale skin and enormous eyes—the haunted image of an apparition—and cried out, tried to run, but it was too late. The figure leaped into the air and was on top of him, slamming into his shoulders, gripping him with strong hands. Thomas crashed to the ground; he felt a grave marker dig into his back before it snapped in two, burning a deep scratch along his flesh.

He pushed and swatted at his attacker, a relentless jumble of skin and bones cavorting on top of him as he tried to gain purchase. It seemed like a monster, a horror from a nightmare, but Thomas knew it had to be a Glader, someone who'd completely lost his mind. He heard teeth snapping open and closed, a horrific clack, clack, clack. Then he felt the jarring dagger of pain as the boy's mouth found a home, bit deeply into Thomas's shoulder.

Thomas screamed, the pain like a burst of adrenaline through his blood. He planted the palms of his hands against his attacker's chest and pushed, straightening his arms until his muscles strained against the struggling figure above him. Finally the kid fell back; a sharp crack filled the air as another grave marker met its demise.

Thomas squirmed away on his hands and feet, sucking in breaths of air, and got his first good look at the crazed attacker.

It was the sick boy.

It was Ben.

CHAPTER 11

It looked as if Ben had recovered only slightly since Thomas had seen him in the Homestead. He wore nothing but shorts, his whiter-than-white skin stretched across his bones like a sheet wrapped tightly around a bundle of sticks. Ropelike veins ran along his body, pulsing and green—but less pronounced than the day before. His bloodshot eyes fell upon Thomas as if he were seeing his next meal.

Ben crouched, ready to spring for another attack. At some point a knife had made an appearance, gripped in his right hand. Thomas was filled with a queasy fear, disbelief that this was happening at all.

“*Ben!*”

Thomas looked toward the voice, surprised to see Alby standing at the edge of the graveyard, a mere phantom in the fading light. Relief flooded Thomas’s body—Alby held a large bow, an arrow cocked for the kill, pointed straight at Ben.

“*Ben,*” Alby repeated. “Stop right now, or you ain’t gonna see tomorrow.”

Thomas looked back at Ben, who stared viciously at Alby, his tongue darting between his lips to wet them. *What could possibly be wrong with that kid?* Thomas thought. The boy had turned into a monster. Why?

“If you kill me,” Ben shrieked, spittle flying from his mouth, far enough to hit Thomas in the face, “you’ll get the wrong guy.” He snapped his gaze back to Thomas. “He’s the shank you wanna kill.” His voice was full of madness.

“Don’t be stupid, Ben,” Alby said, his voice calm as he continued to aim the arrow. “Thomas just got here—ain’t nothing to worry about. You’re still buggin’ from the Changing. You should’ve never left your bed.”

“He’s not one of us!” Ben shouted. “I saw him—he’s ... he’s bad. We have to kill him! Let me gut him!”

Thomas took an involuntary step backward, horrified by what Ben had said. What did he mean, he’d seen him? Why did he think Thomas was bad?

Alby hadn’t moved his weapon an inch, still aiming for Ben. “You leave that to me and the Keepers to figure out, shuck-face.” His hands were perfectly steady as he held the bow, almost as if he had propped it against a branch for support. “Right now, back your scrawny butt down and get to the Homestead.”

“He’ll wanna take us home,” Ben said. “He’ll wanna get us out of the Maze. Better we all jumped off the Cliff! Better we tore each other’s guts out!”

“What are you talking—” Thomas began.

“*Shut your face!*” Ben screamed. “Shut your ugly, traitorous face!”

“*Ben,*” Alby said calmly. “I’m gonna count to three.”

“He’s bad, he’s bad, he’s bad ...,” Ben was whispering now, almost chanting. He swayed back and forth, switching the knife from hand to hand, eyes glued on Thomas.

“One.”

“Bad, bad, bad, bad ...” Ben smiled; his teeth seemed to glow, greenish in the pale

light.

Thomas wanted to look away, get out of there. But he couldn't move; he was too mesmerized, too scared.

"Two." Alby's voice was louder, filled with warning.

"Ben," Thomas said, trying to make sense of it all. "I'm not ... I don't even know what—"

Ben screamed, a strangled gurgle of madness, and leaped into the air, slashing out with his blade.

"Three!" Alby shouted.

There was the sound of snapping wire. The *whoosh* of an object slicing through the air. The sickening, wet *thunk* of it finding a home.

Ben's head snapped violently to the left, twisting his body until he landed on his stomach, his feet pointed toward Thomas. He made no sound.

Thomas jumped to his feet and stumbled forward. The long shaft of the arrow stuck from Ben's cheek, the blood surprisingly less than Thomas had expected, but seeping out all the same. Black in the darkness, like oil. The only movement was Ben's right pinky finger, twitching. Thomas fought the urge to puke. Was Ben dead because of him? Was it his fault?

"Come on," Alby said. "Baggers'll take care of him tomorrow."

What just happened here? Thomas thought, the world tilting around him as he stared at the lifeless body. *What did I ever do to this kid?*

He looked up, wanting answers, but Alby was already gone, a trembling branch the only sign he'd ever stood there in the first place.

Thomas squeezed his eyes against the blinding light of the sun as he emerged from the woods. He was limping, his ankle screaming in pain, though he had no memory of hurting it. He held one hand carefully over the area where he'd been bitten; the other clutched his stomach as if that would prevent what Thomas now felt was an inevitable barf. The image of Ben's head popped into his mind, cocked at an unnatural angle, blood running down the shaft of the arrow until it collected, dripped, splattered on the ground....

The image of it was the last straw.

He fell to his knees by one of the scraggly trees on the outskirts of the forest and threw up, retching as he coughed and spat out every last morsel of the acidic, nasty bile from his stomach. His whole body shook, and it seemed like the vomiting would never end.

And then, as if his brain were mocking him, trying to make it worse, he had a thought.

He'd now been at the Glade for roughly twenty-four hours. One full day. That was it. And look at all the things that had happened. All the terrible things.

Surely it could only get better.

That night, Thomas lay staring at the sparkling sky, wondering if he'd ever sleep again. Every time he closed his eyes, the monstrous image of Ben leaping at him, the boy's face set in lunacy, filled his mind. Eyes opened or not, he could swear he kept hearing the moist thunk of the arrow slamming into Ben's cheek.

Thomas knew he'd never forget those few terrible minutes in the graveyard.

"Say something," Chuck said for the fifth time since they'd set out their sleeping bags.

"No," Thomas replied, just as he had before.

"Everyone knows what happened. It's happened once or twice—some Griever-stung shank flipped out and attacked somebody. Don't think you're special."

For the first time, Thomas thought Chuck's personality had gone from mildly irritating to intolerable. "Chuck, be glad I'm not holding Alby's bow right about now."

"I'm just play—"

"Shut up, Chuck. Go to sleep." Thomas just couldn't handle it right then.

Eventually, his "buddy" did doze off, and based on the rumble of snores across the Glade, so did everyone else. Hours later, deep in the night, Thomas was still the only one awake. He wanted to cry, but didn't. He wanted to find Alby and punch him, for no reason whatsoever, but didn't. He wanted to scream and kick and spit and open up the Box and jump into the blackness below. But he didn't.

He closed his eyes and forced the thoughts and dark images away and at some point he fell asleep.

Chuck had to drag Thomas out of his sleeping bag in the morning, drag him to the showers, and drag him to the dressing rooms. The whole time, Thomas felt mopey and indifferent, his head aching, his body wanting more sleep. Breakfast was a blur, and an hour after it was over, Thomas couldn't remember what he'd eaten. He was so tired, his brain felt like someone had gone in and stapled it to his skull in a dozen places. Heartburn ravaged his chest.

But from what he could tell, naps were frowned upon in the giant working farm of the Glade.

He stood with Newt in front of the barn of the Blood House, getting ready for his first training session with a Keeper. Despite the rough morning, he was actually excited to learn more, and for the chance to get his mind off Ben and the graveyard. Cows mooed, sheep bleated, pigs squealed all around him. Somewhere close by, a dog barked, making Thomas hope Frypan didn't bring new meaning to the word *hot dog*. *Hot dog*, he thought. *When's the last time I had a hot dog? Who did I eat it with?*

"Tommy, are you even listening to me?"

Thomas snapped out of his daze and focused on Newt, who'd been talking for who knew how long; Thomas hadn't heard a word of it. "Yeah, sorry. Couldn't sleep last night."

Newt attempted a pathetic smile. "Can't blame ya there. Went through the buggin' ringer, you did. Probably think I'm a slinthead shank for gettin' you ready to work your butt off today after an episode the likes of that."

Thomas shrugged. "Work's probably the best thing I could do. Anything to get my mind off it."

Newt nodded, and his smile became more genuine. "You're as smart as you look, Tommy. That's one of the reasons we run this place all nice and busylike. You get lazy, you get sad. Start givin' up. Plain and simple."

Thomas nodded, absently kicking a loose rock across the dusty, cracked stone floor of the Glade. "So what's the latest on that girl from yesterday?" If anything had penetrated the haze of his long morning, it had been thoughts of her. He wanted to know more about her, understand the odd connection he felt to her.

"Still in a coma, sleepin'. Med-jacks are spoon-feeding her whatever soups Frypan can

cook up, checking her vitals and such. She seems okay, just dead to the world for now.”

“That was just plain weird.” If it hadn’t been for the whole Ben-in-the-graveyard incident, Thomas was sure she would’ve been all he’d thought about last night. Maybe he wouldn’t have been able to sleep for an entirely different reason. He wanted to know who she was and if he really did know her somehow.

“Yeah,” Newt said. “*Weird’s* as good a word as any, I ’spect.”

Thomas looked over Newt’s shoulder at the big faded-red barn, pushing thoughts of the girl aside. “So what’s first? Milk cows or slaughter some poor little pigs?”

Newt laughed, a sound Thomas realized he hadn’t heard much since he’d arrived. “We always make the Newbies start with the bloody Slicers. Don’t worry, cuttin’ up Frypan’s victuals ain’t but a part. Slicers do anything and everything dealin’ with the beasties.”

“Too bad I can’t remember my whole life. Maybe I love killing animals.” He was just joking, but Newt didn’t seem to get it.

Newt nodded toward the barn. “Oh, you’ll know good and well by the time sun sets tonight. Let’s go meet Winston—he’s the Keeper.”

Winston was an acne-covered kid, short but muscular, and it seemed to Thomas the Keeper liked his job way too much. *Maybe he was sent here for being a serial killer*, he thought.

Winston showed Thomas around for the first hour, pointing out which pens held which animals, where the chicken and turkey coops were, what went where in the barn. The dog, a pesky black Lab named Bark, took quickly to Thomas, hanging at his feet the entire tour. Wondering where the dog came from, Thomas asked Winston, who said Bark had just always been there. Luckily, he seemed to have gotten his name as a joke, because he was pretty quiet.

The second hour was spent actually working with the farm animals—feeding, cleaning, fixing a fence, scraping up klunk. *Klunk*. Thomas found himself using the Glader terms more and more.

The third hour was the hardest for Thomas. He had to watch as Winston slaughtered a hog and began preparing its many parts for future eating. Thomas swore two things to himself as he walked away for lunch break. First, his career would not be with the animals; second, he’d never again eat something that came out of a pig.

Winston had said for him to go on alone, that he’d hang around the Blood House, which was fine with Thomas. As he walked toward the East Door, he couldn’t stop picturing Winston in a dark corner of the barn, gnawing on raw pigs’ feet. The guy gave him the willies.

Thomas was just passing the Box when he was surprised to see someone enter the Glade from the Maze, through the West Door, to his left—an Asian kid with strong arms and short black hair, who looked a little older than Thomas. The Runner stopped three steps in, then bent over and put his hands on his knees, gasping for breath. He looked like he’d just run twenty miles, face red, skin covered in sweat, clothes soaked.

Thomas stared, overcome with curiosity—he’d yet to see a Runner up close or talk to one. Plus, based on the last couple of days, the Runner was home hours early. Thomas stepped forward, eager to meet him and ask questions.

But before he could form a sentence, the boy collapsed to the ground.

CHAPTER 12

Thomas didn't move for a few seconds. The boy lay in a crumpled heap, barely moving, but Thomas was frozen by indecision, afraid to get involved. What if something was seriously wrong with this guy? What if he'd been ... *stung*? What if—

Thomas snapped out of it—the Runner obviously needed help.

"Alby!" he shouted. "Newt! Somebody get them!"

Thomas sprinted to the older boy and knelt down beside him. "Hey—you okay?" The Runner's head rested on outstretched arms as he panted, his chest heaving. He was conscious, but Thomas had never seen someone so exhausted.

"I'm ... fine," he said between breaths, then looked up. "Who the klunk are you?"

"I'm new here." It hit Thomas then that the Runners were out in the Maze during the day and hadn't witnessed any of the recent events firsthand. Did this guy even know about the girl? Probably—surely someone had told him. "I'm Thomas—been here just a couple of days."

The Runner pushed himself up into a sitting position, his black hair matted to his skull with sweat. "Oh, yeah, Thomas," he huffed. "Newbie. You and the chick."

Alby jogged up then, clearly upset. "What're you doin' back, Minho? What happened?"

"Calm your wad, Alby," the Runner replied, seeming to gain strength by the second. "Make yourself useful and get me some water—I dropped my pack out there somewhere."

But Alby didn't move. He kicked Minho in the leg—too hard to be playful. "What happened?"

"I can barely talk, shuck-face!" Minho yelled, his voice raw. "Get me some water!"

Alby looked over at Thomas, who was shocked to see the slightest hint of a smile flash across his face before vanishing in a scowl. "Minho's the only shank who can talk to me like that without getting his butt kicked off the Cliff."

Then, surprising Thomas even more, Alby turned and ran off, presumably to get Minho some water.

Thomas turned toward Minho. "He lets you boss him around?"

Minho shrugged, then wiped fresh beads of sweat off his forehead. "You scared of that pip-squeak? Dude, you got a lot to learn. Freakin' Newbies."

The rebuke hurt Thomas far more than it should have, considering he'd known this guy all of three minutes. "Isn't he the leader?"

"Leader?" Minho barked a grunt that was probably supposed to be a laugh. "Yeah, call him leader all you want. Maybe we should call him El Presidente. Nah, nah—Admiral Alby. There you go." He rubbed his eyes, snickering as he did so.

Thomas didn't know what to make of the conversation—it was hard to tell when Minho was joking. "So who *is* the leader if he isn't?"

"Greenie, just shut it before you confuse yourself more." Minho sighed as if bored, then muttered, almost to himself, "Why do you shanks always come in here asking stupid questions? It's really annoying."

"What do you expect us to do?" Thomas felt a flush of anger. *Like you were any different when you first came*, he wanted to say.

"Do what you're told, keep your mouth shut. That's what I expect."

Minho had looked him square in the face for the first time with that last sentence, and Thomas scooted back a few inches before he could stop himself. He realized immediately he'd just made a mistake—he couldn't let this guy think he could talk to him like that.

He pushed himself back up onto his knees so he was looking down at the older boy. "Yeah, I'm sure that's exactly what you did as a Newbie."

Minho looked at Thomas carefully. Then, again staring straight in his eyes, said, "I was one of the first Gladers, slinthead. Shut your hole till you know what you're talking about."

Thomas, now slightly scared of the guy but mostly fed up with his attitude, moved to get up. Minho's hand snapped out and grabbed his arm.

"Dude, sit down. I'm just playin' with your head. It's too much fun—you'll see when the next Newbie ..." He trailed off, a perplexed look wrinkling his eyebrows. "Guess there won't be another Newbie, huh?"

Thomas relaxed, returned to a sitting position, surprised at how easily he'd been put back at ease. He thought of the girl and the note saying she was the last one ever. "Guess not."

Minho squinted slightly, as if he was studying Thomas. "You saw the chick, right? Everybody says you probably know her or something."

Thomas felt himself grow defensive. "I saw her. Doesn't really look familiar at all." He felt immediately guilty for lying—even if it was just a little lie.

"She hot?"

Thomas paused, not having thought of her in that way since she'd freaked out and delivered the note and her one-liner—*Everything is going to change*. But he remembered how beautiful she was. "Yeah, I guess she's hot."

Minho leaned back until he lay flat, eyes closed. "Yeah, you guess. If you got a thing for chicks in comas, right?" He snickered again.

"Right." Thomas was having the hardest time figuring out if he liked Minho or not—his personality seemed to change every minute. After a long pause, Thomas decided to take a chance. "So ...," he asked cautiously, "did you find anything today?"

Minho's eyes opened wide; he focused on Thomas. "You know what, Greenie? That's usually the dumbest shuck-faced thing you could ask a Runner." He closed his eyes again. "But not today."

"What do you mean?" Thomas dared to hope for information. *An answer*, he thought. *Please just give me an answer!*

"Just wait till the fancy admiral gets back. I don't like saying stuff twice. Plus, he might not want you to hear it anyway."

Thomas sighed. He wasn't in the least bit surprised at the non-answer. "Well, at least tell me why you look so tired. Don't you run out there every day?"

Minho groaned as he pulled himself up and crossed his legs under him. "Yeah, Greenie, I run out there every day. Let's just say I got a little excited and ran extra fast to get my bee-hind back here."

"Why?" Thomas desperately wanted to hear about what happened out in the Maze.

Minho threw his hands up. "Dude. I told you. Patience. Wait for General Alby."

Something in his voice lessened the blow, and Thomas made his decision. He liked Minho. "Okay, I'll shut up. Just make sure Alby lets me hear the news, too."

Minho studied him for a second. "Okay, Greenie. You da boss."

Alby walked up a moment later with a big plastic cup full of water and handed it to Minho, who gulped down the whole thing without stopping once for breath.

"Okay," Alby said, "out with it. What happened?"

Minho raised his eyebrows and nodded toward Thomas.

"He's fine," Alby replied. "I don't care what this shank hears. Just talk!"

Thomas sat quietly in anticipation as Minho struggled to stand up, wincing with every move, his whole demeanor just *screaming* exhaustion. The Runner balanced himself against the wall, gave both of them a cold look. "I found a dead one."

"Huh?" Alby asked. "A dead what?"

Minho smiled. "A dead Griever."

Thomas was fascinated at the mention of a Griever. The nasty creature was terrifying to think about, but he wondered why finding a dead one was such a big deal. Had it never happened before?

Alby looked like someone had just told him he could grow wings and fly. “Ain’t a good time for jokes,” he said.

“Look,” Minho answered, “I wouldn’t believe me if I were you, either. But trust me, I did. Big fat nasty one.”

It’s definitely never happened before, Thomas thought.

“You found a *dead* Griever,” Alby repeated.

“Yes, Alby,” Minho said, his words laced with annoyance. “A couple of miles from here, out near the Cliff.”

Alby looked out at the Maze, then back at Minho. “Well ... why didn’t you bring it back with you?”

Minho laughed again, a half-grunt, half-giggle. “You been drinkin’ Frypan’s saucy-sauce? Those things must weigh half a ton, dude. Plus, I wouldn’t touch one if you gave me a free trip out of this place.”

Alby persisted with the questions. “What did it look like? Were the metal spikes in or out of its body? Did it move at all—was its skin still moist?”

Thomas was bursting with questions—*Metal spikes? Moist skin? What in the world?*—but held his tongue, not wanting to remind them he was there. And that maybe they should talk in private.

“Slim it, man,” Minho said. “You gotta see it for yourself. It’s ... weird.”

“Weird?” Alby looked confused.

“Dude, I’m exhausted, starving, and sun-sick. But if you wanna haul it right now, we could probably make it there and back before the walls shut.”

Alby looked at his watch. “Better wait till the wake-up tomorrow.”

“Smartest thing you’ve said in a week.” Minho righted himself from leaning on the wall, hit Alby on the arm, then started walking toward the Homestead with a slight limp. He spoke over his shoulder as he shuffled away—it looked like his whole body was in pain. “I should go back out there, but screw it. I’m gonna go eat some of Frypan’s nasty casserole.”

Thomas felt a wash of disappointment. He had to admit Minho did look like he deserved a rest and a bite to eat, but he wanted to learn more.

Then Alby turned to Thomas, surprising him. “If you know something and ain’t tellin’ me ...”

Thomas was sick of being accused of knowing things. Wasn’t that the problem in the first place? He *didn’t* know anything. He looked at the boy square in the face and asked, simply, “Why do you hate me so much?”

The look that came over Alby’s face was indescribable—part confusion, part anger, part shock. “Hate you? Boy, you ain’t learned nothin’ since showing up in that Box. This ain’t

got nothin' to do with no hate or like or love or friends or anything. All we care about is surviving. Drop your sissy side and start using that shuck brain if you got one."

Thomas felt like he'd been slapped. "But ... why do you keep accusing—"

"Cuz it can't be a coincidence, slinthead! You pop in here, then we get us a girl Newbie the next day, a crazy note, Ben tryin' to bite ya, dead Grievers. Something's goin' on and I ain't restin' till I figure it out."

"I don't know anything, Alby." It felt good to put some heat into his words. "I don't even know where I was three days ago, much less why this Minho guy would find a dead thing called a Griefer. So back off!"

Alby leaned back slightly, stared absently at Thomas for several seconds. Then he said, "Slim it, Greenie. Grow up and start thinkin'. Ain't got nothin' to do with accusing nobody of nothin'. But if you remember anything, if something even *seems* familiar, you better start talking. Promise me."

Not until I have a solid memory, Thomas thought. *Not unless I want to share.* "Yeah, I guess, but—"

"Just promise!"

Thomas paused, sick of Alby and his attitude. "Whatever," he finally said. "I promise."

At that Alby turned and walked away, not saying another word.

Thomas found a tree in the Deadheads, one of the nicer ones on the edge of the forest with plenty of shade. He dreaded going back to work with Winston the Butcher and knew he needed to eat lunch, but he didn't want to be near anybody for as long as he could get away with it. Leaning back against the thick trunk, he wished for a breeze but didn't get one.

He'd just felt his eyelids droop when Chuck ruined his peace and quiet.

"Thomas! Thomas!" the boy shrieked as he ran toward him, pumping his arms, his face lit up with excitement.

Thomas rubbed his eyes and groaned; he wanted nothing in the world more than a half-hour nap. It wasn't until Chuck stopped right in front of him, panting to catch his breath, that he finally looked up. "What?"

Words slowly fell from Chuck, in between his gasps for breath. "Ben ... Ben ... he isn't ... dead."

All signs of fatigue catapulted out of Thomas's system. He jumped up to stand nose to nose with Chuck. "What?"

"He ... isn't dead. Baggers went to get him ... arrow missed his brain ... Med-jacks patched him up."

Thomas turned away to stare into the forest where the sick boy had attacked him just the night before. "You gotta be kidding. I saw him...." He wasn't dead? Thomas didn't know what he felt most strongly: confusion, relief, fear that he'd be attacked again ...

"Well, so did I," Chuck said. "He's locked up in the Slammer, a huge bandage covering half his head."

Thomas spun to face Chuck again. "The Slammer? What do you mean?"

"The Slammer. It's our jail on the north side of the Homestead." Chuck pointed in that direction. "They threw him in it so fast, the Med-jacks had to patch him up in there."

Thomas rubbed his eyes. Guilt consumed him when he realized how he truly felt—he'd been relieved that Ben was dead, that he didn't have to worry about facing him again. "So what are they gonna do with him?"

"Already had a Gathering of the Keepers this morning—made a unanimous decision by the sounds of it. Looks like Ben'll be wishing that arrow had found a home inside his shuck brain after all."

Thomas squinted, confused by what Chuck had said. "What are you talking about?"

"He's being Banished. Tonight, for trying to kill you."

"Banished? What does *that* mean?" Thomas had to ask, though he knew it couldn't be good if Chuck thought it was worse than being dead.

And then Thomas saw perhaps the most disturbing thing he'd seen since he'd arrived at the Glade. Chuck didn't answer; he only smiled. *Smiled*, despite it all, despite the sinister sound of what he'd just announced. Then he turned and ran, maybe to tell someone else the exciting news.

That night, Newt and Alby gathered every last Glader at the East Door about a half hour before it closed, the first traces of twilight's dimness creeping across the sky. The Runners had just returned and entered the mysterious Map Room, clanging the iron door shut; Minho had already gone in earlier. Alby told the Runners to hurry about their business—he wanted them back out in twenty minutes.

It still bothered Thomas how Chuck had smiled when breaking the news about Ben being Banished. Though he didn't know exactly what it meant, it certainly didn't sound like a good thing. Especially since they were all standing so close to the Maze. *Are they going to put him out there?* he wondered. *With the Grievers?*

The other Gladers murmured their conversations in hushed tones, an intense feeling of dreadful anticipation hanging over them like a patch of thick fog. But Thomas said nothing, standing with arms folded, waiting for the show. He stood quietly until the Runners finally came out of their building, all of them looking exhausted, their faces pinched from deep thinking. Minho had been the first to exit, which made Thomas wonder if he was the Keeper of the Runners.

"Bring him out!" Alby shouted, startling Thomas out of his thoughts.

His arms fell to his sides as he turned, looking around the Glade for a sign of Ben, trepidation building within him as he wondered what the boy would do when he saw him.

From around the far side of the Homestead, three of the bigger boys appeared, literally dragging Ben along the ground. His clothes were tattered, barely hanging on; a bloody, thick bandage covered half his head and face. Refusing to put his feet down or help the progress in any way, he seemed as dead as the last time Thomas had seen him. Except for one thing.

His eyes were open, and they were wide with terror.

"Newt," Alby said in a much quieter voice; Thomas wouldn't have heard him if he hadn't been standing just a few feet away. "Bring out the Pole."

Newt nodded, already on the move toward a small tool shed used for the Gardens; he'd clearly been waiting for the order.

Thomas turned his focus back to Ben and the guards. The pale, miserable boy still made

no effort to resist, letting them drag him across the dusty stone of the courtyard. When they reached the crowd, they pulled Ben to his feet in front of Alby, their leader, where Ben hung his head, refusing to make eye contact with anyone.

"You brought this on yourself, Ben," Alby said. Then he shook his head and looked toward the shack to which Newt had gone.

Thomas followed his gaze just in time to see Newt walk though the slanted door. He was holding several aluminum poles, connecting the ends to make a shaft maybe twenty feet long. When he was finished, he grabbed something odd-shaped on one of the ends and dragged the whole thing along toward the group. A shiver ran up Thomas's spine at the metallic scrape of the pole on the stone ground as Newt walked.

Thomas was horrified by the whole affair—he couldn't help feeling responsible even though he'd never done anything to provoke Ben.

How was any of this his fault? No answer came to him, but he felt the guilt all the same, like a disease in his blood.

Finally, Newt stepped up to Alby and handed over the end of the pole he was holding. Thomas could see the strange attachment now. A loop of rough leather, fastened to the metal with a massive staple. A large button snap revealed that the loop could be opened and closed, and its purpose became obvious.

It was a collar.

CHAPTER 14

Thomas watched as Alby unbuttoned the collar, then wrapped it around Ben's neck; Ben finally looked up just as the loop of leather snapped closed with a loud pop. Tears glistened in his eyes; dribbles of snot oozed from his nostrils. The Gladers looked on, not a word from any of them.

"Please, Alby," Ben pleaded, his shaky voice so pathetic that Thomas couldn't believe it was the same guy who'd tried to bite his throat off the day before. "I swear I was just sick in the head from the Changing. I never would've killed him—just lost my mind for a second. Please, Alby, *please*."

Every word from the kid was like a fist punching Thomas in the gut, making him feel more guilty and confused.

Alby didn't respond to Ben; he pulled on the collar to make sure it was both firmly snapped and solidly attached to the long pole. He walked past Ben and along the pole, picking it up off the ground as he slid its length through his palm and fingers. When he reached the end, he gripped it tightly and turned to face the crowd. Eyes bloodshot, face wrinkled in anger, breathing heavily—to Thomas, he suddenly looked evil.

And it was an odd sight on the other side: Ben, trembling, crying, a roughly cut collar of old leather wrapped around his pale, scrawny neck, attached to a long pole that stretched from him to Alby, twenty feet away. The shaft of aluminum bowed in the middle, but only a little. Even from where Thomas was standing, it looked surprisingly strong.

Alby spoke in a loud, almost ceremonious voice, looking at no one and everyone at the same time. "Ben of the Builders, you've been sentenced to Banishment for the attempted murder of Thomas the Newbie. The Keepers have spoken, and their word ain't changing. And you ain't coming back. Ever." A long pause. "Keepers, take your place on the Banishment Pole."

Thomas hated that his link to Ben was being made public—hated the responsibility he felt. Being the center of attention again could only bring more suspicion about him. His guilt transformed into anger and blame. More than anything, he just wanted Ben gone, wanted it all to be over.

One by one, boys were stepping out of the crowd and walking over to the long pole; they grabbed it with both hands, gripped it as if readying for a tug-of-war match. Newt was one of them, as was Minho, confirming Thomas's guess that he was the Keeper of the Runners. Winston the Butcher also took up a position.

Once they were all in place—ten Keepers spaced evenly apart between Alby and Ben—the air grew still and silent. The only sounds were the muffled sobs of Ben, who kept wiping at his nose and eyes. He was looking left and right, though the collar around his neck prevented him from seeing the pole and Keepers behind him.

Thomas's feelings changed again. Something was obviously wrong with Ben. Why did he deserve this fate? Couldn't something be done for him? Would Thomas spend the rest of his days feeling responsible? *Just end*, he screamed in his head. *Just be over!*

"Please," Ben said, his voice rising in desperation. "Plllleeeeeeeease! Somebody, help me! You can't do this to me!"

"Shut up!" Alby roared from behind.

But Ben ignored him, pleading for help as he started to pull on the leather looped around his neck. "Someone stop them! Help me! Please!" He glanced from boy to boy, begging with his eyes. Without fail, everyone looked away. Thomas quickly stepped behind a taller boy to avoid his own confrontation with Ben. *I can't look into those eyes again*, he thought.

"If we let shanks like you get away with that stuff," Alby said, "we never would've survived this long. Keepers, get ready."

"No, no, no, no, no," Ben was saying, half under his breath. "I swear I'll do anything! I swear I'll never do it again! Plllleeeeeeee—"

His shrill cry was cut off by the rumbling crack of the East Door beginning to close. Sparks flew from the stone as the massive right wall slid to the left, groaning thunderously as it made its journey to close off the Glade from the Maze for the night. The ground shook beneath them, and Thomas didn't know if he could watch what he knew was going to happen next.

"Keepers, now!" Alby shouted.

Ben's head snapped back as he was jerked forward, the Keepers pushing the pole toward the Maze outside the Glade. A strangling cry erupted from Ben's throat, louder than the sounds of the closing Door. He fell to his knees, only to be jerked back to his feet by the Keeper in front, a thick guy with black hair and a snarl on his face.

"Noooooooooo!" Ben screamed, spit flying from his mouth as he thrashed about, tearing at the collar with his hands. But the combined strength of the Keepers was way too much, forcing the condemned boy closer and closer to the edge of the Glade, just as the right wall was almost there. "Nooooo!" he screamed again, and then again.

He tried to plant his feet at the threshold, but it only lasted for a split second; the pole sent him into the Maze with a lurch. Soon he was fully four feet outside the Glade, jerking his body from side to side as he tried to escape his collar. The walls of the Door were only seconds from sealing shut.

With one last violent effort, Ben was finally able to twist his neck in the circle of leather so that his whole body turned to face the Gladers. Thomas couldn't believe he was still looking upon a human being—the madness in Ben's eyes, the phlegm flying from his mouth, the pale skin stretched taut across his veins and bones. He looked as alien as anything Thomas could imagine.

"Hold!" Alby shouted.

Ben screamed then, without pause, a sound so piercing that Thomas covered his ears. It was a bestial, lunatic cry, surely ripping the boy's vocal cords to shreds. At the last second, the front Keeper somehow loosened the larger pole from the piece attached to Ben and yanked it back into the Glade, leaving the boy to his Banishment. Ben's final screams were cut off when the walls closed with a terrible boom.

Thomas squeezed his eyes shut and was surprised to feel tears trickling down his cheeks.

CHAPTER 15

For the second night in a row, Thomas went to bed with the haunted image of Ben's face burned into his mind, tormenting him. How different would things be right now if it weren't for that one boy? Thomas could almost convince himself he'd be completely content, happy and excited to learn his new life, aim for his goal of being a Runner. Almost. Deep down he knew that Ben was only part of his many problems.

But now he was gone, Banished to the world of the Grievers, taken to wherever they took their prey, victim to whatever was done there. Though he had plenty of reasons to despise Ben, he mostly felt sorry for him.

Thomas couldn't imagine going out that way, but based on Ben's last moments, psychotically thrashing and spitting and screaming, he no longer doubted the importance of the Glade rule that no one should enter the Maze except Runners, and then only during the day. Somehow Ben had already been stung once, which meant he knew better than perhaps anyone just exactly what lay in store for him.

That poor guy, he thought. That poor, poor guy.

Thomas shuddered and rolled over on his side. The more he thought about it, being a Runner didn't sound like such a great idea. But, inexplicably, it still called to him.

The next morning, dawn had barely touched the sky before the working sounds of the Glade wakened Thomas from the deepest slumber since he'd arrived. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, trying to shake the heavy grogginess. Giving up, he lay back down, hoping no one would bother him.

It didn't last a minute.

Someone tapped his shoulder and he opened his eyes to see Newt staring down at him. *What now?* he thought.

"Get up, ya lug."

"Yeah, good morning to you, too. What time is it?"

"Seven o'clock, Greenie," Newt said with a mocking smile. "Figured I'd let ya sleep in after such a rough couple days."

Thomas rolled into a sitting position, hating that he couldn't just lie there for another few hours. "Sleep in? What are you guys, a bunch of farmers?" Farmers—how did he remember so much about them? Once again his memory wipe baffled him.

"Uh ... yeah, now that ya mention it." Newt plopped down beside Thomas and folded his legs up under himself. He sat quietly for a few moments, looking out at all the hustle-bustle starting to whip up across the Glade. "Gonna put ya with the Track-hoes today, Greenie. See if that suits your fancy more than slicin' up bloody piggies and such."

Thomas was sick of being treated like a baby. "Aren't you supposed to quit calling me that?"

"What, bloody piggies?"

Thomas forced a laugh and shook his head. "No, *Greenie*. I'm not really the newest Newbie anymore, right? The girl in the coma is. Call *her* Greenie—my name's Thomas."

Thoughts of the girl crashed around his mind, made him remember the connection he felt. A sadness washed over him, as if he missed her, wanted to see her. *That doesn't make sense*, he thought. *I don't even know her name.*

Newt leaned back, eyebrows raised. "Burn me—you grew some right nice-sized eggs over night, now didn't ya?"

Thomas ignored him and moved on. "What's a Track-hoe?"

"It's what we call the guys workin' their butts off in the Gardens—tilling, weeding, planting and such."

Thomas nodded in that direction. "Who's the Keeper?"

"Zart. Nice guy, s'long as you don't sluff on the job, that is. He's the big one that stood in front last night."

Thomas didn't say anything to that, hoping that somehow he could go through the entire day without talking about Ben and the Banishment. The subject only made him sick and guilty, so he moved on to something else. "So why'd you come wake me up?"

"What, don't like seein' my face first thing on the wake-up?"

"Not especially. So—" But before he could finish his sentence the rumble of the walls opening for the day cut him off. He looked toward the East Door, almost expecting to see Ben standing there on the other side. Instead, he saw Minho stretching. Then Thomas watched as he walked over and picked something up.

It was the section of pole with the leather collar attached to it. Minho seemed to think nothing of it, throwing it to one of the other Runners, who went and put it back in the tool shed near the Gardens.

Thomas turned back to Newt, confused. How could Minho act so nonchalant about it all? "What the—"

"Only seen three Banishments, Tommy. All as nasty as the one you peeped on last night. But every buggin' time, the Grievers leave the collar on our doorstep. Gives me the willies like nothin' else."

Thomas had to agree. "What do they *do* with people when they catch them?" Did he really want to know?

Newt just shrugged, his indifference not very convincing. More likely he didn't want to talk about it.

"So tell me about the Runners," Thomas said suddenly. The words seemed to pop out of nowhere. But he remained still, despite an odd urge to apologize and change the subject; he wanted to know everything about them. Even after what he'd seen last night, even after witnessing the Griever through the window, he wanted to know. The *pull* to know was strong, and he didn't quite understand why. Becoming a Runner just felt like something he was born to do.

Newt had paused, looking confused. "The Runners? Why?"

"Just wondering."

Newt gave him a suspicious look. "Best of the best, those guys. Have to be. Everything depends on them." He picked up a loose rock and tossed it, watching it absently as it bounced to a stop.

"Why aren't you one?"

Newt's gaze returned to Thomas, sharply. "Was till I hurt my leg few months back. Hasn't

been the bloody same since.” He reached down and rubbed his right ankle absently, a brief look of pain flashing across his face. The look made Thomas think it was more from the memory, not any actual physical pain he still felt.

“How’d you do it?” Thomas asked, thinking the more he could get Newt to talk, the more he’d learn.

“Runnin’ from the buggin’ Grievers, what else? Almost got me.” He paused. “Still gives me the chills thinkin’ I might have gone through the Changing.”

The Changing. It was the one topic that Thomas thought might lead him to answers more than anything else. “What *is* that, anyway? What changes? Does everyone go psycho like Ben and start trying to kill people?”

“Ben was way worse than most. But I thought you wanted to talk about the Runners.” Newt’s tone warned that the conversation about the Changing was over.

This made Thomas even more curious, though he was just fine going back to the subject of Runners. “Okay, I’m listening.”

“Like I said, best of the best.”

“So what do you do? Test everybody to see how fast they are?”

Newt gave Thomas a disgusted look, then groaned. “Show me some smarts, Greenie, Tommy, whatever ya like. How fast you can bloody run is only part of it. A very small part, actually.”

This piqued Thomas’s interest. “What do you mean?”

“When I say best of the best, I mean at everything. To survive the buggin’ Maze, you gotta be smart, quick, strong. Gotta be a decision maker, know the right amount of risk to take. Can’t be reckless, can’t be timid, either.” Newt straightened his legs and leaned back on his hands. “It’s bloody awful out there, ya know? I don’t miss it.”

“I thought the Grievers only came out at night.” Destiny or not, Thomas didn’t want to run into one of those things.

“Yeah, usually.”

“Then why is it so terrible out there?” What *else* didn’t he know about?

Newt sighed. “Pressure. Stress. Maze pattern different every day, tryin’ to picture things in your mind, tryin’ to get us out of here. Worryin’ about the bloody Maps. Worst part, you’re always scared you might not make it back. A normal maze’d be hard enough—but when it *changes* every night, couple of mental mistakes and you’re spendin’ the night with vicious beasts. No room or time for dummies or brats.”

Thomas frowned, not quite understanding the drive inside him, urging him on. Especially after last night. But he still felt it. Felt it all over.

“Why all the interest?” Newt asked.

Thomas hesitated, thinking, scared to say it out loud again. “I want to be a Runner.”

Newt turned and looked him in the eye. “Haven’t been here a week, shank. Little early for death wishes, don’t ya think?”

“I’m serious.” It barely made sense even to Thomas, but he felt it deeply. In fact, the desire to become a Runner was the only thing driving him on, helping him accept his predicament.

Newt didn’t break his gaze. “So am I. Forget it. No one’s ever become a Runner in their first month, much less their first week. Got a lot of provin’ to do before we’ll recommend

you to the Keeper."

Thomas stood and started folding up his sleeping gear. "Newt, I mean it. I can't pull weeds all day—I'll go nuts. I don't have a clue what I did before they shipped me here in that metal box, but my gut tells me that being a Runner is what I'm supposed to do. I can do it."

Newt still sat there, staring up at Thomas, not offering to help. "No one said you couldn't. But give it a rest for now."

Thomas felt a surge of impatience. "But—"

"Listen, trust me on this, Tommy. Start stompin' around this place yappin' about how you're too good to work like a peasant, how you're all nice and ready to be a Runner—you'll make plenty of enemies. Drop it for now."

Making enemies was the last thing Thomas wanted, but still. He decided on another direction. "Fine, I'll talk to Minho about it."

"Good try, ya buggin' shank. The Gathering elects Runners, and if you think *I'm* tough, they'd laugh in your face."

"For all you guys know, I could be really good at it. It's a waste of time to make me wait."

Newt stood to join Thomas and jabbed a finger in his face. "You listen to me, Greenie. You listenin' all nice and pretty?"

Thomas surprisingly didn't feel that intimidated. He rolled his eyes, but then nodded.

"You better stop this nonsense, before others hear about it. That's not how it works around here, and our whole existence depends on things *working*."

He paused, but Thomas said nothing, dreading the lecture he knew was coming.

"Order," Newt continued. "Order. You say that bloody word over and over in your shuck head. Reason we're all sane around here is 'cause we work our butts off and maintain order. Order's the reason we put Ben out—can't very well have loonies runnin' around tryin' to kill people, now can we? *Order*. Last thing we need is you screwin' that up."

The stubbornness washed out of Thomas. He knew it was time to shut up. "Yeah" was all he said.

Newt slapped him on the back. "Let's make a deal."

"What?" Thomas felt his hopes rise.

"You keep your mouth shut about it, and I'll put you on the list of potential trainees as soon as you show some clout. *Don't* keep your trap shut, and I'll bloody make sure ya never see it happen. Deal?"

Thomas hated the idea of waiting, not knowing how long it might be. "That's a sucky deal."

Newt raised his eyebrows.

Thomas finally nodded. "Deal."

"Come on, let's get us some grub from Frypan. And hope we don't bloody choke."

That morning, Thomas finally met the infamous Frypan, if only from a distance. The guy was too busy trying to feed breakfast to an army of starving Gladers. He couldn't have been more than sixteen years old, but he had a full beard and hair sticking out all over the rest of his body, as if each follicle were trying to escape the confines of his food-smeared

clothes. Didn't seem like the most sanitary guy in the world to oversee all the cooking, Thomas thought. He made a mental note to watch out for nasty black hairs in his meals.

He and Newt had just joined Chuck for breakfast at a picnic table right outside the Kitchen when a large group of Gladers got up and ran toward the West Door, talking excitedly about something.

"What's going on?" Thomas asked, surprising himself at how nonchalantly he said it. New developments in the Glade had just become a part of life.

Newt shrugged as he dug into his eggs. "Just seein' off Minho and Alby—they're going to look at the buggin' dead Griever."

"Hey," Chuck said. A small piece of bacon flew out of his mouth when he spoke. "I've got a question about that."

"Yeah, Chuckie?" Newt asked, somewhat sarcastically. "And what's your bloody question?"

Chuck seemed deep in thought. "Well, they found a dead Griever, right?"

"Yeah," Newt replied. "Thanks for that bit of news."

Chuck absently tapped his fork against the table for a few seconds. "Well, then who *killed* the stupid thing?"

Excellent question, Thomas thought. He waited for Newt to answer, but nothing came. He obviously didn't have a clue.

CHAPTER 16

Thomas spent the morning with the Keeper of the Gardens, “working his butt off,” as Newt would’ve said. Zart was the tall, black-haired kid who’d stood at the front of the pole during Ben’s Banishment, and who for some odd reason smelled like sour milk. He didn’t say much, but showed Thomas the ropes until he could start working on his own. Weeding, pruning an apricot tree, planting squash and zucchini seeds, picking veggies. He didn’t love it, and mostly ignored the other boys working alongside him, but he didn’t hate it nearly as much as what he’d done for Winston at the Blood House.

Thomas and Zart were weeding a long row of young corn when Thomas decided it was a good time to start asking questions. This Keeper seemed a lot more approachable.

“So, Zart,” he said.

The Keeper glanced up at him, then resumed his work. The kid had droopy eyes and a long face—for some reason he looked as bored as humanly possible. “Yeah, Greenie, what you want?”

“How many Keepers total are there?” Thomas asked, trying to act casual. “And what are the job options?”

“Well, you got the Builders, the Sloppers, Baggers, Cooks, Map-makers, Med-jacks, Track-Hoes, Blood Housers. The Runners, of course. I don’t know, a few more, maybe. Pretty much keep to myself and my own stuff.”

Most of the words were self-explanatory, but Thomas wondered about a couple of them. “What’s a Slopper?” He knew that was what Chuck did, but the boy never wanted to talk about it. Refused to talk about it.

“That’s what the shanks do that can’t do nothin’ else. Clean toilets, clean the showers, clean the kitchen, clean up the Blood House after a slaughter, everything. Spend one day with them suckers—that’ll cure any thoughts of goin’ that direction, I can tell ya that.”

Thomas felt a pang of guilt over Chuck—felt sorry for him. The kid tried so hard to be everyone’s friend, but no one seemed to like him or even pay attention to him. Yeah, he was a little excitable and talked too much, but Thomas was glad enough to have him around.

“What about the Track-hoes?” Thomas asked as he yanked out a huge weed, clumps of dirt swaying on the roots.

Zart cleared his throat and kept on working as he answered. “They’re the ones take care of all the heavy stuff for the Gardens. Trenching and whatnot. During off times they do other stuff round the Glade. Actually, a lot of Gladers have more than one job. Anyone tell you that?”

Thomas ignored the question and moved on, determined to get as many answers as possible. “What about the Baggers? I know they take care of dead people, but it can’t happen *that* often, can it?”

“Those are the creepy fellas. They act as guards and poh-lice, too. Everyone just likes to call ‘em Baggers. Have fun that day, brother.” He snickered, the first time Thomas had

heard him do so—there was something very likable about it.

Thomas had more questions. Lots more. Chuck and everyone else around the Glade never wanted to give him the answers to anything. And here was Zart, who seemed perfectly willing. But suddenly Thomas didn't feel like talking anymore. For some reason the girl had popped into his head again, out of the blue, and then thoughts of Ben, and the dead Griever, which should have been a good thing but everyone acted as if it were anything but.

His new life pretty much sucked.

He drew a deep, long breath. *Just work*, he thought. And he did.

By the time midafternoon arrived, Thomas was ready to collapse from exhaustion—all that bending over and crawling around on your knees in the dirt was the pits. Blood House, Gardens. Two strikes.

Runner, he thought as he went on break. *Just let me be a Runner*. Once again he thought about how absurd it was that he wanted it so badly. But even though he didn't understand it, or where it came from, the desire was undeniable. Just as strong were thoughts of the girl, but he pushed them aside as much as possible.

Tired and sore, he headed to the Kitchen for a snack and some water. He could've eaten a full-blown meal despite having had lunch just two hours earlier. Even pig was starting to sound good again.

He bit into an apple, then plopped on the ground beside Chuck. Newt was there, too, but sat alone, ignoring everybody. His eyes were bloodshot, his forehead creased with heavy lines. Thomas watched as Newt chewed his fingernails, something he hadn't seen the older boy do before.

Chuck noticed and asked the question that was on Thomas's mind. "What's wrong with him?" the boy whispered. "Looks like you did when you popped out of the Box."

"I don't know," Thomas replied. "Why don't you go ask him."

"I can hear every bloody word you guys are saying," Newt called in a loud voice. "No wonder people hate sleepin' next to you shanks."

Thomas felt like he'd been caught stealing, but he was genuinely concerned—Newt was one of the few people in the Glade he actually liked.

"What is wrong with you?" Chuck asked. "No offense, but you look like klunk."

"Every lovin' thing in the universe," he replied, then fell silent as he stared off into space for a long moment. Thomas almost pushed him with another question, but Newt finally continued. "The girl from the Box. Keeps groanin' and saying all kinds of weird stuff, but won't wake up. Medjacks're doing their best to feed her, but she's eatin' less each time. I'm tellin' ya, something's very bad about that whole bloody thing."

Thomas looked down at his apple, then took a bite. It tasted sour now—he realized he was worried about the girl. Concerned for her welfare. As if he knew her.

Newt let out a long sigh. "Shuck it. But that's not what really has me buggin'."

"Then what does?" Chuck asked.

Thomas leaned forward, so curious he was able to put the girl out of his mind.

Newt's eyes narrowed as he looked out toward one of the entrances to the Maze. "Alby and Minho," he muttered. "They should've come back hours ago."

Before Thomas knew it he was back at work, pulling up weeds again, counting down the minutes until he'd be done with the Gardens. He glanced constantly at the West Door, looking for any sign of Alby and Minho, Newt's concern having rubbed off on him.

Newt had said they were supposed to have come back by noon, just enough time for them to get to the dead Grievers, explore for an hour or two, then return. No wonder he'd looked so upset. When Chuck offered up that maybe they were just exploring and having some fun, Newt had given him a stare so harsh Thomas thought Chuck might spontaneously combust.

He'd never forget the next look that had come over Newt's face. When Thomas asked why Newt and some others didn't just go into the Maze and search for their friends, Newt's expression had changed to outright horror—his cheeks had *shrunk* into his face, becoming sallow and dark. It gradually passed, and he'd explained that sending out search parties was forbidden, lest even more people be lost, but there was no mistaking the fear that had crossed his face.

Newt was terrified of the Maze.

Whatever had happened to him out there—maybe even related to his lingering ankle injury—had been truly awful.

Thomas tried not to think about it as he put his focus back on yanking weeds.

That night dinner proved to be a somber affair, and it had nothing to do with the food. Frypan and his cooks served up a grand meal of steak, mashed potatoes, green beans and hot rolls. Thomas was quickly learning that jokes about Frypan's cooking were just that—jokes. Everyone gobbled up his food and usually begged for more. But tonight, the Gladers ate like dead men resurrected for one last meal before being sent to live with the devil.

The Runners had returned at their normal time, and Thomas had grown more and more upset as he watched Newt run from Door to Door as they entered the Glade, not bothering to hide his panic. But Alby and Minho never showed up. Newt forced the Gladers to go on and get some of Frypan's hard-earned dinner, but he insisted on standing watch for the missing duo. No one said it, but Thomas knew it wouldn't be long before the Doors closed.

Thomas reluctantly followed orders like the rest of the boys and was sharing a picnic table on the south side of the Homestead with Chuck and Winston. He'd only been able to eat a few bites when he couldn't take it anymore.

"I can't stand sitting here while they're out there missing," he said as he dropped his fork on the plate. "I'm going over to watch the Doors with Newt." He stood up and headed out to look.

Not surprisingly, Chuck was right behind him.

They found Newt at the West Door, pacing, running his hands through his hair. He looked up as Thomas and Chuck approached.

"Where *are* they?" Newt said, his voice thin and strained.

Thomas was touched that Newt cared so much about Alby and Minho—as if they were his own kin. "Why don't we send out a search party?" he suggested again. It seemed so stupid to sit here and worry themselves to death when they could go out there and *find* them.

"Bloody he—" Newt started before stopping himself; he closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath. "We can't. Okay? Don't say it again. One hundred percent against the

rules. Especially with the buggin' Doors about to close."

"But why?" Thomas persisted, in disbelief at Newt's stubbornness. "Won't the Grievers get them if they stay out there? Shouldn't we do something?"

Newt turned on him, his face flushed red, his eyes flamed with fury.

"Shut your hole, Greenie!" he yelled. "Not a bloody week you've been here! You think I wouldn't risk my life in a second to save those lugs?"

"No ... I ... Sorry. I didn't mean ..." Thomas didn't know what to say—he was just trying to help.

Newt's face softened. "You don't get it yet, Tommy. Going out there at night is beggin' for death. We'd just be throwin' more lives away. If those shanks don't make it back ..." He paused, seeming hesitant to say what everyone was thinking. "Both of 'em swore an oath, just like I did. Like we all did. You, too, when you go to your first Gathering and get chosen by a Keeper. Never go out at night. No matter what. Never."

Thomas looked over at Chuck, who seemed as pale-faced as Newt.

"Newt won't say it," the boy said, "so I will. If they're not back, it means they're dead. Minho's too smart to get lost. Impossible. They're dead."

Newt said nothing, and Chuck turned and walked back toward the Homestead, his head hanging low. *Dead?* Thomas thought. The situation had become so grave he didn't know how to react, felt a pit of emptiness in his heart.

"The shank's right," Newt said solemnly. "That's why we can't go out. We can't afford to make things bloody worse than they already are."

He put his hand on Thomas's shoulder, then let it slump to his side. Tears moistened Newt's eyes, and Thomas was sure that even within the dark chamber of memories that were locked away, out of his reach, he'd never seen someone look so sad. The growing darkness of twilight was a perfect fit for how grim things felt to Thomas.

"The Doors close in two minutes," Newt said, a statement so succinct and final it seemed to hang in the air like a burial shroud caught in a puff of wind. Then he walked away, hunched over, quiet.

Thomas shook his head and looked back into the Maze. He barely knew Alby and Minho. But his chest ached at the thought of them out there, killed by the horrendous creature he'd seen through the window his first morning in the Glade.

A loud boom sounded from all directions, startling Thomas out of his thoughts. Then came the crunching, grinding sound of stone against stone. The Doors were closing for the night.

The right wall rumbled across the ground, spitting dirt and rocks as it moved. The vertical row of connecting rods, so many they seemed to reach the sky far above, slid toward their corresponding holes on the left wall, ready to seal shut until the morning. Once again, Thomas looked in awe at the massive moving wall—it defied any sense of physics. It seemed impossible.

Then a flicker of movement to the left caught his eyes.

Something stirred inside the Maze, down the long corridor in front of him.

At first, a shot of panic raced through him; he stepped back, worried it might be a Griever. But then two forms took shape, stumbling along the alley toward the Door. His eyes finally focused through the initial blindness of fear, and he realized it was Minho, with

one of Alby's arms draped across his shoulders, practically dragging the boy along behind him. Minho looked up, saw Thomas, who knew his eyes must be bulging out of his head.

"They got him!" Minho shouted, his voice strangled and weak with exhaustion. Every step he took seemed like it could be his last.

Thomas was so stunned by the turn of events, it took a moment for him to act. "Newt!" he finally screamed, forcing his gaze away from Minho and Alby to face the other direction. "They're coming! I can see 'em!" He knew he should run into the Maze and help, but the rule about not leaving the Glade was seared into his mind.

Newt had already made it back to the Homestead, but at Thomas's cry he immediately spun around and broke into a stuttering run toward the Door.

Thomas turned to look back into the Maze and dread washed through him. Alby had slipped out of Minho's clutches and fallen to the ground. Thomas watched as Minho tried desperately to get him back on his feet, then, finally giving up, started to drag the boy across the stone floor by the arms.

But they were still a hundred feet away.

The right wall was closing fast, seeming to quicken its pace the more Thomas willed it to slow down. There were only seconds left until it shut completely. They had no chance of making it in time. No chance at all.

Thomas turned to look at Newt: limping along as well as he could, he'd only made it halfway to Thomas.

He looked back into the Maze, at the closing wall. Only a few feet more and it'd be over.

Minho stumbled up ahead, fell to the ground. They weren't going to make it. Time was up. That was it.

Thomas heard Newt scream something from behind him.

"Don't do it, Tommy! Don't you bloody do it!"

The rods on the right wall seemed to reach like stretched-out arms for their home, grasping for those little holes that would serve as their resting place for the night. The crunching, grinding sound of the Doors filled the air, deafening.

Five feet. Four feet. Three. Two.

Thomas knew he had no choice. He *moved*. Forward. He squeezed past the connecting rods at the last second and stepped into the Maze.

The walls slammed shut behind him, the echo of its boom bouncing off the ivy-covered stone like mad laughter.

For several seconds, Thomas felt like the world had frozen in place. A thick silence followed the thunderous rumble of the Door closing, and a veil of darkness seemed to cover the sky, as if even the sun had been frightened away by what lurked in the Maze. Twilight had fallen, and the mammoth walls looked like enormous tombstones in a weed-infested cemetery for giants. Thomas leaned back against the rough rock, overcome by disbelief at what he had just done.

Filled with terror at what the consequences might be.

Then a sharp cry from Alby up ahead snapped Thomas to attention; Minho was moaning. Thomas pushed himself away from the wall and ran to the two Gladers.

Minho had pulled himself up and was standing once again, but he looked terrible, even in the pale light still available—sweaty, dirty, scratched-up. Alby, on the ground, looked worse, his clothes ripped, his arms covered with cuts and bruises. Thomas shuddered. Had Alby been attacked by a Grieaver?

“Greenie,” Minho said, “if you think that was brave comin’ out here, listen up. You’re the shuckiest shuck-faced shuck there ever was. You’re as good as dead, just like us.”

Thomas felt his face heat up—he’d expected at least a little gratitude. “I couldn’t just sit there and leave you guys out here.”

“And what good are you with us?” Minho rolled his eyes. “Whatever, dude. Break the Number One Rule, kill yourself, whatever.”

“You’re welcome. I was just trying to help.” Thomas felt like kicking him in the face.

Minho forced a bitter laugh, then knelt back on the ground beside Alby. Thomas took a closer look at the collapsed boy and realized just how bad things were. Alby looked on the edge of death. His usually dark skin was losing color fast and his breaths were quick and shallow.

Hopelessness rained down on Thomas. “What happened?” he asked, trying to put aside his anger.

“Don’t wanna talk about it,” Minho said as he checked Alby’s pulse and bent over to listen to his chest. “Let’s just say the Grievers can play dead really well.”

This statement took Thomas by surprise. “So he was ... bitten? Stung, whatever? Is he going through the Changing?”

“You’ve got a lot to learn” was all Minho would say.

Thomas wanted to scream. He knew he had a lot to learn—that was why he was asking questions. “Is he going to die?” he forced himself to say, cringing at how shallow and empty it sounded.

“Since we didn’t make it back before sunset, probably. Could be dead in an hour—I don’t know how long it takes if you don’t get the Serum. Course, we’ll be dead, too, so don’t get all weepy for him. Yep, we’ll all be nice and dead soon.” He said it so matter-of-factly, Thomas could hardly process the meaning of the words.

But fast enough, the dire reality of the situation began to hit Thomas, and his insides

turned to rot. “We’re really going to die?” he asked, unable to accept it. “You’re telling me we have no chance?”

“None.”

Thomas was annoyed at Minho’s constant negativity. “Oh, come on—there has to be something we can do. How many Grievers’ll come at us?” He peered down the corridor that led deeper into the Maze, as if expecting the creatures to arrive then, summoned by the sound of their name.

“I don’t know.”

A thought sprang into Thomas’s mind, giving him hope. “But … what about Ben? And Gally, and others who’ve been stung and survived?”

Minho glanced up at him with a look that said he was dumber than cow klunk. “Didn’t you hear me? They made it back before sunset, you dong. Made it back and got the Serum. All of them.”

Thomas wondered about the mention of a serum, but had too many other questions to get out first. “But I thought the Grievers only came out at night.”

“Then you were *wrong*, shank. They *always* come out at night. That doesn’t mean they never show up during the day.”

Thomas wouldn’t allow himself to give in to Minho’s hopelessness—he didn’t want to give up and die just yet. “Has anyone ever been caught outside the walls at night and lived through it?”

“Never.”

Thomas scowled, wishing he could find one little spark of hope. “How many have died, then?”

Minho stared at the ground, crouched with one forearm on a knee. He was clearly exhausted, almost in a daze. “At least twelve. Haven’t you been to the graveyard?”

“Yeah.” *So that’s how they died*, he thought.

“Well, those are just the ones we *found*. There are more whose bodies never showed up.” Minho pointed absently back toward the sealed-off Glade. “That freaking graveyard’s back in the woods for a reason. Nothing kills happy time more than being reminded of your slaughtered friends every day.”

Minho stood and grabbed Alby’s arms, then nodded toward his feet. “Grab those smelly suckers. We gotta carry him over to the Door. Give ’em one body that’s easy to find in the morning.”

Thomas couldn’t believe how *morbid* a statement that was. “How can this be happening!” he screamed to the walls, turning in a circle. He felt close to losing it once and for all.

“Quit your crying. You should’ve followed the rules and stayed inside. Now come on, grab his legs.”

Wincing at the growing cramps in his gut, Thomas walked over and lifted Alby’s feet as he was told. They half carried, half dragged the almost-lifeless body a hundred feet or so to the vertical crack of the Door, where Minho propped Alby up against the wall in a semi-sitting position. Alby’s chest rose and fell with struggled breaths, but his skin was drenched in sweat; he looked like he wouldn’t last much longer.

“Where was he bitten?” Thomas asked. “Can you see it?”

“They don’t freaking bite you. They prick you. And no, you can’t see it. There could be

dozens all over his body." Minho folded his arms and leaned against the wall.

For some reason, Thomas thought the word *prick* sounded a lot worse than *bite*. "Prick you? What does that mean?"

"Dude, you just have to see them to know what I'm talking about."

Thomas pointed at Minho's arms, then his legs. "Well, why didn't the thing *prick* you?"

Minho held his hands out. "Maybe it did—maybe I'll collapse any second."

"They ..." Thomas began, but didn't know how to finish. He couldn't tell if Minho had been serious.

"There was no *they*, just the one we thought was dead. It went nuts and stung Alby, but then ran away." Minho looked back into the Maze, which was now almost completely dark with nighttime. "But I'm sure it and a whole bunch of them suckers'll be here soon to finish us off with their needles."

"Needles?" Things just kept sounding more and more disturbing to Thomas.

"Yeah, needles." He didn't elaborate, and his face said he didn't plan to.

Thomas looked up at the enormous walls covered in thick vines—desperation had finally clicked him into problem-solving mode. "Can't we climb this thing?" He looked at Minho, who didn't say a word. "The *vines*—can't we climb them?"

Minho let out a frustrated sigh. "I swear, Greenie, you must think we're a bunch of idiots. You really think we've never had the ingenious thought of climbing the freaking *walls*?"

For the first time, Thomas felt anger creeping in to compete with his fear and panic. "I'm just trying to help, man. Why don't you quit moping at every word I say and *talk* to me?"

Minho abruptly jumped at Thomas and grabbed him by the shirt. "You don't *understand*, shuck-face! You don't know anything, and you're just making it worse by trying to have hope! We're dead, you hear me? Dead!"

Thomas didn't know which he felt more strongly at that moment—anger at Minho or pity for him. He was giving up too easily.

Minho looked down at his hands clasped to Thomas's shirt and shame washed across his face. Slowly, he let go and backed away. Thomas straightened his clothes defiantly.

"Ah, man, oh man," Minho whispered, then crumpled to the ground, burying his face in clenched fists. "I've never been this scared before, dude. Not like this."

Thomas wanted to say something, tell him to grow up, tell him to *think*, tell him to explain everything he knew. Something!

He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it quickly when he heard the *noise*. Minho's head popped up; he looked down one of the darkened stone corridors. Thomas felt his own breath quicken.

It came from deep within the Maze, a low, haunting sound. A constant whirring that had a metallic ring every few seconds, like sharp knives rubbing against each other. It grew louder by the second, and then a series of eerie clicks joined in. Thomas thought of long fingernails tapping against glass. A hollow moan filled the air, and then something that sounded like the clanking of chains.

All of it, together, was horrifying, and the small amount of courage Thomas had gathered began to slip away.

Minho stood, his face barely visible in the dying light. But when he spoke, Thomas imagined his eyes wide with terror. "We have to split up—it's our only chance. Just keep

moving. Don't stop moving!"

And then he turned and ran, disappearing in seconds, swallowed by the Maze and darkness.

Thomas stared at the spot where Minho had vanished.

A sudden dislike for the guy swelled up inside him. Minho was a veteran in this place, a Runner. Thomas was a Newbie, just a few days in the Glade, a few minutes in the Maze. Yet of the two of them, Minho had broken down and panicked, only to run off at the first sign of trouble. *How could he leave me here?* Thomas thought. *How could he do that!*

The noises grew louder. The roar of engines interspersed with rolling, cranking sounds like chains hoisting machinery in an old, grimy factory. And then came the smell—something burning, oily. Thomas couldn't begin to guess what was in store for him; he'd seen a Griever, but only a glimpse, and through a dirty window. What would they do to him? How long would he last?

Stop, he told himself. He had to quit wasting time waiting for them to come and end his life.

He turned and faced Alby, still propped against the stone wall, now only a mound of shadow in the darkness. Kneeling on the ground, Thomas found Alby's neck, then searched for a pulse. Something there. He listened at his chest like Minho had done.

buh-bump, buh-bump, buh-bump

Still alive.

Thomas rocked back on his heels, then ran his arm across his forehead, wiping away the sweat. And at that moment, in the space of only a few seconds, he learned a lot about himself. About the Thomas that was *before*.

He couldn't leave a friend to die. Even someone as cranky as Alby.

He reached down and grabbed both of Alby's arms, then squatted into a sitting position and wrapped the arms around his neck from behind. He pulled the lifeless body onto his back and pushed with his legs, grunting with the effort.

But it was too much. Thomas collapsed forward onto his face; Alby sprawled to the side with a loud flump.

The frightening sounds of the Grievers grew closer by the second, echoing off the stone walls of the Maze. Thomas thought he could see bright flashes of light far away, bouncing off the night sky. He didn't want to meet the source of those lights, those sounds.

Trying a new approach, he grabbed Alby's arms again and started dragging him along the ground. He couldn't believe how *heavy* the boy was, and it took only ten feet or so for Thomas to realize that it just wasn't going to work. Where would he take him, anyway?

He pushed and pulled Alby back over to the crack that marked the entrance to the Glade, and propped him once more into a sitting position, leaning against the stone wall.

Thomas sat back against it himself, panting from exertion, thinking. As he looked into the dark recesses of the Maze, he searched his mind for a solution. He could hardly see anything, and he knew, despite what Minho had said, that it'd be stupid to run even if he *could* carry Alby. Not only was there the chance of getting lost, he could actually find himself running toward the Grievers instead of away from them.

He thought of the wall, the ivy. Minho hadn't explained, but he had made it sound as if climbing the walls was impossible. Still ...

A plan formed in his mind. It all depended on the unknown abilities of the Grievers, but it was the best thing he could come up with.

Thomas walked a few feet along the wall until he found a thick growth of ivy covering most of the stone. He reached down and grabbed one of the vines that went all the way to the ground and wrapped his hand around it. It felt thicker and more solid than he would've imagined, maybe a half-inch in diameter. He pulled on it, and with the sound of thick paper ripping apart, the vine came unattached from the wall—more and more as Thomas stepped away from it. When he'd moved back ten feet, he could no longer see the end of the vine way above; it disappeared in the darkness. But the trailing plant had yet to fall free, so Thomas knew it was still attached up there somewhere.

Hesitant to try, Thomas steeled himself and pulled on the vine of ivy with all his strength.

It held.

He yanked on it again. Then again, pulling and relaxing with both hands over and over. Then he lifted his feet and hung onto the vine; his body swung forward.

The vine held.

Quickly, Thomas grabbed other vines, ripping them away from the wall, creating a series of climbing ropes. He tested each one, and they all proved to be as strong as the first. Encouraged, he went back to Alby and dragged him over to the vines.

A sharp crack echoed from within the Maze, followed by the horrible sound of crumpling metal. Thomas, startled, swung around to look, his mind so concentrated on the vines that he'd momentarily shut out the Grievers; he searched all three directions of the Maze. He couldn't see anything coming, but the sounds were louder—the whirring, the groaning, the clanging. And the air had brightened ever so slightly; he could make out more of the details of the Maze than he'd been able to just minutes before.

He remembered the odd lights he'd observed through the Glade window with Newt. The Grievers were close. They had to be.

Thomas pushed aside the swelling panic and set himself to work.

He grabbed one of the vines and wrapped it around Alby's right arm. The plant would only reach so far, so he had to prop Alby up as much as he could to make it work. After several wraps, he tied the vine off. Then he took another vine and put it around Alby's left arm, then both of his legs, tying each one tightly. He worried about the Glader's circulation getting cut off, but decided it was worth the risk.

Trying to ignore the doubt that was seeping into his mind about the plan, Thomas continued on. Now it was his turn.

He snatched a vine with both hands and started to climb, directly over the spot where he'd just tied up Alby. The thick leaves of the ivy served well as handholds, and Thomas was elated to find that the many cracks in the stone wall were perfect supports for his feet as he climbed. He began to think how easy it would be without ...

He refused to finish the thought. He couldn't leave Alby behind.

Once he reached a point a couple of feet above his friend, Thomas wrapped one of the vines around his own chest, around and around several times, snug against his armpits for

support. Slowly, he let himself sag, letting go with his hands but keeping his feet planted firmly in a large crack. Relief filled him when the vine held.

Now came the really hard part.

The four vines tied to Alby below hung tautly around him. Thomas took hold of the one attached to Alby's left leg, and pulled. He was only able to get it up a few inches before letting go—the weight was too much. He couldn't do it.

He climbed back down to the Maze floor, decided to try *pushing* from below instead of *pulling* from above. To test it, he tried raising Alby only a couple of feet, limb by limb. First, he pushed the left leg up, then tied a new vine around it. Then the right leg. When both were secure, Thomas did the same to Alby's arms—right, then left.

He stepped back, panting, to take a look.

Alby hung there, seemingly lifeless, now three feet higher than he'd been five minutes earlier.

Clangs from the Maze. Whirrs. Buzzes. Moans. Thomas thought he saw a couple of red flashes to his left. The Grievers were getting closer, and it was now obvious that there were more than one.

He got back to work.

Using the same method of pushing each of Alby's arms and legs up two or three feet at a time, Thomas slowly made his way up the stone wall. He climbed until he was right below the body, wrapped a vine around his own chest for support, then pushed Alby up as far as he could, limb by limb, and tied them off with ivy. Then he repeated the whole process.

Climb, wrap, push up, tie off.

Climb, wrap, push up, tie off. The Grievers at least seemed to be moving slowly through the Maze, giving him time.

Over and over, little by little, up they went. The effort was exhausting; Thomas heaved in every breath, felt sweat cover every inch of his skin. His hands began to slip and slide on the vines. His feet ached from pressing into the stone cracks. The sounds grew louder—the awful, awful sounds. Still Thomas worked.

When they'd reached a spot about thirty feet off the ground, Thomas stopped, swaying on the vine he'd tied around his chest. Using his drained, rubbery arms, he turned himself around to face the Maze. An exhaustion he'd not known possible filled every tiny particle of his body. He ached with weariness; his muscles screamed. He couldn't push Alby up another inch. He was done.

This was where they'd hide. Or make their stand.

He'd known they couldn't reach the top—he only hoped the Grievers couldn't or wouldn't look above them. Or, at the very least, Thomas hoped he could fight them off from high up, one by one, instead of being overwhelmed on the ground.

He had no idea what to expect; he didn't know if he'd see tomorrow. But here, hanging in the ivy, Thomas and Alby would meet their fate.

A few minutes passed before Thomas saw the first glimmer of light shine off the Maze walls up ahead. The terrible sounds he'd heard escalate for the last hour took on a high-pitched, mechanical squeal, like a robotic death yell.

A red light to his left, on the wall, caught his attention. He turned and almost screamed out loud—a beetle blade was only a few inches from him, its spindly legs poking through

the ivy and somehow sticking to the stone. The red light of its eye was like a little sun, too bright to look at directly. Thomas squinted and tried to focus on the beetle's body.

The torso was a silver cylinder, maybe three inches in diameter and ten inches long. Twelve jointed legs ran along the length of its bottom, spread out, making the thing look like a sleeping lizard. The head was impossible to see because of the red beam of light shining right at him, though it seemed small, vision its only purpose, perhaps.

But then Thomas saw the most chilling part. He thought he'd seen it before, back in the Glade when the beetle blade had scooted past him and into the woods. Now it was confirmed: the red light from its eye cast a creepy glow on six capital letters smeared across the torso, as if they had been written with blood:

WICKED

Thomas couldn't imagine why that one word would be stamped on the beetle blade, unless for the purpose of announcing to the Gladers that it was evil. Wicked.

He knew it had to be a spy for whoever had sent them here—Alby had told him as much, saying the beetles were how the Creators watched them. Thomas stilled himself, held his breath, hoping that maybe the beetle only detected movement. Long seconds passed, his lungs screaming for air.

With a click and then a clack, the beetle turned and scuttled off, disappearing into the ivy. Thomas sucked in a huge gulp of air, then another, feeling the pinch of the vines tied around his chest.

Another mechanical squeal screeched through the Maze, close now, followed by the surge of revved machinery. Thomas tried to imitate Alby's lifeless body, hanging limp in the vines.

And then something rounded the corner up ahead, and came toward them.

Something he'd seen before, but through the safety of thick glass.

Something unspeakable.

A Griever.

CHAPTER 19

Thomas stared in horror at the monstrous thing making its way down the long corridor of the Maze.

It looked like an experiment gone terribly wrong—something from a nightmare. Part animal, part machine, the Griever rolled and clicked along the stone pathway. Its body resembled a gigantic slug, sparsely covered in hair and glistening with slime, grotesquely pulsating in and out as it breathed. It had no distinguishable head or tail, but front to end it was at least six feet long, four feet thick.

Every ten to fifteen seconds, sharp metal spikes popped through its bulbous flesh and the whole creature abruptly curled into a ball and spun forward. Then it would settle, seeming to gather its bearings, the spikes receding back through the moist skin with a sick slurping sound. It did this over and over, traveling just a few feet at a time.

But hair and spikes were not the only things protruding from the Griever's body. Several randomly placed mechanical arms stuck out here and there, each one with a different purpose. A few had bright lights attached to them. Others had long, menacing needles. One had a three-fingered claw that clasped and unclasped for no apparent reason. When the creature rolled, these arms folded and maneuvered to avoid being crushed. Thomas wondered what—or who—could create such frightening, disgusting creatures.

The source of the sounds he'd been hearing made sense now. When the Griever rolled, it made the metallic whirring sound, like the spinning blade of a saw. The spikes and the arms explained the creepy clicking sounds, metal against stone. But nothing sent chills up and down Thomas's spine like the haunted, deathly moans that somehow escaped the creature when it sat still, like the sound of dying men on a battlefield.

Seeing it all now—the beast matched with the sounds—Thomas couldn't think of any nightmare that could equal this hideous thing coming toward him. He fought the fear, forced his body to remain perfectly still, hanging there in the vines. He was sure their only hope was to avoid being noticed.

Maybe it won't see us, he thought. *Just maybe.* But the reality of the situation sank like a stone in his belly. The beetle blade had already revealed his exact position.

The Griever rolled and clicked its way closer, zigzagging back and forth, moaning and whirring. Every time it stopped, the metal arms unfolded and turned this way and that, like a roving robot on an alien planet looking for signs of life. The lights cast eerie shadows across the Maze. A faint memory tried to escape the locked box within his mind—shadows on the walls when he was a kid, scaring him. He longed to be back to wherever that was, to run to the mom and dad he hoped still lived, somewhere, missing him, searching for him.

A strong whiff of something burnt stung his nostrils; a sick mixture of overheated engines and charred flesh. He couldn't believe people could create something so horrible and send it after kids.

Trying not to think about it, Thomas closed his eyes for a moment and concentrated on remaining still and quiet. The creature kept coming.

whirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr

click-click-click

whirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr

click-click-click

Thomas peeked down without moving his head—the Griever had finally reached the wall where he and Alby hung. It paused by the closed Door that led into the Glade, only a few yards to Thomas's right.

Please go the other way, Thomas pleaded silently.

Turn.

Go.

That way.

Please!

The Grievers spikes popped out; its body rolled toward Thomas and Alby.

whirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr

click-click-click

It came to a stop, then rolled once more, right up to the wall.

Thomas held his breath, not daring to make the slightest sound. The Griever now sat directly below them. Thomas wanted to look down so badly, but knew any movement might give him away. The beams of light from the creature shone all over the place, completely random, never settling in one spot.

Then, without warning, they went out.

The world turned instantly dark and silent. It was as if the creature had turned off. It didn't move, made no sound—even the haunting groans had stopped completely. And with no more lights, Thomas couldn't see a single thing.

He was blind.

He took small breaths through his nose; his pumping heart needed oxygen desperately. Could it hear him? Smell him? Sweat drenched his hair, his hands, his clothes, everything. A fear he had never known filled him to the point of insanity.

Still, nothing. No movement, no light, no sound. The anticipation of trying to guess its next move was killing Thomas.

Seconds passed. Minutes. The ropy plant dug into Thomas's flesh—his chest felt numb. He wanted to scream at the monster below him: *Kill me or go back to your hiding hole!*

Then, in a sudden burst of light and sound, the Griever came back to life, whirring and clicking.

And then it started to climb the wall.

CHAPTER 20

The Griever's spikes tore into the stone, throwing shredded ivy and rock chips in every direction. Its arms shifted about like the legs of the beetle blade, some with sharp picks that drove into the stone of the wall for support. A bright light on the end of one arm pointed directly at Thomas, only this time, the beam didn't move away.

Thomas felt the last drop of hope drain from his body.

He knew the only option left was to run. *I'm sorry, Alby*, he thought as he unraveled the thick vine from his chest. Using his left hand to hold tight to the foliage above him, he finished unwrapping himself and prepared to move. He knew he couldn't go up—that would bring the Griever across the path of Alby. Down, of course, was only an option if he wanted to die as quickly as possible.

He had to go to the side.

Thomas reached out and grabbed a vine two feet to the left of where he hung. Wrapping it around his hand, he yanked on it with a sharp tug. It held true, just like all the others. A quick glance below revealed that the Griever had already halved the distance between them, and it was moving faster yet, no more pauses or stops.

Thomas let go of the rope he'd used around his chest and heaved his body to the left, scraping along the wall. Before his pendulum swing took him back toward Alby, he reached out for another vine, catching a nice thick one. This time he grabbed it with both hands and turned to plant the bottom of his feet on the wall. He shuffled his body to the right as far as the plant would let him, then let go and grabbed another one. Then another. Like some tree-climbing monkey, Thomas found he could move more quickly than he ever could've hoped.

The sounds of his pursuer went on relentlessly, only now with the bone-shuddering addition of cracking and splitting rock joined in. Thomas swung to the right several more times before he dared to look back.

The Griever had altered its course from Alby to head directly for Thomas. *Finally*, Thomas thought, *something went right*. Pushing off with his feet as strongly as he could, swing by swing, he fled the hideous thing.

Thomas didn't need to look behind him to know the Griever was gaining on him with every passing second. The sounds gave it away. Somehow, he had to get back to the ground, or it would all end quickly.

On the next switch, he let his hand slip a bit before clasping tightly. The ivy-rope burned his palm, but he'd slipped several feet closer to the ground. He did the same with the next vine. And the next. Three swings later he'd made his way halfway to the Maze floor. Scorching pain flared up both his arms; he felt the sting of raw skin on his hands. The adrenaline rushing through his body helped push away his fear—he just kept moving.

On his next swing, the darkness prevented Thomas from seeing a new wall looming in front of him until it was too late; the corridor ended and turned to the right.

He slammed into the stone ahead, losing his grip on the vine. Throwing his arms out,

Thomas flailed, reaching and grabbing to stop his plunge to the hard stone below. At the same instant, he saw the Griever out of the corner of his left eye. It had altered its course and was almost on him, reaching out with its clasping claw.

Thomas found a vine halfway to the ground and grasped it, his arms almost ripping out of their sockets at the sudden stop. He pushed off the wall with both feet as hard as he could, swinging his body away from it just as the Griever charged in with its claw and needles. Thomas kicked out with his right leg, connecting with the arm attached to the claw. A sharp crack revealed a small victory, but any elation ended when he realized that the momentum of his swing was now pulling him back down to land right on top of the creature.

Pulsing with adrenaline, Thomas drew his legs together and pulled them tight against his chest. As soon as he made contact with the Griever's body, disgustingly sinking inches into its gushy skin, he kicked out with both feet to push off, squirming to avoid the swarm of needles and claws coming at him from all directions. He swung his body out and to the left; then he jumped toward the wall of the Maze, trying to grab another vine; the Griever's vicious tools snapped and clawed at him from behind. He felt a deep scratch on his back.

Flailing once again, Thomas found a new vine and clutched it with both hands. He gripped the plant just enough to slow him down as he slid to the ground, ignoring the horrible burn. As soon as his feet hit the solid stone floor, he took off, running despite the scream of exhaustion from his body.

A booming crash sounded behind him, followed by the rolling, cracking, whirring of the Griever. But Thomas refused to look back, knowing every second counted.

He rounded a corner of the Maze, then another. Pounding the stone with his feet, he fled as fast as he possibly could. Somewhere in his mind he tracked his own movements, hoping he'd live long enough to use the information to return to the Door again.

Right, then left. Down a long corridor, then right again. Left. Right. Two lefts. Another long corridor. The sounds of pursuit from behind didn't relent or fade, but he wasn't *losing* ground, either.

On and on he ran, his heart ready to blow its way out of his chest. With great, sucking heaves of breath, he tried to get oxygen in his lungs, but he knew he couldn't last much longer. He wondered if it'd just be easier to turn and fight, get it over with.

When he rounded the next corner, he skidded to a halt at the sight in front of him. Panting uncontrollably, he stared.

Three Grievers were up ahead, rolling along as they dug their spikes into the stone, coming directly toward him.

CHAPTER 21

Thomas turned to see his original pursuer still coming, though it had slowed a bit, clasping and unclasping a metal claw as if mocking him, laughing.

It knows I'm done, he thought. After all that effort, here he was, surrounded by Grievers. It was over. Not even a week of salvageable memory, and his life was over.

Almost consumed by grief, he made a decision. He'd go down fighting.

Much preferring one over three, he ran straight toward the Griever that had chased him there. The ugly thing retracted just an inch, stopped moving its claw, as if shocked at his boldness. Taking heart at the slight falter, Thomas started screaming as he charged.

The Griever came to life, spikes popping out of its skin; it rolled forward, ready to collide head-on with its foe. The sudden movement almost made Thomas stop, his brief moment of insane courage washing away, but he kept running.

At the last second before collision, just as he got a close look at the metal and hair and slime, Thomas planted his left foot and dove to the right. Unable to stop its momentum, the Griever zoomed straight past him before it shuddered to a halt—Thomas noticed the thing was moving a lot faster now. With a metallic howl, it swiveled and readied to pounce on its victim. But now, no longer surrounded, Thomas had a clear shot away, back down the path.

He scrambled to his feet and sprinted forward. Sounds of pursuit, this time from all four Grievers, followed close behind. Sure that he was pushing his body beyond its physical limits, he ran on, trying to rid himself of the hopeless feeling that it was only a matter of time before they got him.

Then, three corridors down, two hands suddenly reached out and yanked him into the adjoining hallway. Thomas's heart leaped into his throat as he struggled to free himself. He stopped when he realized it was Minho.

"What—"

"Shut up and follow me!" Minho yelled, already dragging Thomas away until he was able to get his feet under him.

Without a moment to think, Thomas collected himself. Together, they ran through corridors, taking turn after turn. Minho seemed to know exactly what he was doing, where he was going; he never paused to think about which way they should run.

As they rounded the next corner, Minho attempted to speak. Between heaving breaths, he gasped, "I just saw ... the dive move you did ... back there ... gave me an idea ... we only have to last ... a little while longer."

Thomas didn't bother wasting his own breath on questions; he just kept running, following Minho. Without having to look behind him, he knew the Grievers were gaining ground at an alarming rate. Every inch of his body hurt, inside and out; his limbs cried for him to quit running. But he ran on, hoped his heart didn't quit pumping.

A few turns later, Thomas saw something ahead of them that didn't register with his brain. It seemed ... wrong. And the faint light emanating from their pursuers made the

oddity up ahead all the more apparent.

The corridor didn't end in another stone wall.

It ended in blackness.

Thomas narrowed his eyes as they ran toward the wall of darkness, trying to comprehend what they were approaching. The two ivy-covered walls on either side of him seemed to intersect with nothing but sky up ahead. He could see stars. As they got closer, he finally realized that it was an opening—the Maze ended.

How? he wondered. After years of searching, how did Minho and I find it this easily?

Minho seemed to sense his thoughts. "Don't get excited," he said, barely able to get the words out.

A few feet before the end of the corridor, Minho pulled up, holding his hand out over Thomas's chest to make sure he stopped, too. Thomas slowed, then walked up to where the Maze opened out into open sky. The sounds of the onrushing Grievers grew closer, but he had to see.

They had indeed reached a way out of the Maze, but like Minho had said, it was nothing to get excited about. All Thomas could see in every direction, up and down, side to side, was empty air and fading stars. It was a strange and unsettling sight, like he was standing at the edge of the universe, and for a brief moment he was overcome by vertigo, his knees weakening before he steadied himself.

Dawn was beginning to make its mark, the sky seeming to have lightened considerably even in the last minute or so. Thomas stared in complete disbelief, not understanding how it could all be possible. It was like somebody had built the Maze and then set it afloat in the sky to hover there in the middle of nothing for the rest of eternity.

"I don't get it," he whispered, not knowing if Minho could even hear him.

"Careful," the Runner replied. "You wouldn't be the first shank to fall off the Cliff." He grabbed Thomas's shoulder. "Did you forget something?" He nodded back toward the inside of the Maze.

Thomas remembered hearing the word *Cliff* before, but couldn't place it at the moment. Seeing the vast, open sky in front of and below him had put him into some kind of hypnotized stupor. He shook himself back to reality and turned to face the oncoming Grievers. They were now only dozens of yards away, single file, charging in with a vengeance, moving surprisingly fast.

Everything clicked, then, even before Minho explained what they were going to do.

"These things may be vicious," Minho said, "but they're dumb as dirt. Stand here, close to me, facing—"

Thomas cut him off. "I know. I'm ready."

They shuffled their feet until they stood scrunched up together in front of the drop-off at the very middle of the corridor, facing the Grievers. Their heels were only inches from the edge of the Cliff behind them, nothing but air waiting after that.

The only thing left for them was courage.

"We need to be in sync!" Minho yelled, almost drowned out by the earsplitting sounds of the thundering spikes rolling along the stone. "On my mark!"

Why the Grievers had lined up single file was a mystery. Maybe the Maze proved just narrow enough to make it awkward for them to travel side by side. But one after the other,

they rolled down the stone hallway, clicking and moaning and ready to kill. Dozens of yards had become dozens of feet, and the monsters were only seconds away from crashing into the waiting boys.

"Ready," Minho said steadily. "Not yet ... not yet ..."

Thomas hated every millisecond of waiting. He just wanted to close his eyes and never see another Griever again.

"Now!" screamed Minho.

Just as the first Griever's arm extended out to nip at them, Minho and Thomas dove in opposite directions, each toward one of the outer walls of the corridor. The tactic had worked for Thomas earlier, and judging by the horrible screeching sound that escaped the first Griever, it had worked again. The monster flew off the edge of the Cliff. Oddly, its battle cry cut off sharply instead of fading as it plummeted to the depths beyond.

Thomas landed against the wall and spun just in time to see the second creature tumble over the edge, not able to stop itself. The third one planted a heavily spiked arm into the stone, but its momentum was too much. The nerve-grinding squeal of the spike cutting through the ground sent a shiver up Thomas's spine, though a second later the Griever tumbled into the abyss. Again, neither of them made a sound as they fell—as if they'd disappeared instead of falling.

The fourth and final approaching creature was able to stop in time, teetering on the very edge of the cliff, a spike and a claw holding it in place.

Instinctively Thomas knew what he had to do. Looking to Minho, he nodded, then turned. Both boys ran in at the Griever and jumped feetfirst at the creature, kicking out at the last second with every waning bit of strength. They both connected, sending the last monster plummeting to its death.

Thomas quickly scrambled to the edge of the abyss, poking his head over to see the falling Grievers. But impossibly, they were gone—not even a sign of them in the emptiness that stretched below. Nothing.

His mind couldn't process the thought of where the Cliff led or what had happened to the terrible creatures. His last ounce of strength disappeared, and he curled into a ball on the ground.

Then, finally, came the tears.

A half hour passed.

Neither Thomas nor Minho had moved an inch.

Thomas had finally stopped crying; he couldn't help wondering what Minho would think of him, or if he'd tell others, calling him a sissy. But there wasn't a shred of self-control left in him; he couldn't have prevented the tears, he knew that. Despite his lack of memory, he was sure he'd just been through the most traumatic night of his life. And his sore hands and utter exhaustion didn't help.

He crawled to the edge of the Cliff once more, stuck his head over again to get a better look now that dawn was in full force. The open sky in front of him was a deep purple, slowly fading into the bright blue of day, with tinges of orange from the sun on a distant, flat horizon.

He stared straight down, saw that the stone wall of the Maze went toward the ground in a sheer cliff until it disappeared into whatever lay far, far below. But even with the ever-increasing light, he still couldn't tell what was down there. It seemed as if the Maze was perched on a structure several miles above the ground.

But that was impossible, he thought. *It can't be. Has to be an illusion.*

He rolled over onto his back, groaning at the movement. Things seemed to hurt on him and inside him that he'd never known existed before. At least the Doors would be opening soon, and they could return to the Glade. He looked over at Minho, huddled against the hall of the corridor. "I can't believe we're still alive," he said.

Minho said nothing, just nodded, his face devoid of expression.

"Are there more of them? Did we just kill them all?"

Minho snorted. "Somehow we made it to sunrise, or we would've had ten more on our butts before long." He shifted his body, wincing and groaning. "I can't believe it. Seriously. We made it through the whole night—never been done before."

Thomas knew he should feel proud, brave, something. But all he felt was tired and relieved. "What did we do differently?"

"I don't know. It's kind of hard to ask a dead guy what he did wrong."

Thomas couldn't stop wondering about how the Grievers' enraged cries had ended as they fell from the Cliff, and how he hadn't been able to see them plummeting to their deaths. There was something very strange and unsettling about it. "Seems like they disappeared or something after they went over the edge."

"Yeah, that was kinda psycho. Couple of Gladers had a theory that other things had disappeared, but we proved 'em wrong. Look."

Thomas watched as Minho tossed a rock over the Cliff, then followed its path with his eyes. Down and down it went, not leaving his sight until it grew too small to see. He turned back toward Minho. "How does that prove them wrong?"

Minho shrugged. "Well, the rock didn't disappear, now, did it?"

"Then what do you think happened?" There was something significant here, Thomas

could feel it.

Minho shrugged again. "Maybe they're magic. My head hurts too much to think about it."

With a jolt, all thoughts of the Cliff were forgotten. Thomas remembered Alby. "We have to get back." Straining, he forced himself to get to his feet. "Gotta get Alby off the wall." Seeing the look of confusion on Minho's face, he quickly explained what he'd done with the ropes of ivy.

Minho looked down, his eyes dejected. "No way he's still alive."

Thomas refused to believe it. "How do you know? Come on." He started limping back along the corridor.

"Because no one's ever made it ..."

He trailed off, and Thomas knew what he was thinking. "That's because they've always been killed by the Grievers by the time you found them. Alby was only stuck with one of those needles, right?"

Minho stood up and joined Thomas in his slow walk back toward the Glade. "I don't know, I guess this has never happened before. A few guys have been stung by the needles during the day. And those are the ones who got the Serum and went through the Changing. The poor shanks who got stuck out in the Maze all night weren't found until later—days later, sometimes, if at all. And all of them were killed in ways you don't wanna hear about."

Thomas shuddered at the thought. "After what we just went through, I think I can imagine."

Minho looked up, surprise transforming his face. "I think you just figured it out. We've been wrong—well, *hopefully* we've been wrong. Because no one who'd been stung and *didn't* make it back by sunset has ever survived, we just assumed that was the point of no return—when it's too late to get the Serum." He seemed excited by his line of thinking.

They turned yet another corner, Minho suddenly taking the lead. The boy's pace was picking up, but Thomas stayed on his heels, surprised at how familiar he felt with the directions, usually even leaning into turns before Minho showed the way.

"Okay—this Serum," Thomas said. "I've heard that a couple of times now. What is that? And where does it come from?"

"Just what it sounds like, shank. It's a serum. The Grief Serum."

Thomas forced out a pathetic laugh. "Just when I think I've learned everything about this stupid place. Why is it called that? And why are Grievers called Grievers?"

Minho explained as they continued through the endless turns of the Maze, neither one of them leading now. "I don't know where we got the names, but the Serum comes from the Creators—or that's what we call them, at least. It's with the supplies in the Box every week, always has been. It's a medicine or antidote or something, already inside a medical syringe, ready to use." He made a show of sticking a needle in his arm. "Stick that sucker in someone who's been stung and it saves 'em. They go through the Changing—which sucks—but after that, they're healed."

A minute or two passed in silence as Thomas processed the information; they made a couple more turns. He wondered about the Changing, and what it meant. And for some reason, he kept thinking of the girl.

"Weird, though," Minho finally continued. "We've never talked about this before. If he's

still alive, there's really no reason to think Alby can't be saved by the Serum. We somehow got it into our klunk heads that once the Doors closed, you were done—end of story. I gotta see this hanging-on-the-wall thing myself—I think you're shuckin' me."

The boys kept walking, Minho almost looking happy, but something was nagging at Thomas. He'd been avoiding it, denying it to himself. "What if another Griever got Alby after I diverted the one chasing me?"

Minho looked over at him, a blank expression on his face.

"Let's just hurry, is all I'm saying," Thomas said, hoping all that effort to save Alby hadn't been wasted.

They tried to pick up the pace, but their bodies hurt too much and they settled back into a slow walk despite the urgency. The next time they rounded a corner, Thomas faltered, his heart skipping a beat when he saw movement up ahead. Relief washed through him an instant later when he realized it was Newt and a group of Gladers. The West Door to the Glade towered over them and it was open. They'd made it back.

At the boys' appearance, Newt limped over to them. "What happened?" he asked; he sounded almost angry. "How in the bloody—"

"We'll tell you later," Thomas interrupted. "We have to save Alby."

Newt's face went white. "What do you mean? He's alive?"

"Just come here." Thomas headed to the right, craning his neck to look high up at the wall, searching along the thick vines until he found the spot where Alby hung by his arms and legs far above them. Without saying anything, Thomas pointed up, not daring to be relieved yet. He was still there, and in one piece, but there was no sign of movement.

Newt finally saw his friend hanging in the ivy, and looked back at Thomas. If he'd seemed shocked before, now he looked completely bewildered. "Is he ... alive?"

Please let him be, Thomas thought. "I don't know. Was when I left him up there."

"When you left him ..." Newt shook his head. "You and Minho get your butts inside, get yourselves checked by the Med-jacks. You look bloody awful. I want the whole story when they're done and you're rested up."

Thomas wanted to wait and see if Alby was okay. He started to speak but Minho grabbed him by the arm and forced him to walk toward the Glade. "We need sleep. And bandages. Now."

And Thomas knew he was right. He relented, glancing back up at Alby, then followed Minho out and away from the Maze.

The walk back into the Glade and then to the Homestead seemed endless, a row of Gladers on both sides gawking at them. Their faces showed complete awe, as if they were watching two ghosts strolling through a graveyard. Thomas knew it was because they'd accomplished something never done before, but he was embarrassed by the attention.

He almost stopped walking altogether when he spotted Gally up ahead, arms folded and glaring, but he kept moving. It took every ounce of his willpower, but he looked directly into Gally's eyes, never breaking contact. When he got to within five feet, the other boy's stare fell to the ground.

It almost disturbed Thomas how good that felt. Almost.

The next few minutes were a blur. Escorted into the Homestead by a couple of Med-jacks,

up the stairs, a glimpse through a barely ajar door of someone feeding the comatose girl in her bed—he felt an incredibly strong urge to go see her, to check on her—into their own rooms, into bed, food, water, bandages. Pain. Finally, he was left alone, his head resting on the softest pillow his limited memory could recall.

But as he fell asleep, two things wouldn't leave his mind. First, the word he'd seen scrawled across the torso of both beetle blades—*WICKED*—ran through his thoughts again and again.

The second thing was the girl.

Hours later—days for all he knew—Chuck was there, shaking him awake. It took several seconds for Thomas to get his bearings and see straight. He focused in on Chuck, groaned. “Let me sleep, you shank.”

“I thought you’d want to know.”

Thomas rubbed his eyes and yawned. “Know what?” He looked at Chuck again, confused by his big smile.

“He’s alive,” he said. “Alby’s okay—the Serum worked.”

Thomas’s grogginess instantly washed away, replaced with relief—it surprised him how much joy the information brought. But then Chuck’s next words made him reconsider.

“He just started the Changing.”

As if brought on by the words, a blood-chilling scream erupted from a room down the hall.

CHAPTER 23

Thomas wondered long and hard about Alby. It'd seemed such a victory just to save his life, bring him back from a night in the Maze. But had it been worth it? Now the boy was in intense pain, going through the same things as Ben. And what if he became as psychotic as Ben? Troubling thoughts all around.

Twilight fell upon the Glade and Alby's screams continued to haunt the air. It was impossible to escape the terrible sound, even after Thomas finally talked the Med-jacks into letting him go—weary, sore, bandaged, but tired of the piercing, agonized wails of their leader. Newt had adamantly refused when Thomas asked to see the person he'd risked his life for. *It'll only make it worse*, he'd said, and would not be swayed.

Thomas was too tired to put up a fight. He'd had no idea it was possible to feel so exhausted, despite the few hours of sleep he'd gotten. He'd hurt too much to do anything after that, and had spent most of the day on a bench on the outskirts of the Deadheads, wallowing in despair. The elation of his escape had faded rapidly, leaving him with pain and thoughts of his new life in the Glade. Every muscle ached; cuts and bruises covered him from head to toe. But even that wasn't as bad as the heavy emotional weight of what he'd been through the previous night. It seemed as if all the realities of living there had finally settled in his mind, like hearing a final diagnosis of terminal cancer.

How could anyone ever be happy in a life like this? he thought. Then, *How could anyone be evil enough to do this to us?* He understood more than ever the passion the Gladers felt for finding their way out of the Maze. It wasn't just a matter of escape. For the first time, he felt a hunger to get revenge on the people responsible for sending him there.

But those thoughts just led back to the hopelessness that had filled him so many times already. If Newt and the others hadn't been able to solve the Maze after two years of searching, it seemed impossible there could actually *be* a solution. The fact that the Gladers hadn't given up said more about these people than anything else.

And now he was one of them.

This is my life, he thought. *Living in a giant maze, surrounded by hideous beasts.* Sadness filled him like a heavy poison. Alby's screams, now distant but still audible, only made it worse. He had to squeeze his hands to his ears every time he heard them.

Eventually, the day dragged to a close, and the setting of the sun brought the now-familiar grinding of the four Doors closing for the night. Thomas had no memory of his life before the Box, but he was positive he'd finished the worst twenty-four hours of his existence.

Just after dark, Chuck brought him some dinner and a big glass of cold water.

"Thanks," Thomas said, feeling a burst of warmth for the kid. He scooped the beef and noodles off the plate as fast as his aching arms could move. "I so needed this," he mumbled through a huge bite. He took a big swig of his drink, then went back to attacking the food. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until he'd started eating.

"You're disgusting when you eat," Chuck said, sitting on the bench next to him. "It's like

watching a starving pig eat his own klunk.”

“That’s funny,” Thomas said, sarcasm lacing his voice. “You should go entertain the Grievers—see if they laugh.”

A quick expression of hurt flashed across Chuck’s face, making Thomas feel bad, but vanished almost as fast as it had appeared. “That reminds me—you’re the talk of the town.”

Thomas sat up straighter, not sure how he felt about the news. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Oh, gee, let me think. First, you go out in the Maze when you’re not supposed to, at night. Then you turn into some kind of freaky jungle dude, climbing vines and tying people up on walls. Next, you become one of the first people ever to survive an entire night outside the Glade, and to top it all off you kill four Grievers. Can’t imagine what those shanks are talking about.”

A surge of pride filled Thomas’s body, then fizzled. Thomas was sickened by the happiness he’d just felt. Alby was still in bed, screaming his head off in pain—probably *wishing* he were dead. “Tricking them to go over the Cliff was Minho’s idea, not mine.”

“Not according to him. He saw you do the wait-and-dive thingy, then had the idea to do the same thing at the Cliff.”

“The ‘wait-and-dive thingy’?” Thomas asked, rolling his eyes. “Any idiot on the planet would’ve done that.”

“Don’t get all humbly bumbly on us—what you did is freaking unbelievable. You and Minho, both.”

Thomas tossed the empty plate on the ground, suddenly angry. “Then why do I feel so crappy, Chuck? Wanna answer me that?”

Thomas searched Chuck’s face for an answer, but by the looks of it he didn’t have one. The boy just sat clasping his hands as he leaned forward on his knees, head hanging. Finally, half under his breath, he murmured, “Same reason we all feel crappy.”

They sat in silence until, a few minutes later, Newt walked up, looking like death on two feet. He sat on the ground in front of them, as sad and worried as any person could possibly appear. Still, Thomas was glad to have him around.

“I think the worst part’s over,” Newt said. “The bugger should be sleepin’ for a couple of days, then wake up okay. Maybe a little screaming now and then.”

Thomas couldn’t imagine how bad the whole ordeal must be—but the whole process of the Changing was still a mystery to him. He turned to the older boy, trying his best to be casual. “Newt, what’s he going through up there? Seriously, I don’t get what this Changing thing is.”

Newt’s response startled Thomas. “You think *we* do?” he spat, throwing his arms up, then slapping them back down on his knees. “All we bloody know is if the Grievers sting you with their nasty needles, you inject the Grief Serum or you die. If you do get the Serum, then your body wigs out and shakes and your skin bubbles and turns a freaky green color and you vomit all over yourself. Enough explanation for ya there, Tommy?”

Thomas frowned. He didn’t want to make Newt any more upset than he already was, but he needed answers. “Hey, I know it sucks to see your friend go through that, but I just want to know what’s really happening up there. Why do you call it the Changing?”

Newt relaxed, seemed to shrink, even, and sighed. "It brings back memories. Just little snippets, but definite memories of before we came to this horrible place. Anyone who goes through it acts like a bloody psycho when it's over—although usually not as bad as poor Ben. Anyway, it's like being given your old life back, only to have it snatched away again."

Thomas's mind was churning. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Newt looked confused. "What do you mean? Sure about what?"

"Are they *changed* because they want to go back to their old life, or is it because they're so depressed at realizing their old life was no better than what we have now?"

Newt stared at him for a second, then looked away, seemingly deep in thought. "Shanks who've been through it'll never really talk about it. They get ... different. Unlikable. There's a handful around the Glade, but I can't stand to be around them." His voice was distant, his eyes having strayed to a certain blank spot in the woods. Thomas knew he was thinking about how Alby might never be the same again.

"Tell me about it," Chuck chimed in. "Gally's the worst of 'em all."

"Anything new on the girl?" Thomas asked, changing the subject. He was in no mood to talk about Gally. Plus, his thoughts kept going back to her. "I saw the Med-jacks feeding her upstairs."

"No," Newt answered. "Still in the buggin' coma, or whatever it is. Every once in a while she'll mumble something—nonsense, like she's dreaming. She takes the food, seems to be doing all right. It's kind of weird."

A long pause followed, as if the three of them were trying to come up with an explanation for the girl. Thomas wondered again about his inexplicable feeling of connection with her, though it *had* faded a little—but that could have been because of everything else occupying his thoughts.

Newt finally broke the silence. "Anyway, next up—figure out what we do with Tommy here."

Thomas perked up at that, confused by the statement. "Do with me? What're you talking about?"

Newt stood, stretched his arms. "Turned this whole place upside down, you bloody shank. Half the Gladers think you're God, the other half wanna throw your butt down the Box Hole. Lotta stuff to talk about."

"Like what?" Thomas didn't know which was more unsettling—that people thought he was some kind of hero, or that some wished he didn't exist.

"Patience," Newt said. "You'll find out after the wake-up."

"Tomorrow? Why?" Thomas didn't like the sound of this.

"I've called a Gathering. And you'll be there. You're the only buggin' thing on the agenda."

And with that, he turned and walked away, leaving Thomas to wonder why in the world a Gathering was needed just to talk about *him*.

CHAPTER 24

The next morning, Thomas found himself sitting in a chair, worried and anxious, sweating, facing eleven other boys. They were seated in chairs arranged in a semicircle around him. Once settled, he realized they were the Keepers, and to his chagrin that meant Gally was among them. One chair directly in front of Thomas stood empty—he didn't need to be told that it was Alby's.

They sat in a large room of the Homestead that Thomas hadn't been in before. Besides the chairs, there was no other furniture except for a small table in the corner. The walls were made of wood, as was the floor, and it didn't look like anyone had ever attempted to make the place look inviting. There were no windows; the room smelled of mildew and old books. Thomas wasn't cold, but shivered all the same.

He was at least relieved that Newt was there. He sat in the chair to the right of Alby's empty seat. "In place of our leader, sick in bed, I declare this Gathering begun," he said, with a subtle roll of his eyes as if he hated anything approaching formality. "As you all know, the last few days have been bloody crazy, and quite a bit seems centered around our Greenbean, Tommy, seated before us."

Thomas's face flushed with embarrassment.

"He's not the Greenie anymore," Gally said, his scratchy voice so low and cruel it was almost comical. "He's just a rule breaker now."

This started off a rumbling of murmurs and whispers, but Newt shushed them. Thomas suddenly wanted to be as far from that room as possible.

"Gally," Newt said, "try to keep some buggin' order, here. If you're gonna blabber your shuck mouth every time I say something, you can go ahead and bloody leave, because I'm not in a very cheerful mood."

Thomas wished he could cheer at that.

Gally folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, the scowl on his face so forced that Thomas almost laughed out loud. He was having a harder and harder time believing he'd been terrified of this guy just a day earlier—he seemed silly, even pathetic now.

Newt gave Gally a hard stare, then continued. "Glad we got that out of the way." Another roll of the eyes. "Reason we're here is because almost every lovin' kid in the Glade has come up to me in the last day or two either boohooing about Thomas or beggin' to take his bloody hand in marriage. We need to decide what we're gonna do with him."

Gally leaned forward, but Newt cut him off before he could say anything.

"You'll have your chance, Gally. One at a time. And Tommy, you're not allowed to say a buggin' thing until we ask you to. Good that?" He waited for a nod of consent from Thomas—who gave it reluctantly—then pointed to the kid in the chair on the far right. "Zart the Fart, you start."

There were a few snickers as Zart, the quiet big guy who watched over the Gardens, shifted in his seat. He looked to Thomas more out of place than a carrot on a tomato plant.

"Well," Zart began, his eyes darting around almost like he was waiting for someone else

to tell him what to say. “I don’t know. He broke one of our most important rules. We can’t just let people think that’s okay.” He paused and looked down at his hands, rubbing them together. “But then again, he’s … changed things. Now we know we can survive out there, and that we can beat the Grievers.”

Relief flooded Thomas. He had someone else on his side. He made a promise to himself to be extra nice to Zart.

“Oh, give me a break,” Gally spat. “I bet Minho’s the one who actually got rid of the stupid things.”

“Gally, shut your hole!” Newt yelled, standing for effect this time; once again Thomas felt like cheering. “I’m the bloody Chair right now, and if I hear one more buggin’ word out of turn from you, I’ll be arrangeth another Banishing for your sorry butt.”

“Please,” Gally whispered sarcastically, the ridiculous scowl returning as he slouched back into his chair again.

Newt sat down and motioned to Zart. “Is that it? Any official recommendations?” Zart shook his head.

“Okay. You’re next, Frypan.”

The cook smiled through his beard and sat up straighter. “Shank’s got more guts than I’ve fried up from every pig and cow in the last year.” He paused, as if expecting a laugh, but none came. “How stupid is this—he saves Alby’s life, kills a couple of Grievers, and we’re sitting here yappin’ about what to do with him. As Chuck would say, this is a pile of klunk.”

Thomas wanted to walk over and shake Frypan’s hand—he’d just said exactly what Thomas himself had been thinking about all of this.

“So what’re ya recommendin’?” Newt asked.

Frypan folded his arms. “Put him on the freaking Council and have him train us on everything he did out there.”

Voces erupted from every direction, and it took Newt half a minute to calm everyone down. Thomas winced; Frypan had gone too far with that recommendation, almost invalidating his well-stated opinion of the whole mess.

“All right, writin’ her down,” Newt said as he did just that, scribbling on a notepad. “Now everyone keep their bloody mouths shut, I mean it. You know the rules—no idea’s unacceptable—and you’ll all have your say when we vote on it.” He finished writing and pointed to the third member of the Council, a kid Thomas hadn’t met yet with black hair and a freckly face.

“I don’t really have an opinion,” he said.

“What?” Newt asked angrily. “Lot of good it did to choose you for the Council, then.”

“Sorry, I honestly don’t.” He shrugged. “If anything, I agree with Frypan, I guess. Why punish a guy for saving someone’s life?”

“So you do have an opinion—is that it?” Newt insisted, pencil in hand.

The kid nodded and Newt scribbled a note. Thomas was feeling more and more relieved—it seemed like most of the Keepers were for him, not against him. Still, he was having a hard time just sitting there; he desperately wanted to speak on his own behalf. But he forced himself to follow Newt’s orders and keep quiet.

Next was acne-covered Winston, Keeper of the Blood House. “I think he should be

punished. No offense, Greenie, but Newt, you're the one always harping about *order*. If we don't punish him, we'll set a bad example. He broke our Number One Rule."

"Okay," Newt said, writing on his pad. "So you're recommendin' punishment. What kind?"

"I think he should be put in the Slammer for a week with only bread and water—and we need to make sure everyone knows about it so they don't get any ideas."

Gally clapped, earning a scowl from Newt. Thomas's heart fell just a bit.

Two more Keepers spoke, one for Frypan's idea, one for Winston's. Then it was Newt's turn.

"I agree with the lot of ya. He should be punished, but then we need to figure out a way to use him. I'm reservin' my recommendation until I hear everyone out. Next."

Thomas hated all this talk about punishment, even more than he hated having to keep his mouth shut. But deep inside he couldn't bring himself to disagree—as odd as it seemed after what he'd accomplished, he *had* broken a major rule.

Down the line they went. Some thought he should be praised, some thought he should be punished. Or both. Thomas could barely listen anymore, anticipating the comments from the last two Keepers, Gally and Minho. The latter hadn't said a word since Thomas had entered the room; he just sat there, drooped in his chair, looking like he hadn't slept in a week.

Gally went first. "I think I've made my opinions pretty clear already."

Great, Thomas thought. Then just keep your mouth shut.

"Good that," Newt said with yet another roll of the eyes. "Go on, then, Minho."

"No!" Gally yelled, making a couple of Keepers jump in their seats. "I still wanna say something."

"Then bloody say it," Newt replied. It made Thomas feel a little better that the temporary Council Chair despised Gally almost as much as he did. Though Thomas wasn't that afraid of him anymore, he still hated the guy's guts.

"Just think about it," Gally began. "This slinthead comes up in the Box, acting all confused and scared. A few days later, he's running around the Maze with Grievers, acting like he owns the place."

Thomas shrank into his chair, hoping that others hadn't been thinking anything like that.

Gally continued his rant. "I think it was all an act. How could he have done what he did out there after just a few days? I ain't buyin' it."

"What're you tryin' to say, Gally?" Newt asked. "How 'bout having a bloody point?"

"I think he's a spy from the people who put us here."

Another uproar exploded in the room; Thomas could do nothing but shake his head—he just didn't get how Gally could come up with all these ideas. Newt finally calmed everyone down again, but Gally wasn't finished.

"We can't trust this shank," he continued. "Day after he shows up, a psycho girl comes, spoutin' off that things are gonna change, clutching that freaky note. We find a dead Griever. Thomas conveniently finds himself in the Maze for the night, then tries to convince everyone he's a hero. Well, neither Minho nor anyone else actually *saw* him do anything in the vines. How do we know it was the Greenie who tied Alby up there?"

Gally paused; no one said a word for several seconds, and panic rose inside Thomas's chest. Could they actually believe what Gally was saying? He was anxious to defend himself and almost broke his silence for the first time—but before he could get a word in, Gally was talking again.

"There's too many weird things going on, and it all started when this shuck-face Greenie showed up. And he just happens to be the first person to survive a night out in the Maze. Something ain't right, and until we figure it out, I officially recommend that we lock his butt in the Slammer—for a month, and then have another review."

More rumblings broke out, and Newt wrote something on his pad, shaking his head the whole time—which gave Thomas a tinge of hope.

"Finished, Captain Gally?" Newt asked.

"Quit being such a smart aleck, Newt," he spat, his face flushing red. "I'm dead serious. How can we trust this shank after less than a week? Quit voting me down before you even *think* about what I'm saying."

For the first time, Thomas felt a little empathy for Gally—he did have a point about how Newt was treating him. Gally was a Keeper, after all. *But I still hate him*, Thomas thought.

"Fine, Gally," Newt said. "I'm sorry. We heard you, and we'll all consider your bloody recommendation. Are you done?"

"Yes, I'm done. And I'm *right*."

With no more words for Gally, Newt pointed at Minho. "Go ahead, last but not least."

Thomas was elated that it was finally Minho's turn; surely he'd defend him to the end.

Minho stood quickly, taking everyone off guard. "I was out there; I saw what this guy did—he stayed strong while I turned into a panty-wearin' chicken. No blabbin' on and on like Gally. I want to say my recommendation and be done with it."

Thomas held his breath, wondering what he'd say.

"Good that," Newt said. "Tell us, then."

Minho looked at Thomas. "I nominate this shank to replace me as Keeper of the Runners."

CHAPTER 25

Complete silence filled the room, as if the world had been frozen, and every member of the Council stared at Minho. Thomas sat stunned, waiting for the Runner to say he'd been kidding.

Gally finally broke the spell, standing up. "That's ridiculous!" He faced Newt and pointed back at Minho, who had taken his seat again. "He should be kicked off the Council for saying something so stupid."

Any pity Thomas had felt for Gally, however remote, completely vanished at that statement.

Some Keepers seemed to actually agree with Minho's recommendation—like Frypan, who clapped to drown out Gally, clamoring to take a vote. Others didn't. Winston shook his head adamantly, saying something that Thomas couldn't quite make out. When everyone started talking at once, Thomas put his head in his hands to wait it out, terrified and awed at the same time. Why had Minho said that? *Has to be a joke*, he thought. *Newt said it takes forever just to become a Runner, much less the Keeper*. He looked back up, wishing he were a thousand miles away.

Finally, Newt put his notepad down and stepped out from the semicircle, screaming at people to shut up. Thomas watched on as at first no one seemed to hear or notice Newt at all. Gradually, though, order was restored and everyone sat down.

"Shuck it," Newt said. "I've never seen so many shanks acting like teat-suckin' babies. We may not look it, but around these parts we're adults. Act like it, or we'll disband this bloody Council and start from scratch." He walked from end to end of the curved row of sitting Keepers, looking each of them in the eye as he spoke. "Are we clear?"

Quiet had swept across the group. Thomas expected more outbursts, but was surprised when everyone nodded their consent, even Gally.

"Good that." Newt walked back to his chair and sat down, putting the pad in his lap. He scratched out a few lines on the paper, then looked up at Minho. "That's some pretty serious klunk, brother. Sorry, but you need to talk it up to move it forward."

Thomas couldn't help feeling eager to hear the response.

Minho looked exhausted, but he started defending his proposal. "It's sure easy for you shanks to sit here and talk about something you're stupid on. I'm the only Runner in this group, and the only other one here who's even *been* out in the Maze is Newt."

Gally interjected: "Not if you count the time I—"

"I don't!" Minho shouted. "And believe me, you or nobody else has the slightest clue what it's like to be out there. The only reason you were stung is because you broke the same rule you're blaming Thomas for. That's called *hypocrisy*, you shuck-faced piece of—"

"Enough," Newt said. "Defend your proposal and be done with it."

The tension was palpable; Thomas felt like the air in the room had become glass that could shatter at any second. Both Gally and Minho looked as if the taut, red skin of their faces was about to burst—but they finally broke their stare.

"Anyway, listen to me," Minho continued as he took his seat. "I've never seen anything like it. He didn't panic. He didn't whine and cry, never seemed scared. Dude, he'd been here for just a few days. Think about what we were all like in the beginning. Huddling in corners, disoriented, crying every hour, not trusting anybody, refusing to do anything. We were all like that, for weeks or months, till we had no choice but to shuck it and live."

Minho stood back up, pointed at Thomas. "Just a few days after this guy shows up, he steps out in the Maze to save two shanks he hardly knows. All this klunk about him breaking a rule is just beyond stupid. He didn't get the rules yet. But plenty of people had told him what it's like in the Maze, especially at night. And he still stepped out there, just as the Door was closing, only caring that two people needed help." He took a deep breath, seeming to gain strength the more he spoke.

"But that was just the beginning. After that, he saw me give up on Alby, leave him for dead. And I was the veteran—the one with all the experience and knowledge. So when Thomas saw me give up, he shouldn't have questioned it. But he did. Think about the willpower and strength it took him to push Alby up that wall, inch by inch. It's psycho. It's freaking crazy."

"But that wasn't it. Then came the Grievers. I told Thomas we had to split up and I started the practiced evasive maneuvers, running in the patterns. Thomas, when he should've been wettin' his pants, took control, defied all laws of physics and gravity to get Alby up onto that wall, diverted the Grievers away from him, beat one off, found—"

"We get the point," Gally snapped. "Tommy here is a lucky shank."

Minho rounded on him. "No, you worthless shuck, you *don't* get it! I've been here two years, and I've never seen anything like it. For you to say anything ..."

Minho paused, rubbing his eyes, groaning in frustration. Thomas realized his own mouth had dropped wide open. His emotions were scattered: appreciation for Minho standing up to everybody on his behalf, disbelief at Gally's continuous belligerence, fear of what the final decision would be.

"Gally," Minho said in a calmer voice, "you're nothing but a sissy who has never, not once, asked to be a Runner or tried out for it. You don't have the right to talk about things you don't understand. So shut your mouth."

Gally stood up again, fuming. "Say one more thing like that and I'll break your neck, right here in front of everybody." Spit flew from his mouth as he spoke.

Minho laughed, then raised the palm of his hand and shoved Gally in the face. Thomas half stood as he watched the Glader crash down into his chair, tipping it over backward, cracking it in two pieces. Gally sprawled across the floor, then scrambled to stand up, struggling to get his hands and feet under him. Minho stepped closer and stomped the bottom of his foot down on Gally's back, driving his body flat to the ground.

Thomas plopped back into his seat, stunned.

"I swear, Gally," Minho said with a sneer, "don't ever threaten me again. Don't ever speak to me again. Ever. If you do, I'll break *your* shuck neck, right after I'm done with your arms and legs."

Newt and Winston were on their feet and grabbing Minho before Thomas even knew what was going on. They pulled him away from Gally, who jumped up, his face a ruddied mask of rage. But he made no move toward Minho; he just stood there with his chest out,

heaving ragged breaths.

Finally Gally backed away, half stumbling toward the exit behind him. His eyes darted around the room, lit with a burning hatred. Thomas had the sickening thought that Gally looked like someone about to commit murder. He backed toward the door, reached behind him to grab the handle.

"Things are different now," he said, spitting on the floor. "You shouldn't have done that, Minho. You should *not* have done that." His maniacal gaze shifted to Newt. "I know you hate me, that you've always hated me. You should be Banished for your embarrassing inability to lead this group. You're shameful, and any one of you who stays here is no better. Things are going to change. This, I promise."

Thomas's heart sank. As if things hadn't been awkward enough already.

Gally yanked the door open and stepped out into the hall, but before anyone could react, he popped his head back in the room. "And you," he said, glaring at Thomas, "the *Greenbean* who thinks he's friggin' God. Don't forget I've seen you before—I've *been* through the Changing. What these guys decide doesn't mean jack."

He paused, looking at each person in the room. When his malicious stare fell back on Thomas, he had one last thing to say. "Whatever you came here for—I swear on my life I'm gonna stop it. Kill you if I have to."

Then he turned and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER 26

Thomas sat frozen in his chair, a sickness growing in his stomach like an infestation. He'd been through the whole gamut of emotions in the short time since he'd arrived at the Glade. Fear, loneliness, desperation, sadness, even the slightest hint of joy. But this was something new—to hear a person say they hate you enough that they want to kill you.

Gally's crazy, he told himself. *He's completely insane*. But the thought only increased his worries. Insane people could really be capable of anything.

The Council members stood or sat in silence, seemingly as shocked as Thomas at what they'd just seen. Newt and Winston finally let go of Minho; all three of them sullenly walked to their chairs and sat down.

"He's finally whacked for good," Minho said, almost in a whisper. Thomas couldn't tell if he'd meant for the others to hear him.

"Well, you're not the bloody saint in the room," Newt said. "What were you *thinking*? That was a little overboard, don't ya think?"

Minho squinched up his eyes and pulled his head back, as if he were baffled by Newt's question. "Don't give me that garbage. Every one of you loved seeing that slinthead get his dues, and you know it. It's about time someone stood up to his klunk."

"He's on the Council for a reason," Newt said.

"Dude, he threatened to break my neck and kill Thomas! The guy is mentally whacked, and you better send someone right now to throw him in the Slammer. He's dangerous."

Thomas couldn't have agreed more and once again almost broke his order to stay quiet, but stopped himself. He didn't want to get in any more trouble than he was already in—but he didn't know how much longer he could last.

"Maybe he had a good point," Winston said, almost too quietly.

"What?" Minho asked, mirroring Thomas's thoughts exactly.

Winston looked surprised at the acknowledgment that he'd said anything. His eyes darted around the room before he explained. "Well ... he *has* been through the Changing—Grievers stung him in the middle of the day just outside the West Door. That means he has *memories*, and he said the Greenie looks familiar. Why would he make that up?"

Thomas thought about the Changing, and the fact that it brought back memories. The idea hadn't occurred to him before, but would it be worth it to get stung by the Grievers, go through that horrible process, just to remember something? He pictured Ben writhing in bed and remembered Alby's screams. *No way*, he thought.

"Winston, did you *see* what just happened?" Frypan asked, looking incredulous. "Gally's psycho. You can't put too much stock in his rambling nonsense. What, you think Thomas here is a Griever in disguise?"

Council rules or no Council rules, Thomas had finally had enough. He couldn't stay silent another second.

"Can I say something now?" he asked, frustration raising the volume of his voice. "I'm sick of you guys talking about me like I'm not here."

Newt glanced up at him and nodded. "Go ahead. This bloody meetin' can't be much more screwed up."

Thomas quickly gathered his thoughts, grasping for the right words inside the swirling cloud of frustration, confusion and anger in his mind. "I don't know why Gally hates me. I don't care. He seems psychotic to me. As for who I *really* am, you all know just as much as I do. But if I remember correctly, we're here because of what I did out in the Maze, not because some idiot thinks I'm evil."

Someone snickered and Thomas quit talking, hoping he'd gotten his point across.

Newt nodded, looking satisfied. "Good that. Let's get this meeting over with and worry about Gally later."

"We can't vote without all the members here," Winston insisted. "Unless they're really sick, like Alby."

"For the love, Winston," Newt replied. "I'd say Gally's a wee bit ill today, too, so we continue without him. Thomas, defend yourself and then we'll take the vote on what we should do with you."

Thomas realized his hands were squeezed up into fists on his lap. He relaxed them and wiped his sweaty palms on his pants. Then he began, not sure of what he'd say before the words came out.

"I didn't do anything wrong. All I know is I saw two people struggling to get inside these walls and they couldn't make it. To ignore that because of some stupid rule seemed selfish, cowardly, and ... well, stupid. If you want to throw me in jail for trying to save someone's life, then go ahead. Next time I promise I'll point at them and laugh, then go eat some of Frypan's dinner."

Thomas wasn't trying to be funny. He was just dumbfounded that the whole thing could even be an issue.

"Here's my recommendation," Newt said. "You broke our bloody Number One Rule, so you get one day in the Slammer. That's your punishment. I also recommend we elect you as a Runner, effective the second this meeting's over. You've proven more in one night than most trainees do in weeks. As for you being the buggin' Keeper, forget it." He looked over at Minho. "Gally was right on that count—stupid idea."

The comment hurt Thomas's feelings, even though he couldn't disagree. He looked to Minho for his reaction.

The Keeper didn't seem surprised, but argued all the same. "Why? He's the best we have—I swear it. The best should be the Keeper."

"Fine," Newt responded. "If that's true, we'll make the change later. Give it a month and see if he proves himself."

Minho shrugged. "Good that."

Thomas quietly sighed in relief. He still wanted to be a Runner—which surprised him, considering what he'd just gone through out in the Maze—but becoming the Keeper right away sounded ridiculous.

Newt glanced around the room. "Okay, we had several recommendations, so let's give it a go-round—"

"Oh, come on," Frypan said. "Just vote. I vote for yours."

"Me too," Minho said.

Everyone else chimed in their approval, filling Thomas with relief and a sense of pride. Winston was the only one to say no.

Newt looked at him. "We don't need your vote, but tell us what's bonkin' around your brain."

Winston gazed at Thomas carefully, then back to Newt. "It's fine with me, but we shouldn't totally ignore what Gally said. Something about it—I don't think he just made it up. And it's true that ever since Thomas got here, everything's been shucked and screwy."

"Fair enough," Newt said. "Everyone put some thought into it—maybe when we get right nice and bored we can have another Gathering to talk about it. Good that?"

Winston nodded.

Thomas groaned at how invisible he'd become. "I love how you guys are just talking about me like I'm not here."

"Look, Tommy," Newt said. "We just elected you as a buggin' Runner. Quit your cryin' and get out of here. Minho has a lot of training to give you."

It hadn't really hit Thomas until then. He was going to be a *Runner*, explore the Maze. Despite everything, he felt a shiver of excitement; he was sure they could avoid getting trapped out there at night again. Maybe he'd had his one and only turn of bad luck. "What about my punishment?"

"Tomorrow," Newt answered. "The wake-up till sunset."

One day, Thomas thought. That won't be so bad.

The meeting was dismissed and everyone except Newt and Minho left the room in a hurry. Newt hadn't moved from his chair, where he sat jotting notes. "Well, that was good times," he murmured.

Minho walked over and playfully punched Thomas in the arm. "It's all this shank's fault."

Thomas punched him back. "Keeper? You want me to be Keeper? You're nuttier than Gally by a long shot."

Minho faked an evil grin. "Worked, didn't it? Aim high, hit low. Thank me later."

Thomas couldn't help smiling at the Keeper's clever ways. A knock on the opened door grabbed his attention—he turned to see who it was. Chuck stood there, looking like he'd just been chased by a Griever. Thomas felt the grin fade from his face.

"What's wrong?" Newt asked, standing up. The tone of his voice only heightened Thomas's concern.

Chuck was wringing his hands. "Med-jacks sent me."

"Why?"

"I guess Alby's thrashing around and acting all crazy, telling them he needs to talk to somebody."

Newt made for the door, but Chuck held up his hand. "Um ... he doesn't want you."

"What do you mean?"

Chuck pointed at Thomas. "He keeps asking for him."

For the second time that day, Thomas was shocked into silence.

"Well, come on," Newt said to Thomas as he grabbed his arm. "No way I'm not going with ya."

Thomas followed him, with Chuck right behind, as they left the Council room and went down the hall toward a narrow, spiraling staircase that he hadn't noticed before. Newt took the first step, then gave Chuck a cold glare. "You. Stay."

For once, Chuck simply nodded and said nothing. Thomas figured that something about Alby's behavior had the kid's nerves on edge.

"Lighten up," Thomas said to Chuck as Newt headed up the staircase. "They just elected me a Runner, so you're buddies with a stud now." He was trying to make a joke, trying to deny that he was terrified to see Alby. What if he made accusations like Ben had? Or worse?

"Yeah, right," Chuck whispered, staring at the wooden steps in a daze.

With a shrug Thomas began climbing the stairs. Sweat slicked his palms, and he felt a drop trickle down his temple. He did *not* want to go up there.

Newt, all grim and solemn, was waiting for Thomas at the top of the stairwell. They stood at the opposite end of the long, dark hallway from the usual staircase, the one Thomas had climbed on his very first day to see Ben. The memory made him queasy; he hoped Alby was completely healed from the ordeal so he didn't have to witness something like that again—the sickly skin, the veins, the thrashing. But he expected the worst, and braced himself.

He followed Newt to the second door on the right and watched as the older boy knocked lightly; a moan sounded in reply. Newt pushed open the door, the slight creak once again reminding Thomas of some vague childhood memory of haunted-house movies. There it was again—the smallest glimpse at his past. He could remember movies, but not the actors' faces or with whom he'd watched them. He could remember theaters, but not what any specific one *looked* like. It was impossible to explain how that felt, even to himself.

Newt had stepped into the room and was motioning for Thomas to follow. As he entered, he prepared himself for the horror that might await. But when his eyes lifted, all he saw was a very weak-looking teenage boy lying in his bed, eyes closed.

"Is he asleep?" Thomas whispered, trying to avoid the real question that had popped in his mind: *He's not dead, is he?*

"I don't know," Newt said quietly. He walked over and sat in a wooden chair next to the bed. Thomas took a seat on the other side.

"Alby," Newt whispered. Then more loudly: "Alby. Chuck said you wanted to talk to Tommy."

Alby's eyes fluttered open—bloodshot orbs that glistened in the light. He looked at Newt, then across at Thomas. With a groan he shifted in the bed and sat up, his back against the headboard. "Yeah," he muttered, a scratchy croak.

"Chuck said you were thrashin' around, acting like a loonie." Newt leaned forward. "What's wrong? You still sick?"

Alby's next words came out in a wheeze, as if every one of them would take a week off his life. "Everything's ... gonna change.... The girl ... Thomas ... I saw them ..." His eyelids flickered closed, then open again; he sank back to a flat position on the bed, stared at the ceiling. "Don't feel so good."

"What do you mean, you saw—" Newt began.

"I wanted Thomas!" Alby yelled, with a sudden burst of energy that Thomas would've thought impossible a few seconds earlier. "I didn't ask for you, Newt! Thomas! I asked for freaking Thomas!"

Newt looked up, questioned Thomas with a raising of his eyebrows. Thomas shrugged, feeling sicker by the second. What did Alby want *him* for?

"Fine, ya grouchy shuck," Newt said. "He's right here—talk to him."

"Leave," Alby said, his eyes closed, his breathing heavy.

"No way—I wanna hear."

"Newt." A pause. "Leave. Now." Thomas felt incredibly awkward, worried about what Newt was thinking and dreading what Alby wanted to say to him.

"But—" Newt protested.

"Out!" Alby sat up as he yelled, his voice cracking with the strain of it. He scooted himself back to lean against the headboard again. "Get out!"

Newt's face sank in obvious hurt—Thomas was surprised to see no anger there. Then, after a long, tense moment, Newt stood from his chair and walked over to the door, opened it. *He's really going to leave?* Thomas thought.

"Don't expect me to kiss your butt when you come sayin' sorry," he said, then stepped into the hallway.

"Close the door!" Alby shouted, one final insult. Newt obeyed, slamming it shut.

Thomas's heart rate quickened—he was now alone with a guy who'd had a bad temper before getting attacked by a Griever and going through the Changing. He hoped Alby would say what he wanted and be done with it. A long pause stretched into several minutes, and Thomas's hands shook with fear.

"I know who you are," Alby said finally, breaking the silence.

Thomas couldn't find words to reply. He tried; nothing came out but an incoherent mumble. He was utterly confused. And scared.

"I know who you are," Alby repeated slowly. "Seen it. Seen everything. Where we came from, who you are. Who the *girl* is. I remember the Flare."

The Flare? Thomas forced himself to talk. "I don't know what you're talking about. What did you see? I'd love to know who I am."

"It ain't pretty," Alby answered, and for the first time since Newt had left, Alby looked up, straight at Thomas. His eyes were deep pockets of sorrow, sunken, dark. "It's horrible, ya know. Why would those shucks want us to remember? Why can't we just live here and be happy?"

"Alby ..." Thomas wished he could take a peek in the boy's mind, see what he'd seen. "The Changing," he pressed, "what happened? What came back? You're not making sense."

"You—" Alby started, then suddenly grabbed his own throat, making gurgly choking

sounds. His legs kicked out and he rolled onto his side, thrashing back and forth as if someone else were trying to strangle him. His tongue stuck out of his mouth; he bit it over and over.

Thomas stood up quickly, stumbled backward, horrified—Alby struggled as if he was having a seizure, his legs kicking in every direction. The dark skin of his face, which had been oddly pale just a minute earlier, had turned purple, his eyes rolled up so far in their sockets they looked like glowing white marbles.

“Alby!” Thomas yelled, not daring to reach down and grab him. “Newt!” he screamed, cupping his hands around his mouth. “Newt, get in here!”

The door was flung open before he’d finished his last sentence.

Newt ran to Alby and grabbed him by the shoulders, pushing with his whole body to pin the convulsing boy to the bed. “Grab his legs!”

Thomas moved forward, but Alby’s legs kicked and flailed out, making it impossible to get any closer. His foot hit Thomas in the jaw; a lance of pain shot through his whole skull. He stumbled backward again, rubbing the sore spot.

“Just bloody do it!” Newt yelled.

Thomas steeled himself, then jumped on top of Alby’s body, grabbing both legs and pinning them to the bed. He wrapped his arms around the boy’s thighs and squeezed while Newt put a knee on one of Alby’s shoulders, then grabbed at Alby’s hands, still clasped around his own neck in a chokehold.

“Let go!” Newt yelled as he tugged. “You’re bloody killin’ yourself !”

Thomas could see the muscles in Newt’s arms flexing, veins popping out as he pulled at Alby’s hands, until finally, inch by inch, he was able to pry them away. He pushed them tightly against the struggling boy’s chest. Alby’s whole body jerked a couple of times, his midsection thrusting up and away from the bed. Then, slowly, he calmed, and a few seconds later he lay still, his breath evening; his eyes glazed over.

Thomas held firm to Alby’s legs, afraid to move and set the boy off again. Newt waited a full minute before he slowly let go of Alby’s hands. Then another minute before he pulled his knee back and stood up. Thomas took that as his cue to do the same, hoping the ordeal had truly ended.

Alby looked up, eyes droopy, as if he was on the edge of slipping into a deep sleep. “I’m sorry, Newt,” he whispered. “Don’t know what happened. It was like ... something was controlling my body. I’m sorry....”

Thomas took a deep breath, sure he’d never experience something so disturbing and uncomfortable again. He hoped.

“Sorry, nothin’,” Newt replied. “You were trying to bloody kill yourself.”

“Wasn’t me, I swear,” Alby murmured.

Newt threw his hands up. “What do you mean it wasn’t you?” he asked.

“I don’t know.... It ... it wasn’t me.” Alby looked just as confused as Thomas felt.

But Newt seemed to think it wasn’t worth trying to figure out. At least at the moment. He grabbed the blankets that had fallen off the bed in Alby’s struggle and pulled them atop the sick boy. “Get your butt to sleep and we’ll talk about it later.” He patted him on the head, then added, “You’re messed up, shank.”

But Alby was already drifting off, nodding slightly as his eyes closed.

Newt caught Thomas's gaze and gestured for the door. Thomas had no problem leaving that crazy house—he followed Newt out and into the hall. Then, just as they stepped through the doorway, Alby mumbled something from his bed.

Both boys stopped in their tracks. "What?" Newt asked.

Alby opened his eyes for a brief moment, then repeated what he'd said, a little more loudly. "Be careful with the girl." Then his eyes slid shut.

There it was again—the girl. Somehow things always led back to the girl. Newt gave Thomas a questioning look, but Thomas could only return it with a shrug. He had no idea what was going on.

"Let's go," Newt whispered.

"And Newt?" Alby called again from the bed, not bothering to open his eyes.

"Yeah?"

"Protect the Maps." Alby rolled over, his back telling them he'd finally finished speaking.

Thomas didn't think that sounded very good. Not good at all. He and Newt left the room and softly closed the door.

CHAPTER 28

Thomas followed Newt as he hurried down the stairs and out of the Homestead into the bright light of midafternoon. Neither boy said a word for a while. For Thomas, things just seemed to be getting worse and worse.

“Hungry, Tommy?” Newt asked when they were outside.

Thomas couldn’t believe the question. “Hungry? I feel like puking after what I just saw—no, I’m not hungry.”

Newt only grinned. “Well, I am, ya shank. Let’s go look for some leftovers from lunch. We need to talk.”

“Somehow I knew you were going to say something like that.” No matter what he did, he was becoming more and more entwined in the dealings of the Glade. And he was growing to expect it.

They made their way directly to the kitchen, where, despite Frypan’s grumbling, they were able to get cheese sandwiches and raw vegetables. Thomas couldn’t ignore the way the Keeper of the cooks kept giving him a weird look, eyes darting away whenever Thomas returned the stare.

Something told him this sort of treatment would now be the norm. For some reason, he was different from everyone else in the Glade. He felt like he’d lived an entire lifetime since awakening from his memory wipe, but he’d only been there a week.

The boys decided to take their lunches to eat outside, and a few minutes later they found themselves at the west wall, looking out at the many work activities going on throughout the Glade, their backs up against a spot of thick ivy. Thomas forced himself to eat; the way things were going, he needed to make sure he’d have strength to deal with whatever insane thing came his way next.

“Ever seen that happen before?” Thomas asked after a minute or so.

Newt looked at him, his face suddenly somber. “What Alby just did? No. Never. But then again, no one’s ever tried to tell us what they remembered during the Changing. They always refuse. Alby tried to—must be why he went nuts for a while.”

Thomas paused in the middle of chewing. Could the people behind the Maze *control* them somehow? It was a terrifying thought.

“We have to find Gally,” Newt said through a bite of carrot, changing the subject. “Bugger’s gone off and hid somewhere. Soon as we’re done eating, I need to find him and throw his butt in jail.”

“Serious?” Thomas couldn’t help feeling a shot of pure elation at the thought. He’d be happy to slam the door closed and throw away the key himself.

“That shank threatened to kill you and we have to make bloody sure it never happens again. That shuck-face is gonna pay a heavy price for acting like that—he’s lucky we don’t Banish him. Remember what I told you about order.”

“Yeah.” Thomas’s only concern was that Gally would just hate him all the more for being thrown in jail. *I don’t care*, he thought. *I’m not scared of that guy anymore*.

"Here's how it'll play out, Tommy," Newt said. "You're with me the rest of today—we need to figure things. Tomorrow, the Slammer. Then you're Minho's, and I want you to stay away from the other shanks for a while. Got it?"

Thomas was more than happy to oblige. Being mostly alone sounded like a great idea. "Sounds beautiful. So Minho's going to train me?"

"That's right—you're a Runner now. Minho'll teach ya. The Maze, the Maps, everything. Lots to learn. I expect you to work your butt off."

Thomas was shocked that the idea of entering the Maze again didn't frighten him all that much. He resolved to do just as Newt said, hoping it would keep his mind off things. Deeper down, he hoped to get out of the Glade as much as possible. Avoiding other people was his new goal in life.

The boys sat in silence, finishing their lunches, until Newt finally got to what he really wanted to talk about. Crumpling his trash into a ball, he turned and looked straight at Thomas.

"Thomas," he began, "I need you to accept something. We've heard it too many times now to deny it, and it's time to discuss it."

Thomas knew what was coming, but was startled. He dreaded the words.

"Gally said it. Alby said it. Ben said it," Newt continued, "the girl, after we took her out of the Box—she said it."

He paused, perhaps expecting Thomas to ask what he meant. But Thomas already knew. "They all said things were going to change."

Newt looked away for a moment, then turned back. "That's right. And Gally, Alby and Ben claim they saw you in their memories after the Changing—and from what I gather, you weren't plantin' flowers and helpin' old ladies cross the street. According to Gally, there's somethin' rotten enough about ya that he wants to kill ya."

"Newt, I don't know—" Thomas started, but Newt didn't let him finish.

"I know you don't remember anything, Thomas! Quit sayin' that—don't ever say it again. None of us remember anything, and we're bloody sick of you reminding us. The point is there's something different about you, and it's time we figured it out."

Thomas was overwhelmed by a surge of anger. "Fine, so how do we do it? I want to know who I am just as much as anyone else. *Obviously.*"

"I need you to open your mind. Be honest if anything—anything at all—seems familiar."

"Nothing—" Thomas started, but stopped. So much had happened since arriving, he'd almost forgotten how familiar the Glade had felt to him that first night, sleeping next to Chuck. How comfortable and *at home* he'd felt. A far cry from the terror he should've experienced.

"I can see your wheels spinnin'," Newt said, quietly. "Talk."

Thomas hesitated, scared of the consequences of what he was about to say. But he was tired of keeping secrets. "Well ... I can't put my finger on anything specific." He spoke slowly, carefully. "But I did feel like I'd been here before when I first got here." He looked at Newt, hoping to see some sort of recognition in his eyes. "Anyone else go through that?"

But Newt's face was blank. He simply rolled his eyes. "Uh, no, Tommy. Most of us spent a week klunkin' our pants and bawlin' our eyes out."

"Yeah, well." Thomas paused, upset and suddenly embarrassed. What did it all mean?

Was he different from everyone else somehow? Was something wrong with him? “It all seemed familiar to me, and I knew I wanted to be a Runner.”

“That’s bloody interesting.” Newt examined him for a second, not hiding his obvious suspicion. “Well, keep lookin’ for it. Strain your mind, spend your free time wanderin’ your thoughts, and *think* about this place. Delve inside that brain of yours, and seek it out. *Try*, for all our sakes.”

“I will.” Thomas closed his eyes, started searching the darkness of his mind.

“Not now, you dumb shuck.” Newt laughed. “I just meant do it from now *on*. Free time, meals, goin’ to sleep at night, as you walk around, train, work. Tell me anything that seems even remotely familiar. Got it?”

“Yeah, got it.” Thomas couldn’t help worrying that he’d thrown up some red flags for Newt, and that the older boy was just hiding his concern.

“Good that,” Newt said, looking almost too agreeable. “To begin, we better go see someone.”

“Who?” Thomas asked, but knew the answer as soon as he spoke. Dread filled him again.

“The girl. I want you to look at her till your eyes bleed, see if somethin’ gets triggered in that shuck brain of yours.” Newt gathered his lunch trash and stood up. “Then I want you to tell me every single word Alby said to you.”

Thomas sighed, then got to his feet. “Okay.” He didn’t know if he could bring himself to tell the complete truth about Alby’s accusations, not to mention how he felt about the girl. It looked like he wasn’t done keeping secrets after all.

The boys walked back toward the Homestead, where the girl still lay in a coma. Thomas couldn’t stifle his worry about what Newt was thinking. He’d opened himself up, and he really *liked* Newt. If Newt turned on him now, Thomas didn’t know if he could handle it.

“If all else fails,” Newt said, interrupting Thomas’s thoughts, “we’ll send ya to the Grievers—get ya stung so you can go through the Changing. We *need* your memories.”

Thomas barked a sarcastic laugh at the idea, but Newt wasn’t smiling.

The girl seemed to be sleeping peacefully, like she’d wake up at any minute. Thomas had almost expected the skeletal remnant of a person—someone on the verge of death. But her chest rose and fell with even breaths; her skin was full of color.

One of the Med-jacks was there, the shorter one—Thomas couldn’t remember his name—dropping water into the comatose girl’s mouth a few drips at a time. A plate and bowl on the bedside table had the remains of her lunch—mashed potatoes and soup. They were doing everything possible to keep her alive and healthy.

“Hey, Clint,” Newt said, sounding comfortable, like he’d stopped by to visit many times before. “She surviving?”

“Yeah,” Clint answered. “She’s doing fine, though she talks in her sleep all the time. We think she’ll come out of it soon.”

Thomas felt his hackles rise. For some reason, he’d never really considered the possibility that the girl might wake up and be okay. That she might talk to people. He had no idea why that suddenly made him so nervous.

“Have you been writin’ down every word she says?” Newt asked.

Clint nodded. “Most of it’s impossible to understand. But yeah, when we can.”

Newt pointed at a notepad on the nightstand. “Give me an example.”

"Well, the same thing she said when we pulled her out of the Box, about things changing. Other stuff about the Creators and how 'it all has to end.' And, uh ..." Clint looked at Thomas as if he didn't want to continue in his company.

"It's okay—he can hear whatever I hear," Newt assured him.

"Well ... I can't make it all out, but ..." Clint looked at Thomas again. "She keeps saying his name over and over."

Thomas almost fell down at this. Would the references to him never end? How did he know this girl? It was like a maddening itch inside his skull that wouldn't go away.

"Thanks, Clint," Newt said in what sounded to Thomas like an obvious dismissal. "Get us a report of all that, okay?"

"Will do." The Med-jack nodded at both of them and left the room.

"Pull up a chair," Newt said as he sat on the edge of the bed. Thomas, relieved that Newt still hadn't erupted into accusations, grabbed the one from the desk and placed it right next to where the girl's head lay; he sat down, leaning forward to look at her face.

"Anything ring a bell?" Newt asked. "Anything at all?"

Thomas didn't respond, kept looking, willing his mind to break down the memory barrier and seek out this girl from his past. He thought back to those brief moments when she'd opened her eyes right after being pulled out of the Box.

They'd been blue, richer in color than the eyes of any other person he could remember seeing before. He tried to picture those eyes on her now as he looked at her slumbering face, melding the two images in his mind. Her black hair, her perfect white skin, her full lips.... As he stared at her, he realized once more how truly beautiful she was.

Stronger recognition briefly tickled the back of his mind—a flutter of wings in a dark corner, unseen but there all the same. It lasted only an instant before vanishing into the abyss of his other captured memories. But he had *felt* something.

"I do know her," he whispered, leaning back in his chair. It felt good to finally admit it out loud.

Newt stood up. "What? Who is she?"

"No idea. But something clicked—I know her from somewhere." Thomas rubbed his eyes, frustrated that he couldn't solidify the link.

"Well, keep bloody thinking—don't lose it. Concentrate."

"I'm trying, so shut up." Thomas closed his eyes, searched the darkness of his thoughts, seeking her face in that emptiness. Who *was* she? The irony of the question struck him—he didn't even know who *he* was.

He leaned forward in his chair and took a deep breath, then looked at Newt, shaking his head in surrender. "I just don't—"

Teresa.

Thomas jolted up from the chair, knocked it backward, spun in a circle, searching. He had heard ...

"What's wrong?" Newt asked. "Did ya remember somethin'?"

Thomas ignored him, looked around the room in confusion, knowing he'd heard a voice, then back at the girl.

"I ..." He sat back down, leaned forward, staring at the girl's face. "Newt, did you just say something before I stood up?"

"No."

Of course not. "Oh. I just thought I heard something ... I don't know. Maybe it was in my head. Did ... *she* say anything?"

"Her?" Newt asked, his eyes lit up. "No. Why? What did you hear?"

Thomas was scared to admit it. "I ... I swear I heard a name. Teresa."

"Teresa? No, I didn't hear that. Must've sprung loose from your bloody memory blocks! That's her name, Tommy. Teresa. Has to be."

Thomas felt ... odd—an uncomfortable feeling, like something supernatural had just occurred. "It was ... I swear I *heard* it. But in my mind, man. I can't explain it."

Thomas.

This time he jumped from the chair and scrambled as far from the bed as possible, knocking over the lamp on the table; it landed with the crash of broken glass. A voice. A girl's voice. Whispy, sweet, confident. He'd heard it. He *knew* he'd heard it.

"What's bloody wrong with you?" Newt asked.

Thomas's heart was racing. He felt the thumps in his skull. Acid boiled in his stomach. "She's ... she's freakin' *talking* to me. In my head. She just said my name!"

"What?"

"I swear!" The world spun around him, pressed in, crushing his mind. "I'm ... hearing her voice in my head—or something ... it's not really a voice...."

"Tommy, sit your butt down. *What* are you bloody talking about?"

"Newt, I'm serious. It's ... not really a voice ... but it *is*."

Tom, we're the last ones. It'll end soon. It has to.

The words echoed in his mind, touched his eardrums—he could *hear* them. Yet they didn't sound like they were coming from the room, from outside his body. They were literally, in every way, *inside* his mind.

Tom, don't freak out on me.

He put his hands up to his ears, squeezed his eyes shut. It was too strange; he couldn't bring his rational mind to accept what was happening.

My memory's fading already, Tom. I won't remember much when I wake up. We can pass the Trials. It has to end. They sent me as a trigger.

Thomas couldn't take it anymore. Ignoring Newt's questions, he stumbled to the door and yanked it open, stepped into the hall, ran. Down the stairs, out the front door, he ran. But it did nothing to shut her up.

Everything is going to change, she said.

He wanted to scream, run until he could run no more. He made it to the East Door and sprinted through it, out of the Glade. Kept going, through corridor after corridor, deep into the heart of the Maze, rules or no rules. But he still couldn't escape the voice.

It was you and me, Tom. We did this to them. To us.

Thomas didn't stop until the voice had gone for good.

It shocked him when he realized he'd been running for almost an hour—the shadows of the walls ran long toward the east, and soon the sun would set for the night and the Doors would close. He had to get back. It only peripherally hit him then that without thinking he'd recognized the direction and the time. That his instincts were strong.

He had to get back.

But he didn't know if he could face her again. The voice in his head. The strange things she'd said.

He had no choice. Denying the truth would solve nothing. And as bad—as weird—as the invasion of his mind had been, it beat another date with the Grievers any day.

As he ran toward the Glade, he learned a lot about himself. Without meaning to or realizing it, he'd pictured in his mind his exact route through the Maze as he escaped the voice. Not once did he falter on his return, turning left and right and running down long corridors in reverse of the way he had come. He knew what it meant.

Minho had been right. Soon, Thomas would be the best Runner.

The second thing he learned about himself, as if the night in the Maze hadn't proved it already, was that his body was in perfect shape. Just a day earlier he'd been at the end of his strength and sore from top to bottom. He'd recovered quickly, and ran now with almost no effort, despite nearing the end of his second hour of running. It didn't take a math genius to calculate that his speed and time combined meant he'd run roughly half a marathon by the time he returned to the Glade.

Never before had the sheer size of the Maze truly hit him. Miles and miles and miles. With its walls that moved, every night, he finally understood why the Maze was so hard to solve. He'd doubted it until now, wondered how the Runners could be so inept.

On he ran, left and right, straight, on and on. By the time he'd crossed the threshold into the Glade, the Doors were only minutes away from closing for the night. Exhausted, he headed straight for the Deadheads, went deep into the forest until he reached the spot where the trees crowded against the southwest corner. More than anything, he wanted to be alone.

When he could hear only the sounds of distant Glader conversations, as well as faint echoes of bleating sheep and snorting pigs, his wish was granted; he found the junction of the two giant walls and collapsed into the corner to rest. No one came, no one bothered him. The south wall eventually moved, closing for the night; he leaned forward until it stopped. Minutes later, his back once again comfortably pressed against thick layers of ivy, he fell asleep.

The next morning, someone gently shook him awake.

"Thomas, wake up." It was Chuck—the kid seemed to be able to find him anywhere.

Groaning, Thomas leaned forward, stretched out his back and arms. A couple of blankets had been placed over him during the night—someone playing the Glade Mother.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"You're almost too late for breakfast." Chuck tugged on his arm. "Come on, get up. You need to start acting normal or things'll just get worse."

The events of the previous day came crashing into Thomas's mind, and his stomach seemed to twist inside out. *What are they going to do to me?* he thought. *Those things she said. Something about me and her doing this to them. To us. What did that mean?*

Then it hit him that maybe he was crazy. Maybe the stress of the Maze had driven him insane. Either way, only *he* had heard the voice inside his head. No one else knew the weird things Teresa had said, or accused him of. They didn't even know that she had told him her name. Well, no one except Newt.

And he would keep it that way. Things were bad enough—no way he'd make it worse by telling people about voices in his head. The only problem was Newt. Thomas would have to convince him somehow that stress had finally overwhelmed him and a good night's rest had solved everything. *I'm not crazy*, Thomas told himself. Surely he wasn't.

Chuck was looking at him with eyebrows raised.

"Sorry," Thomas said as he stood up, acting as normal as he could. "Just thinking. Let's eat, I'm starving."

"Good that," Chuck said, slapping Thomas on the back.

They headed for the Homestead, Chuck yapping the whole time. Thomas wasn't complaining—it was the closest thing to normal in his life.

"Newt found you last night and told everyone to let you sleep. *And he told us what the Council decided about you—one day in the cell, then you'll enter the Runner training program.* Some shanks grumbled, some cheered, most acted like they couldn't care less. As for me, I think it's pretty awesome." Chuck paused to take a breath, then kept going. "That first night, when you were bragging about being a Runner and all that klunk—shuck it, I was laughing inside so hard. I kept telling myself, this sucker's in for a rude awakening. Well, you proved *me* wrong, huh?"

But Thomas didn't feel like talking about it. "I just did what anyone else would've done. It's not my fault Minho and Newt want me to be a Runner."

"Yeah, right. Quit being modest."

Being a Runner was the last thing on Thomas's mind. What he couldn't stop thinking about was Teresa, the voice in his head, what she'd *said*. "I guess I'm a little excited." Thomas forced a grin, though he cringed at the thought of hanging out in the Slammer by himself all day before he got to start.

"We'll see how you feel after running your guts out. Anyway, as long as you know old Chucky is proud of you."

Thomas smiled at his friend's enthusiasm. "If only you were my mom," Thomas murmured, "life'd be a peach." *My mom*, he thought. The world seemed to darken for a moment—he couldn't even remember his own mother. He pushed the thought away before it consumed him.

They made it to the kitchen and grabbed a quick breakfast, taking two empty seats at the big table inside. Every Glader going in and out the door gave Thomas a stare; a few came up and offered congratulations. Other than a sprinkling of dirty looks here and there, most people seemed to be on his side. Then he remembered Gally.

"Hey, Chuck," he asked after taking a bite of eggs, trying to sound casual. "Did they ever find Gally?"

"No. I was gonna tell you—someone said they saw him run out into the Maze after he left the Gathering. Hasn't been seen since."

Thomas dropped his fork, not knowing what he'd expected or hoped for. Either way, the news stunned him. "What? You're serious? He went into the Maze?"

"Yeah. Everyone knows he went nuts—some shank even accused you of killing him when you ran out there yesterday."

"I can't believe ..." Thomas stared at his plate, trying to understand why Gally would do that.

"Don't worry about it, dude. No one liked him except for his few shuck cronies. They're the ones accusing you of stuff."

Thomas couldn't believe how casually Chuck spoke about it. "Ya know, the guy is probably dead. You're talking about him like he went on vacation."

A contemplative look came over Chuck. "I don't think he's dead."

"Huh? Then where is he? Aren't Minho and I the only ones who've survived a night out there?"

"That's what I'm saying. I think his buddies are hiding him inside the Glade somewhere. Gally was an idiot, but he couldn't possibly be stupid enough to stay out in the Maze all night. Like you."

Thomas shook his head. "Maybe that's *exactly* why he stayed out there. Wanted to prove he could do anything I can do. The guy hates me." A pause. "Hated me."

"Well, whatever." Chuck shrugged as if they were arguing over what to have for breakfast. "If he's dead, you guys'll probably find him eventually. If not, he'll get hungry and show up to eat. I don't care."

Thomas picked up his plate and took it to the counter. "All I want is one normal day—one day to relax."

"Then your bloody wish is granted," said a voice from the kitchen door behind him.

Thomas turned to see Newt there, smiling. That grin sent a wave of reassurance through Thomas, as if he were finding out the world was okay again.

"Come on, ya buggin' jailbird," Newt said. "You can take it easy while you're hangin' in the Slammer. Let's go. Chucky'll bring ya some lunch at noon."

Thomas nodded and headed out the door, Newt leading the way. Suddenly a day in prison sounded excellent. A day to just sit and relax.

Though something told him there was a better chance of Gally bringing him flowers than of passing a day in the Glade with nothing strange happening.

CHAPTER 30

The Slammer stood in an obscure place between the Homestead and the north Glade wall, hidden behind thorny, ragged bushes that looked like they hadn't been trimmed in ages. It was a big block of roughly cut concrete, with one tiny, barred window and a wooden door that was locked with a menacing rusty metal latch, like something out of the Dark Ages.

Newt took out a key and opened it up, then motioned for Thomas to enter. "There's only a chair in there and nothin' at all for ya to do. Enjoy yourself."

Thomas groaned inwardly as he stepped inside and saw the one piece of furniture—an ugly, rickety chair with one leg obviously shorter than the rest, probably on purpose. Didn't even have a cushion.

"Have fun," Newt said before closing the door. Thomas turned back to his new home and heard the latch close and the lock click behind him. Newt's head appeared at the little glassless window, looking through the bars, a smirk on his face. "Nice reward for breakin' the rules. You saved some lives, Tommy, but ya still need to learn—"

"Yeah, I know. Order."

Newt smiled. "You're not half bad, shank. But friends or no, gotta run things properly, keep us buggers alive. Think about that while ya sit here and stare at the bloody walls."

And then he was gone.

* * *

The first hour passed, and Thomas felt boredom creep in like rats under the door. By hour number two, he wanted to bang his head against the wall. Two hours after that he started to think having dinner with Gally and the Grievers would beat sitting inside that stupid Slammer. He sat and tried to bring back memories, but every effort evaporated into oblivious mist before anything formed.

Thankfully, Chuck arrived with lunch at noon, relieving Thomas from his thoughts.

After passing some pieces of chicken and a glass of water through the window, he took up his usual role of talking Thomas's ear off.

"Everything's getting back to normal," the boy announced. "The Runners are out in the Maze, everyone's working—maybe we'll survive after all. Still no sign of Gally—Newt told the Runners to come back lickety-split if they found his body. And, oh, yeah—Alby's up and around. Seems fine—and Newt's glad he doesn't have to be the big boss anymore."

The mention of Alby pulled Thomas's attention from his food. He pictured the older boy thrashing around, choking himself the day before. Then he remembered that no one else knew what Alby had said after Newt left the room—before the seizure. But that didn't mean Alby would keep it between them now that he was up and walking around.

Chuck continued talking, taking a completely unexpected turn. "Thomas, I'm kinda messed up, man. It's weird to feel sad and homesick, but have no idea what it is you wish you could go back to, ya know? All I know is I don't want to be here. I want to go back to my family. Whatever's there, whatever I was taken from. I wanna *remember*."

Thomas was a little surprised. He'd never heard Chuck say something so deep and so

true. "I know what you mean," he murmured.

Chuck was too short for his eyes to reach where Thomas could see them as he spoke, but from his next statement, Thomas imagined them filling with a bleak sadness, maybe even tears. "I used to cry. Every night."

This made thoughts of Alby leave Thomas's mind. "Yeah?"

"Like a pants-wettin' baby. Almost till the day you got here. Then I just got used to it, I guess. This became home, even though we spend every day hoping to get out."

"I've only cried once since showing up, but that was after almost getting eaten alive. I'm probably just a shallow shuck-face." Thomas might not have admitted it if Chuck hadn't opened up.

"You cried?" he heard Chuck say through the window. "Then?"

"Yeah. When the last one finally fell over the Cliff, I broke down and sobbed till my throat and chest hurt." Thomas remembered all too well. "Everything crushed in on me at once. Sure made *me* feel better—don't feel bad about crying. Ever."

"Kinda does make ya feel better, huh? Weird how that works."

A few minutes passed in silence. Thomas found himself hoping Chuck wouldn't leave.

"Hey, Thomas?" Chuck asked.

"Still here."

"Do you think I have parents? *Real* parents?"

Thomas laughed, mostly to push away the sudden surge of sadness the statement caused. "Of course you do, shank. You need me to explain the birds and bees?" Thomas's heart hurt—he could remember getting that lecture but not who'd given it to him.

"That's not what I meant," Chuck said, his voice completely devoid of cheer. It was low and bleak, almost a mumble. "Most of the guys who've gone through the Changing remember terrible things they won't even talk about, which makes me doubt I have anything good back home. So, I mean, you think it's really possible I have a mom and a dad out in the world somewhere, missing me? Do you think *they* cry at night?"

Thomas was completely shocked to realize his eyes had filled with tears. Life had been so crazy since he'd arrived, he'd never really thought of the Gladers as real people with real families, missing them. It was strange, but he hadn't even really thought of himself that way. Only about what it all meant, who'd sent them there, how they'd ever get out.

For the first time, he felt something for Chuck that made him so angry he wanted to kill somebody. The boy should be in school, in a home, playing with neighborhood kids. He deserved to go home at night to a family who loved him, worried about him. A mom who made him take a shower every day and a dad who helped him with homework.

Thomas hated the people who'd taken this poor, innocent kid from his family. He hated them with a passion he didn't know a human could feel. He wanted them dead, tortured, even. He wanted Chuck to be happy.

But happiness had been ripped from their lives. *Love* had been ripped from their lives.

"Listen to me, Chuck." Thomas paused, calming down as much as he could, making sure his voice didn't crack. "I'm sure you have parents. I know it. Sounds terrible, but I bet your mom is sitting in your room right now, holding your pillow, looking out at the world that stole you from her. And yeah, I bet she's crying. Hard. Puffy-eyed, snotty-nosed crying. The real deal."

Chuck didn't say anything, but Thomas thought he heard the slightest of sniffles.

"Don't give up, Chuck. We're gonna solve this thing, get out of here. I'm a Runner now—I promise on my life I'll get you back to that room of yours. Make your mom quit crying." And Thomas meant it. He felt it *burn* in his heart.

"Hope you're right," Chuck said with a shaky voice. He showed a thumbs-up sign in the window, then walked away.

Thomas stood up to pace around the little room, fuming with an intense desire to keep his promise. "I swear, Chuck," he whispered to no one. "I swear I'll get you back home."

CHAPTER 31

Just after Thomas heard the grind and rumble of stone against stone announce the closing of the Doors for the day, Alby showed up to release him, which was a huge surprise. The metal of key and lock jingled; then the door to the cell swung wide open.

"Ain't dead, are ya, shank?" Alby asked. He looked so much better than the day before, Thomas couldn't help staring at him. His skin was back to full color, his eyes no longer crisscrossed with red veins; he seemed to have gained fifteen pounds in twenty-four hours.

Alby noticed him goggling. "Shuck it, boy, what you lookin' at?"

Thomas shook his head slightly, feeling like he'd been in a trance. His mind was racing, wondering what Alby remembered, what he knew, what he might say about him. "Wha—Nothing. Just seems crazy you healed so quickly. You're fine now?"

Alby flexed his right bicep. "Ain't never been better—come on out."

Thomas did, hoping his eyes weren't flickering, making his concern obvious.

Alby closed the Slammer door and locked it, then turned to face him. "Actually, nothin' but a lie. I feel like a piece of klunk twice crapped by a Griever."

"Yeah, you looked it yesterday." When Alby glared, Thomas hoped it was in jest and quickly clarified. "But today you look brand-new. I swear."

Alby put the keys in his pocket and leaned back against the Slammer's door. "So, quite the little talk we had yesterday."

Thomas's heart pounded. He had no idea what to expect from Alby at that point. "Uh ... yeah, I remember."

"I saw what I saw, Greenie. It's kinda fadin', but I ain't never gonna forget. It was terrible. Tried to talk about it, somethin' starts choking me. Now the images are gettin' up and gone, like that same somethin' don't like me remembering."

The scene from the day before flashed in Thomas's mind. Alby thrashing, trying to strangle himself—Thomas wouldn't have believed it had happened if he hadn't seen it himself. Despite fearing an answer, he knew he had to ask the next question. "What was it about me—you kept saying you saw me. What was I doing?"

Alby stared at an empty space in the distance for a while before answering. "You were with the ... Creators. Helping them. But that ain't what got me shook up."

Thomas felt like someone had just rammed their fist in his abdomen. *Helping them?* He couldn't form the words to ask what that meant.

Alby continued. "I hope the Changing doesn't give us real memories—just plants fake ones. Some suspect it—I can only hope. If the world's the way I saw it ..." He trailed off, leaving an ominous silence.

Thomas was confused, but pressed on. "Can't you tell me what you saw about me?"

Alby shook his head. "No way, shank. Ain't gonna risk stranglin' myself again. Might be something they got in our brains to control us—just like the memory wipe."

"Well, if I'm evil, maybe you should leave me locked up." Thomas half meant it.

"Greenie, you ain't evil. You might be a shuck-faced slinthead, but you ain't evil." Alby

Showed the slightest hint of a smile, a bare crack in his usually hard face. "What you did—riskin' your butt to save me and Minho—that ain't no evil I've ever heard of. Nah, just makes me think the Grief Serum and the Changing got somethin' fishy about 'em. For your sake and mine, I hope so."

Thomas was so relieved that Alby thought he was okay, he only heard about half of what the older boy had just said. "How bad *was* it? Your memories that came back."

"I remembered things from growin' up, where I lived, that sort of stuff. And if God himself came down right now and told me I could go back home ..." Alby looked to the ground and shook his head again. "If it was real, Greenie, I swear I'd go shack up with the Grievers before goin' back."

Thomas was surprised to hear it was so bad—he wished Alby would give details, describe something, anything. But he knew the choking was still too fresh in Alby's mind for him to budge. "Well, maybe they're not real, Alby. Maybe the Grief Serum is some kind of psycho drug that gives you hallucinations." Thomas knew he was grasping at straws.

Alby thought for a minute. "A drug ... hallucinations ..." Then he shook his head. "Doubt it."

It had been worth a try. "We still have to escape this place."

"Yeah, thanks, Greenie," Alby said sarcastically. "Don't know what we'd do without your pep talks." Again, the almost-smile.

Alby's change of mood broke Thomas out of his gloom. "Quit calling me Greenie. The girl's the Greenie now."

"Okay, Greenie." Alby sighed, clearly done with the conversation. "Go find some dinner—your terrible prison sentence of *one day* is over."

"One was plenty." Despite wanting answers, Thomas was ready to get away from the Slammer. Plus, he was starving. He grinned at Alby, then headed straight for the kitchen and food.

Dinner was awesome.

Frypan had known Thomas would be coming late, so he'd left a plate full of roast beef and potatoes; a note announced there were cookies in the cupboard. The Cook seemed fully intent on backing up the support he'd shown for Thomas in the Gathering. Minho joined Thomas as he ate, prepping him a little before his first big day of Runner training, giving him a few stats and interesting facts. Things for him to think about as he went to sleep that night.

When they were finished, Thomas headed back to the secluded place where he'd slept the night before, in the corner behind the Deadheads. He thought about his conversation with Chuck, wondered how it would feel to have parents say good night to you.

Several boys milled about the Glade that night, but for the most part it was quiet, like everyone just wanted to go to sleep, end the day and be done with it. Thomas didn't complain—that was exactly what he needed.

The blankets someone had left for him the night before still lay there. He picked them up and settled in, snuggling up against the comforting corner where the stone walls met in a mass of soft ivy. The mixed smells of the forest greeted him as he took his first deep breath, trying to relax. The air felt perfect, and it made him wonder again about the weather of the

place. Never rained, never snowed, never got too hot or too cold. If it weren't for the little fact they were torn apart from friends and families and trapped in a Maze with a bunch of monsters, it could be paradise.

Some things here were too perfect. He knew that, but had no explanation.

His thoughts drifted to what Minho had told him at dinner about the size and scale of the Maze. He believed it—he'd realized the massive scale when he'd been to the Cliff. But he just couldn't fathom how such a structure could have been built. The Maze stretched for miles and miles. The Runners had to be in almost superhuman shape to do what they did every day.

And yet they'd *never* found an exit. And despite that, despite the utter hopelessness of the situation, they still hadn't given up.

At dinner Minho had told him an old story—one of the bizarre and random things he remembered from before—about a woman trapped in a maze. She escaped by never taking her right hand off the walls of the maze, sliding it along as she walked. In doing so, she was forced to turn right at every turn, and the simple laws of physics and geometry ensured that eventually she found the exit. It made sense.

But not here. Here, all paths led back to the Glade. They had to be missing *something*.

Tomorrow, his training would begin. Tomorrow, he could start helping them find that missing something. Right then Thomas made a decision. Forget all the weird stuff. Forget all the bad things. Forget it all. He wouldn't quit until he'd solved the puzzle and found a way home.

Tomorrow. The word floated in his mind until he finally fell asleep.

Minho woke Thomas before dawn, motioning with a flashlight to follow him back to the Homestead. Thomas easily shook off his morning grogginess, excited to begin his training. He crawled out from under his blanket and eagerly followed his teacher, winding his way through the crowd of Gladers who slept on the lawn, their snores the only sign they weren't dead. The slightest glow of early morning illuminated the Glade, turning everything dark blue and shadowed. Thomas had never seen the place look so peaceful. A cock crowed in the Blood House.

Finally, in a crooked cranny near a back corner of the Homestead, Minho pulled out a key and opened up a shabby door leading to a small storage closet. Thomas felt a shiver of anticipation, wondering what was inside. He caught glimpses of ropes and chains and other odds and ends as Minho's flashlight crisscrossed the closet. Eventually, it fell on an open box full of running shoes. Thomas almost laughed, it seemed so ordinary.

"That right there's the number one supply we get," Minho announced. "At least for us. They send new ones in the Box every so often. If we had bad shoes, we'd have feet that look like freaking Mars." He bent over and rummaged through the pile. "What size you wear?"

"Size?" Thomas thought for a second. "I ... don't know." It was so odd sometimes what he could and couldn't remember. He reached down and pulled off a shoe he'd worn since coming to the Glade and took a look inside. "Eleven."

"Geez, shank, you got big feet." Minho stood up holding a pair of sleek silver ones. "But looks like I've got some—man, we could go canoeing in these things."

"Those are fancy." Thomas took them and walked out of the closet to sit on the ground, eager to try them on. Minho grabbed a few more things before coming out to join him.

"Only Runners and Keepers get these," Minho said. Before Thomas could look up from tying his shoes, a plastic wristwatch dropped into his lap. It was black and very simple, its face showing only a digital display of the time. "Put it on and never take it off. Your life might depend on it."

Thomas was glad to have it. Though the sun and the shadows had seemed plenty to let him know roughly what time it was up to that point, being a Runner probably required more precision. He buckled the watch onto his wrist and then returned to fitting on his shoes.

Minho continued talking. "Here's a backpack, water bottles, lunch pack, some shorts and T-shirts, other stuff." He nudged Thomas, who looked up. Minho was holding out a couple of pairs of tightly cut underwear, made from a shiny white material. "These bad boys're what we call Runnie-undies. Keeps you, um, nice and comfy."

"Nice and comfy?"

"Yeah, ya know. Your—"

"Yeah, got it." Thomas took the underwear and other stuff. "You guys really have this all thought out, don't you?"

"Couple of years runnin' your butt off every day, you figure out what you need and ask for it." He started stuffing things into his own backpack.

Thomas was surprised. "You mean, you can make requests? Supplies you want?" Why would the people who'd sent them there help so much?

"Of course we can. Just drop a note in the Box, and there she goes. Doesn't mean we always get what we want from the Creators. Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't."

"Ever asked for a map?"

Minho laughed. "Yeah, tried that one. Asked for a TV, too, but no luck. I guess those shuck-faces don't want us seeing how wonderful life is when you don't live in a freaking maze."

Thomas felt a trickle of doubt that life was so great back home—what kind of world allowed people to make kids live like this? The thought surprised him, as if its source had been founded in actual memory, a wisp of light in the darkness of his mind. But it was already gone. Shaking his head, he finished lacing up his shoes, then stood up and jogged around in circles, jumping up and down to test them out. "They feel pretty good. I guess I'm ready."

Minho was still crouched over his backpack on the ground; he glanced up at Thomas with a look of disgust. "You look like an idiot, prancin' around like a shuck ballerina. Good luck out there with no breakfast, no packed lunch, no weapons."

Thomas had already stopped moving, felt an icy chill. "Weapons?"

"Weapons." Minho stood and walked back to the closet. "Come here, I'll show ya."

Thomas followed Minho into the small room and watched as he pulled a few boxes away from the back wall. Underneath lay a small trapdoor. Minho lifted it to reveal a set of wooden stairs leading into blackness. "Keep 'em down in the basement so shanks like Gally can't get to them. Come on."

Minho went first. The stairs creaked with every shift of weight as they descended the dozen or so steps. The cool air was refreshing, despite the dust and the strong scent of mildew. They hit a dirt floor, and Thomas couldn't see a thing until Minho turned on a single lightbulb by pulling a string.

The room was larger than Thomas had expected, at least thirty square feet. Shelves lined the walls, and there were several blocky wooden tables; everything in sight was covered with all manner of junk that gave him the creeps. Wooden poles, metal spikes, large pieces of mesh—like what covers a chicken coop—rolls of barbed wire, saws, knives, swords. One entire wall was dedicated to archery: wooden bows, arrows, spare strings. The sight of it immediately brought back the memory of Ben getting shot by Alby in the Deadheads.

"Wow," Thomas murmured, his voice a dull thump in the enclosed place. At first he was terrified that they needed so many weapons, but he was relieved to see that the vast majority of it was covered with a thick layer of dust.

"Don't use most of it," Minho said. "But ya never know. All we usually take with us is a couple of sharp knives."

He nodded toward a large wooden trunk in the corner, its top open and leaning against the wall. Knives of all shapes and sizes were stacked haphazardly all the way to the top.

Thomas just hoped the room was kept secret from most of the Gladers. "Seems kind of dangerous to have all this stuff," he said. "What if Ben had gotten down here right before

he went nuts and attacked me?"

Minho pulled the keys out of his pocket and dangled them with a clickety-clank. "Only a few lucky toads have a set of these."

"Still..."

"Quit your bellyachin' and pick a couple. Make sure they're nice and sharp. Then we'll go get breakfast and pack our lunch. I wanna spend some time in the Map Room before we head out."

Thomas was pumped to hear that—he'd been curious about the squat building ever since he'd first seen a Runner go through its menacing door. He selected a short silvery dagger with a rubber grip, then one with a long black blade. His excitement waned a little. Even though he knew perfectly well what lived out there, he still didn't want to think about why he needed weapons to go into the Maze.

A half hour later, fed and packed, they stood in front of the riveted metal door of the Map Room. Thomas was itching to go inside. Dawn had burst forth in all her glory, and Gladers milled about, readying for the day. Smells of frying bacon wafted through the air—Frypan and his crew trying to keep up with dozens of starving stomachs. Minho unlocked the door, cranked the wheel-handle, spinning it until an audible click sounded from inside, then pulled. With a lurching squeal, the heavy metal slab swung open.

"After you," Minho said with a mocking bow.

Thomas went in without saying anything. A cool fear, mixed with an intense curiosity, gripped him, and he had to remind himself to breathe.

The dark room had a musty, wet smell, laced with a deep coppery scent so strong he could taste it. A distant, faded memory of sucking on pennies as a kid popped into his head.

Minho hit a switch and several rows of fluorescent lights flickered until they came on full strength, revealing the room in detail.

Thomas was surprised at its simplicity. About twenty feet across, the Map Room had concrete walls bare of any decoration. A wooden table stood in the exact center, eight chairs tucked in around it. Neatly stacked piles of paper and pencils lay about the table's surface, one for each chair. The only other items in the room were eight trunks, just like the one containing the knives in the weapons basement. Closed, they were evenly spaced, two to a wall.

"Welcome to the Map Room," Minho said. "As happy a place as you could ever visit."

Thomas was slightly disappointed—he'd been expecting something more profound. He took in a deep breath. "Too bad it smells like an abandoned copper mine."

"I kinda like the smell." Minho pulled out two chairs and sat in one of them. "Have a seat, I want you to get a couple of images in your head before we go out there."

As Thomas sat down, Minho grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil and started drawing. Thomas leaned in to get a better look and saw that Minho had drawn a big box that filled almost the entire page. Then he filled it with smaller boxes until it looked exactly like an enclosed tic-tac-toe board, three rows of three squares, all the same size. He wrote the word *GLADE* in the middle, then numbered the outside squares from one to eight, starting in the upper left corner and going clockwise. Lastly, he drew little notches here and there.

"These are the Doors," Minho said. "You know about the ones from the Glade, but there

are four more out in the Maze that lead to Sections One, Three, Five, and Seven. They stay in the same spot, but the route there changes with the wall movements every night.” He finished, then slid the paper over to rest in front of Thomas.

Thomas picked it up, completely fascinated that the Maze was so structured, and studied it as Minho kept talking.

“So we have the Glade, surrounded by eight Sections, each one a completely self-contained square and unsolvable in the two years since we began this freaking game. The only thing even approaching an exit is the Cliff, and that ain’t a very good one unless you like falling to a horrible death.” Minho tapped the Map. “The walls move all over the shuck place every evening—same time as our Doors close shut. At least, we think that’s when, because we never really hear walls moving any other time.”

Thomas looked up, happy to be able to offer a piece of information. “I didn’t see anything move that night we got stuck out there.”

“Those main corridors right outside the Doors don’t ever change. It’s just the ones a little deeper out.”

“Oh.” Thomas returned to the crude map, trying to visualize the Maze and see stone walls where Minho had penciled lines.

“We always have at least eight Runners, including the Keeper. One for each Section. It takes us a whole day to map out our area—hoping against hope there’s an exit—then we come back and draw it up, a separate page for each day.” Minho glanced over at one of the trunks. “That’s why those things are shuck full of Maps.”

Thomas had a depressing—and scary—thought. “Am I ... replacing someone? Did somebody get killed?”

Minho shook his head. “No, we’re just training you—someone’ll probably want a break. Don’t worry, it’s been a while since a Runner was killed.”

For some reason that last statement worried Thomas, though he hoped it didn’t show on his face. He pointed at Section Three. “So ... it takes you a whole day to run through these little squares?”

“Hilarious.” Minho stood and stepped over to the trunk right behind them, knelt down, then lifted the lid and rested it against the wall. “Come here.”

Thomas had already gotten up; he leaned over Minho’s shoulder and took a look. The trunk was large enough that four stacks of Maps could fit, and all four reached the top. Each of the ones Thomas could see were very similar: a rough sketch of a square maze, filling almost the whole page. In the top right corners, *Section 8* was scribbled, followed by the name *Hank*, then the word *Day*, followed by a number. The latest one said it was day number 749.

Minho continued. “We figured out the walls were moving right at the beginning. As soon as we did, we started keeping track. We’ve always thought that comparing these day to day, week to week, would help us figure out a pattern. And we did—the mazes basically repeat themselves about every month. But we’ve yet to see an exit open up that will lead us out of the square. Never been an exit.”

“It’s been two years,” Thomas said. “Haven’t you gotten desperate enough to stay out there overnight, see if maybe something opens while the walls are moving?”

Minho looked up at him, a flash of anger in his eyes. “That’s kind of insulting, dude.

Seriously.”

“What?” Thomas was shocked—he hadn’t meant it that way.

“We’ve been bustin’ our butts for two years, and all you can ask is why we’re too sissy to stay out there all night? A few tried it in the very beginning—all of them showed up dead. You wanna spend another night out there? Like your chances of surviving again, do ya?”

Thomas’s face reddened in shame. “No. Sorry.” He suddenly felt like a piece of klunk. And he certainly agreed—he’d much rather come home safe and sound to the Glade every night than ensure another battle with the Grievers. He shuddered at the thought.

“Yeah, well.” Minho returned his gaze to the Maps in the trunk, much to Thomas’s relief. “Life in the Glade might not be sweet livin’, but at least it’s safe. Plenty of food, protection from the Grievers. There’s no way we can ask the Runners to risk staying out there—no way. Least not yet. Not until something about these patterns gives a clue that an exit might open up, even temporarily.”

“Are you close? Anything developing?”

Minho shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s kind of depressing, but we don’t know what else to do. Can’t take a chance that one day, in one spot, somewhere, an exit might appear. We can’t give up. Ever.”

Thomas nodded, relieved at the attitude. As bad as things were, giving up would only make them worse.

Minho pulled several sheets from the trunk, the Maps from the last few days. As he flipped through them, he explained, “We compare day to day, week to week, month to month, just like I was saying. Each Runner is in charge of the Map for his own Section. If I gotta be honest, we haven’t figured out jack yet. Even more honest—we don’t know what we’re looking for. Really sucks, dude. Really freaking sucks.”

“But we can’t give up.” Thomas said it in a matter-of-fact tone, as a resigned repeat of what Minho had said a moment earlier. He’d said “we” without even thinking about it, and realized he was truly part of the Glade now.

“Right on, bro. We can’t give up.” Minho carefully returned the papers and closed the trunk, then stood. “Well, we gotta bust it fast since we took time in here—you’ll just be following me around your first few days. Ready?”

Thomas felt a wire of nervousness tighten inside him, pinching his gut. It was actually here—they were going for real now, no more talking and thinking about it. “Um … yeah.”

“No ‘ums’ around here. You ready or not?”

Thomas looked at Minho, matched his suddenly hard gaze. “I’m ready.”

“Then let’s go runnin’.”

CHAPTER 33

They went through the West Door into Section Eight and made their way down several corridors, Thomas right beside Minho as he turned right and left without seeming to think about it, running all the while. The early-morning light had a sharp sheen about it, making everything look bright and crisp—the ivy, the cracked walls, the stone blocks of the ground. Though the sun had a few hours before hitting the noon spot up above, there was plenty of light to see by. Thomas kept up with Minho as best he could, having to sprint every once in a while to catch back up.

They finally made it to a rectangular cut in a long wall to the north that looked like a doorway without a door. Minho ran straight through it without stopping. “This leads from Section Eight—the middle left square—to Section One—the top left square. Like I said, this passage is always in the same spot, but the route here might be a little different because of the walls rearranging themselves.”

Thomas followed him, surprised at how heavy his breaths had already become. He hoped it was only jitters, that his breathing would steady soon.

They ran down a long corridor to the right, passing several turns to the left. When they reached the end of the passage, Minho slowed to barely more than a walk and reached behind him to pull out a notepad and pencil from a side pocket in his backpack. He jotted a note, then put them back, never fully stopping. Thomas wondered what he’d written, but Minho answered him before he could pose the question.

“I rely ... mostly on memory,” the Keeper huffed, his voice finally showing a hint of strain. “But about every fifth turn, I write something down to help me later. Mostly just related to stuff from yesterday—what’s different today. Then I can use yesterday’s Map to make today’s. Easy-peasy, dude.”

Thomas was intrigued. Minho *did* make it sound easy.

They ran for a short while before they reached an intersection. They had three possible choices, but Minho went to the right without hesitating. As he did so, he pulled one of his knives from a pocket and, without missing a beat, cut a big piece of ivy off the wall. He threw it on the ground behind him and kept running.

“Bread crumbs?” Thomas asked, the old fairy tale popping into his mind. Such odd glimpses of his past had almost stopped surprising him.

“Bread crumbs,” Minho replied. “I’m Hansel, you’re Gretel.”

On they went, following the course of the Maze, sometimes turning right, sometimes turning left. After every turn, Minho cut and dropped a three-foot length of ivy. Thomas couldn’t help being impressed—Minho didn’t even need to slow down to do it.

“All right,” the Keeper said, breathing heavier now. “Your turn.”

“What?” Thomas hadn’t really expected to do anything but run and watch on his first day.

“Cut the ivy now—you gotta get used to doing it on the run. We pick ‘em up as we come back, or kick ‘em to the side.”

Thomas was happier than he thought he'd be at having something to do, though it took him a while to become good at it. First couple of times, he had to sprint to catch up after cutting the ivy, and once he nicked his finger. But by his tenth attempt, he could almost match Minho at the task.

On they went. After they'd run awhile—Thomas had no idea for how long or how far, but he guessed three miles—Minho slowed to a walk, then stopped altogether. "Break time." He swung off his pack and pulled out some water and an apple.

Thomas didn't have to be convinced to follow Minho's lead. He guzzled his water, relishing the wet coolness as it washed down his dry throat.

"Slow down there, fishhead," Minho yelped. "Save some for later."

Thomas stopped drinking, sucked in a big satisfied breath, then burped. He took a bite of his apple, feeling surprisingly refreshed. For some reason, his thoughts turned back to the day Minho and Alby had gone to look at the dead Grievers—when everything had gone to klunk. "You never really told me what happened to Alby that day—why he was in such bad shape. Obviously the Grievers woke up, but what *happened*?"

Minho had already put his backpack on. He looked ready to go. "Well, shuck thing wasn't dead. Alby poked at it with his foot like an idiot and that bad boy suddenly sprang to life, spikes flaring, its fat body rollin' all over him. Something was wrong with it, though—didn't really attack like usual. It seemed like it was mostly just trying to get out of there, and poor Alby was in the way."

"So it ran away from you guys?" From what Thomas had seen only a few nights before, he couldn't imagine it.

Minho shrugged. "Yeah, I guess—maybe it needed to get recharged or something. I don't know."

"What could've been wrong with it? Did you see an injury or anything?" Thomas didn't know what kind of answer he was searching for, but he was sure there had to be a clue or lesson to learn from what happened.

Minho thought for a minute. "No. Shuck thing just looked dead—like a wax statue. Then boom, it was back to life."

Thomas's mind was churning, trying to get somewhere, only he didn't know where or which direction to even start in. "I just wonder where it *went*. Where they always go. Don't you?" He was quiet for a second, then, "Haven't you ever thought of following them?"

"Man, you *do* have a death wish, don't you? Come on, we gotta go." And with that Minho turned and started running.

As Thomas followed, he struggled to figure out what was tickling the back of his mind. Something about that Grievers being dead and then not dead, something about where it had gone once it sprang to life ...

Frustrated, he put it aside and sprinted to catch up.

Thomas ran right behind Minho for two more hours, sprinkled with little breaks that seemed to get shorter every time. Good shape or not, Thomas was feeling the pain.

Finally, Minho stopped and pulled off his backpack once more. They sat on the ground, leaning against the soft ivy as they ate lunch, neither one of them talking much. Thomas relished every bite of his sandwich and veggies, eating as slowly as possible. He knew

Minho would make them get up and go once the food disappeared, so he took his time.

"Anything different today?" Thomas asked, curious.

Minho reached down and patted his backpack, where his notes rested. "Just the usual wall movements. Nothing to get your skinny butt excited about."

Thomas took a long swig of water, looking up at the ivy-covered wall opposite them. He caught a flash of silver and red, something he'd seen more than once that day.

"What's the deal with those beetle blades?" he asked. They seemed to be everywhere. Then Thomas remembered what he'd seen in the Maze—so much had happened he hadn't had the chance to mention it. "And why do they have the word *wicked* written on their backs?"

"Never been able to catch one." Minho finished up his meal and put his lunch box away. "And we don't know what that word means—probably just something to scare us. But they have to be spies. For *them*. Only thing we can reckon."

"Who is *them*, anyway?" Thomas asked, ready for more answers. He hated the people behind the Maze. "Anybody have a clue?"

"We don't know jack about the stupid Creators." Minho's face reddened as he squeezed his hands together like he was choking someone. "Can't wait to rip their—"

But before the Keeper could finish, Thomas was on his feet and across the corridor. "What's that?" he interrupted, heading for a dull glimmer of gray he'd just noticed behind the ivy on the wall, about head high.

"Oh, yeah, that," Minho said, his voice completely indifferent.

Thomas reached in and pulled apart the curtains of ivy, then stared blankly at a square of metal riveted to the stone with words stamped across it in big capital letters. He put his hand out to run his fingers across them, as if he didn't believe his eyes.

WORLD IN CATASTROPHE:
KILLZONE EXPERIMENT DEPARTMENT

He read the words aloud, then looked back at Minho. "What's this?" It gave him a chill—it had to have something to do with the Creators.

"I don't know, shank. They're all over the place, like freaking labels for the nice pretty Maze they built. I quit bothering to look at 'em a long time ago."

Thomas turned back to stare at the sign, trying to suppress the feeling of doom that had risen inside him. "Not much here that sounds very good. Catastrophe. Killzone. *Experiment*. Real nice."

"Yeah, real nice, Greenie. Let's go."

Reluctantly, Thomas let the vines fall back into place and swung his backpack over his shoulders. And off they went, those six words burning holes in his mind.

An hour after lunch, Minho stopped at the end of a long corridor. It was straight, the walls, solid, with no hallways branching off.

"The last dead end," he said to Thomas. "Time to go back."

Thomas sucked in a deep breath, trying not to think about only being halfway done for the day. "Nothing new?"

"Just the usual changes to the way we got here—day's half over," Minho replied as he

looked at his watch emotionlessly. “Gotta go back.” Without waiting for a response, the Keeper turned and set off at a run in the direction from which they’d just come.

Thomas followed, frustrated that they couldn’t take time to examine the walls, explore a little. He finally pulled in stride with Minho. “But—”

“Just shut it, dude. Remember what I said earlier—can’t take any chances. Plus, think about it. You really think there’s an exit anywhere? A secret trapdoor or something?”

“I don’t know … maybe. Why do you ask it that way?”

Minho shook his head, spat a big wad of something nasty to his left. “There’s no exit. It’s just more of the same. A wall is a wall is a wall. Solid.”

Thomas felt the heavy truth of it, but pushed back anyway. “How do you know?”

“Because people willing to send Grievers after us aren’t gonna give us an easy way out.”

This made Thomas doubt the whole point of what they were doing. “Then why even bother coming out here?”

Minho looked over at him. “Why *bother*? Because it’s here—gotta be a reason. But if you think we’re gonna find a nice little gate that leads to Happy Town, you’re smokin’ cow klunk.”

Thomas looked straight ahead, feeling so hopeless he almost slowed to a stop. “This sucks.”

“Smartest thing you’ve said yet, Greenie.”

Minho blew out a big puff of air and kept running, and Thomas did the only thing he knew to do. He followed.

The rest of the day was a blur of exhaustion to Thomas. He and Minho made it back to the Glade, went to the Map Room, wrote up the day’s Maze route, compared it to the previous day’s. Then there were the walls closing and dinner. Chuck tried talking to him several times, but all Thomas could do was nod and shake his head, only half hearing, he was so tired.

Before twilight faded to blackness, he was already in his new favorite spot in the forest corner, curled up against the ivy, wondering if he could ever run again. Wondering how he could possibly do the same thing tomorrow. Especially when it seemed so pointless. Being a Runner had lost its glamour. After one day.

Every ounce of the noble courage he’d felt, the will to make a difference, the promise to himself to reunite Chuck with his family—it all vanished into an exhausted fog of hopeless, wretched weariness.

He was somewhere very close to sleep when a voice spoke in his head, a pretty, feminine voice that sounded as if it came from a fairy goddess trapped in his skull. The next morning, when everything started going crazy, he’d wonder if the voice had been real or part of a dream. But he heard it all the same, and remembered every word:

Tom, I just triggered the Ending.

CHAPTER 34

Thomas awoke to a weak, lifeless light. His first thought was that he must've gotten up earlier than usual, that dawn was still an hour away. But then he heard the shouts. And then he looked up, through the leafy canopy of branches.

The sky was a dull slab of gray—not the natural pale light of morning.

He jumped to his feet, put his hand on the wall to steady himself as he craned his neck to gawk toward the heavens. There was no blue, no black, no stars, no purplish fan of a creeping dawn. The sky, every last inch of it, was slate gray. Colorless and dead.

He looked down at his watch—it was a full hour past his mandatory waking time. The brilliance of the sun should've awakened him—had done so easily since he'd arrived at the Glade. But not today.

He glanced upward again, half expecting it to have changed back to normal. But it was all gray. Not cloudy, not twilight, not the early minutes of dawn. Just gray.

The sun had disappeared.

Thomas found most of the Gladers standing near the entrance to the Box, pointing at the dead sky, everyone talking at once. Based on the time, breakfast should've already been served, people should be working. But there was something about the largest object in the solar system vanishing that tended to disrupt normal schedules.

In truth, as Thomas silently watched the commotion, he didn't feel nearly as panicked or frightened as his instincts told him he ought to be. And it surprised him that so many of the others looked like lost chicks thrown from the coop. It was, in fact, ridiculous.

The sun obviously had *not* disappeared—that wasn't possible.

Though that was what it seemed like—signs of the ball of furious fire nowhere to be seen, the slanting shadows of morning absent. But he and all the Gladers were far too rational and intelligent to conclude such a thing. No, there had to be a scientifically acceptable reason for what they were witnessing. And whatever it was, to Thomas it meant one thing: the fact they could no longer see the sun probably meant they'd never been able to in the first place. A sun couldn't just disappear. Their sky had to have been—and still was—fabricated. Artificial.

In other words, the sun that had shone down on these people for two years, providing heat and life to everything, was not the sun at all. Somehow, it had been fake. Everything about this place was fake.

Thomas didn't know what that meant, didn't know how it was possible. But he knew it to be true—it was the only explanation his rational mind could accept. And it was obvious from the other Gladers' reactions that none of them had figured this out until now.

Chuck found him, and the look of fear on the boy's face pinched Thomas's heart.

"What do you think happened?" Chuck said, a pitiful tremor in his voice, his eyes glued to the sky. Thomas thought his neck must hurt something awful. "Looks like a big gray ceiling—close enough you could almost touch it."

Thomas followed Chuck's gaze and looked up. "Yeah, makes you wonder about this place." For the second time in twenty-four hours, Chuck had nailed it. The sky *did* look like a ceiling. Like the ceiling of a massive room. "Maybe something's broken. I mean, maybe it'll be back."

Chuck finally quit gawking and made eye contact with Thomas. "Broken? What's that supposed to mean?"

Before Thomas could answer, the faint memory of last night, before he fell asleep, came to him, Teresa's words inside his mind. She'd said, *I just triggered the Ending*. It couldn't be a coincidence, could it? A sour rot crept into his belly. Whatever the explanation, whatever that had been in the sky, the real sun or not, it was gone. And that couldn't be a good thing.

"Thomas?" Chuck asked, lightly tapping him on the upper arm.

"Yeah?" Thomas's mind felt hazy.

"What'd you mean by broken?" Chuck repeated.

Thomas felt like he needed time to think about it all. "Oh. I don't know. Must be things about this place we obviously don't understand. But you can't just make the sun disappear from space. Plus, there's still enough light to see by, as faint as it is. Where's that coming from?"

Chuck's eyes widened, as if the darkest, deepest secret of the universe had just been revealed to him. "Yeah, where *is* it coming from? What's going on, Thomas?"

Thomas reached out and squeezed the younger boy's shoulder. He felt awkward. "No clue, Chuck. Not a clue. But I'm sure Newt and Alby'll figure things out."

"Thomas!" Minho was running up to them. "Quit your leisure time with Chucky here and let's get going. We're already late."

Thomas was stunned. For some reason he'd expected the weird sky to throw all normal plans out the window.

"You're still going out there?" Chuck asked, clearly surprised as well. Thomas was glad the boy had asked the question for him.

"Of course we are, shank," Minho said. "Don't you have some sloppin' to do?" He looked from Chuck to Thomas. "If anything, gives us even more reason to get our butts out there. If the sun's really gone, won't be long before plants and animals drop dead, too. I think the desperation level just went up a notch."

The last statement struck Thomas deep down. Despite all his ideas—all the things he'd pitched to Minho—he wasn't eager to change how things had been done for the last two years. A mixture of excitement and dread swept over him when he realized what Minho was saying. "You mean we're going to stay out there overnight? Explore the walls a little more closely?"

Minho shook his head. "No, not yet. Maybe soon, though." He looked up toward the sky. "Man—what a way to wake up. Come on, let's go."

Thomas was quiet as he and Minho got their things ready and ate a lightning-fast breakfast. His thoughts were churning too much about the gray sky and what Teresa—at least, he thought it had been the girl—had told him in his mind to participate in any conversation.

What had she meant by the Ending? Thomas couldn't knock the feeling that he should

tell somebody. Everybody.

But he didn't know what it meant, and he didn't want them to know he had a girl's voice in his head. They'd think he'd really gone bonkers, maybe even lock him up—and for good this time.

After a lot of deliberation, he decided to keep his mouth shut and went running with Minho for his second day of training, below a bleak and colorless sky.

They saw the Griever before they'd even made it to the door leading from Section Eight to Section One.

Minho was a few feet ahead of Thomas. He'd just rounded a corner to the right when he slammed to a stop, his feet almost skidding out from under him. He jumped back and grabbed Thomas by the shirt, pushing him against the wall.

"Shh," Minho whispered. "There's a freaking Grievers up there."

Thomas widened his eyes in question, felt his heart pick up the pace, even though it had already been pumping hard and steady.

Minho simply nodded, then put his finger to his lips. He let go of Thomas's shirt and took a step back, then crept up to the corner around which he'd seen the Grievers. Very slowly, he leaned forward to take a peek. Thomas wanted to scream at him to be careful.

Minho's head jerked back and he turned to face Thomas. His voice was still a whisper. "It's just sitting up there—almost like that dead one we saw."

"What do we do?" Thomas asked, as quietly as possible. He tried to ignore the panic flaring inside him. "Is it coming toward us?"

"No, idiot—I just told you it was *sitting* there."

"Well?" Thomas raised his hands to his sides in frustration. "What do we do?" Standing so close to a Grievers seemed like a really bad idea.

Minho paused a few seconds, thinking before he spoke. "We have to go that way to get to our section. Let's just watch it awhile—if it comes after us, we'll run back to the Glade." He took another peek, then quickly looked over his shoulder. "Crap—it's gone! Come on!"

Minho didn't wait for a response, didn't see the look of horror Thomas had just felt widen his own eyes. Minho took off running in the direction where he'd seen the Grievers. Though his instincts told him not to, Thomas followed.

He sprinted down the long corridor after Minho, turned left, then right. At every turn, they slowed so the Keeper could look around the corner first. Each time he whispered back to Thomas that he'd seen the tail end of the Grievers disappearing around the next turn. This went on for ten minutes, until they came to the long hallway that ended at the Cliff, where beyond lay nothing but the lifeless sky. The Grievers was charging toward that sky.

Minho stopped so abruptly Thomas almost ran him over. Then Thomas stared in shock as up ahead the Grievers dug in with its spikes and spun forward right up to the Cliff's edge, then off, into the gray abyss. The creature disappeared from sight, a shadow swallowed by more shadow.

CHAPTER 35

"That settles it," Minho said.

Thomas stood next to him on the edge of the Cliff, staring at the gray nothingness beyond. There was no sign of anything, to the left, right, down, up, or ahead, for as far as he could see. Nothing but a wall of blankness.

"Settles what?" Thomas asked.

"We've seen it three times now. Something's up."

"Yeah." Thomas knew what he meant, but waited for Minho's explanation anyway.

"That dead Griever I found—it ran this way, and we never saw it come back or go deeper into the Maze. Then those suckers we tricked into jumping past us."

"Tricked?" Thomas said. "Maybe not such a trick."

Minho looked over at him, contemplative. "Hmm. Anyway, then this." He pointed out at the abyss. "Not much doubt anymore—somehow the Grievers can *leave the Maze* this way. Looks like magic, but so does the sun disappearing."

"If they can leave this way," Thomas added, continuing Minho's line of reasoning, "so could we." A thrill of excitement shot through him.

Minho laughed. "There's your death wish again. Wanna hang out with the Grievers, have a sandwich, maybe?"

Thomas felt his hopes drop. "Got any better ideas?"

"One thing at a time, Greenie. Let's get some rocks and test this place out. There has to be some kind of hidden exit."

Thomas helped Minho as they scabbled around the corners and crannies of the Maze, picking up as many loose stones as possible. They got more by thumbing cracks in the wall, spilling broken chunks onto the ground. When they finally had a sizable pile, they hauled it over right next to the edge and took a seat, feet dangling over the side. Thomas looked down and saw nothing but a gray descent.

Minho pulled out his pad and pencil, placed them on the ground next to him. "All right, we gotta take good notes. And memorize it in that shuck head of yours, too. If there's some kind of optical illusion hiding an exit from this place, I don't wanna be the one who screws up when the first shank tries to jump into it."

"That shank oughtta be the Keeper of the Runners," Thomas said, trying to make a joke to hide his fear. Being this close to a place where Grievers might come out at any second was making him sweat. "You'd wanna hold on to one beauty of a rope."

Minho picked up a rock from their pile. "Yeah. Okay, let's take turns tossing them, zigzagging back and forth out there. If there's some kind of magical exit, hopefully it'll work with rocks, too—make them disappear."

Thomas took a rock and carefully threw it to their left, just in front of where the left wall of the corridor leading to the Cliff met the edge. The jagged piece of stone fell. And fell. Then disappeared into the gray emptiness.

Minho went next. He tossed his rock just a foot or so farther out than Thomas had. It also

fell far below. Thomas threw another one, another foot out. Then Minho. Each rock fell to the depths. Thomas kept following Minho's orders—they continued until they'd marked a line reaching at least a dozen feet from the Cliff, then moved their target pattern a foot to the right and started coming back toward the Maze.

All the rocks fell. Another line out, another line back. All the rocks fell. They threw enough rocks to cover the entire left half of the area in front of them, covering the distance anyone—or *anything*—could possibly jump. Thomas's discouragement grew with every toss, until it turned into a heavy mass of blah.

He couldn't help chiding himself—it'd been a stupid idea.

Then Minho's next rock disappeared.

It was the strangest, most hard-to-believe thing Thomas had ever seen.

Minho had thrown a large chunk, a piece that had fallen from one of the cracks in the wall. Thomas had watched, deeply concentrating on each and every rock. This one left Minho's hand, sailed forward, almost in the exact center of the Cliff line, started its descent to the unseen ground far below. Then it vanished, as if it had fallen through a plane of water or mist.

One second there, falling. Next second gone.

Thomas couldn't speak.

"We've thrown stuff off the Cliff before," Minho said. "How could we have ever missed that? I never saw anything disappear. Never."

Thomas coughed; his throat felt raw. "Do it again—maybe we blinked weird or something."

Minho did, throwing it at the same spot. And once again, it winked out of existence.

"Maybe you weren't looking carefully other times you threw stuff over," Thomas said. "I mean, it should be impossible—sometimes you don't look very hard for things you don't believe will or can happen."

They threw the rest of the rocks, aiming at the original spot and every inch around it. To Thomas's surprise, the spot in which the rocks disappeared proved only to be a few feet square.

"No wonder we missed it," Minho said, furiously writing down notes and dimensions, his best attempt at a diagram. "It's kind of small."

"The Grievers must barely fit through that thing." Thomas kept his eyes riveted to the area of the invisible floating square, trying to burn the distance and location in his mind, remember exactly where it was. "And when they come out, they must balance on the rim of the hole and jump over the empty space to the Cliff edge—it's not that far. If I could jump it, I'm sure it's easy for them."

Minho finished drawing, then looked up at the special spot. "How's this possible, dude? What're we looking at?"

"Like you said, it's not magic. Must be something like our sky turning gray. Some kind of optical illusion or hologram, hiding a doorway. This place is all jacked up." And, Thomas admitted to himself, kind of cool. His mind craved to know what kind of technology could be behind it all.

"Yeah, jacked up is right. Come on." Minho got up with a grunt and put on his backpack. "Better get as much of the Maze run as we can. With our new decorated sky, maybe other

weird things have happened out there. We'll tell Newt and Alby about this tonight. Don't know how it helps, but at least we know now where the shuck Grievers go."

"And probably where they come from," Thomas said as he took one last look at the hidden doorway. "The Griever Hole."

"Yeah, good a name as any. Let's go."

Thomas sat and stared, waiting for Minho to make a move. Several minutes passed in silence and Thomas realized his friend must be as fascinated as he was. Finally, without saying a word, Minho turned to leave. Thomas reluctantly followed and they ran into the gray-dark Maze.

* * *

Thomas and Minho found nothing but stone walls and ivy.

Thomas did the vine cutting and all the note-taking. It was hard for him to notice any changes from the day before, but Minho pointed out without thinking about it where the walls had moved. When they reached the final dead end and it was time to head back home, Thomas felt an almost uncontrollable urge to bag everything and stay there overnight, see what happened.

Minho seemed to sense it and grabbed his shoulder. "Not yet, dude. Not yet."

And so they'd gone back.

A somber mood rested over the Glade, an easy thing to happen when all is gray. The dim light hadn't changed a bit since they'd woken up that morning, and Thomas wondered if anything would change at "sunset" either.

Minho headed straight for the Map Room as they came through the West Door.

Thomas was surprised. He thought it was the last thing they should do. "Aren't you dying to tell Newt and Alby about the Griever Hole?"

"Hey, we're still Runners," Minho said, "and we still have a job." Thomas followed him to the steel door of the big concrete block and Minho turned to give him a wan smile. "But yeah, we'll do it quick so we can talk to them."

There were already other Runners milling about the room, drawing up their Maps when they entered. No one said a word, as if all speculation on the new sky had been exhausted. The hopelessness in the room made Thomas feel as if he were walking through mud-thick water. He knew he should also be exhausted, but he was too excited to feel it—he couldn't wait to see Newt's and Alby's reactions to the news about the Cliff.

He sat down at the table and drew up the day's Map based on his memory and notes, Minho looking over his shoulder the whole time, giving pointers. "I think that hall was actually cut off here, not there," and "Watch your proportions," and "Draw straighter, you shank." He was annoying but helpful, and fifteen minutes after entering the room, Thomas examined his finished product. Pride washed through him—it was just as good as any other Map he'd seen.

"Not bad," Minho said. "For a Greenie, anyway."

Minho got up and walked over to the Section One trunk and opened it. Thomas knelt down in front of it and took out the Map from the day before and held it up side by side with the one he'd just drawn.

"What am I looking for?" he asked.

"Patterns. But looking at two days' worth isn't gonna tell you jack. You really need to

study several weeks, look for patterns, anything. I know there's something there, something that'll help us. Just can't find it yet. Like I said, it sucks."

Thomas had an itch in the back of his mind, the same one he'd felt the very first time in this room. The Maze walls, moving. Patterns. All those straight lines—were they suggesting an entirely different kind of map? Pointing to something? He had such a heavy feeling that he was missing an obvious hint or clue.

Minho tapped him on the shoulder. "You can always come back and study your butt off after dinner, after we talk to Newt and Alby. Come on."

Thomas put the papers in the trunk and closed it, hating the twinge of unease he felt. It was like a prick in his side. Walls moving, straight lines, patterns ... There had to be an answer. "Okay, let's go."

They'd just stepped outside the Map Room, the heavy door clanging shut behind them, when Newt and Alby walked up, neither one of them looking very happy. Thomas's excitement immediately turned to worry.

"Hey," Minho said. "We were just—"

"Get on with it," Alby interrupted. "Ain't got time to waste. Find anything? Anything?"

Minho actually recoiled at the harsh rebuke, but his face seemed more confused to Thomas than hurt or angry. "Nice to see you, too. Yeah, we *did* find something, actually."

Oddly, Alby almost looked disappointed. "Cuz this whole shuck place is fallin' to pieces." He shot Thomas a nasty glare as if it were all his fault.

What's wrong with him? Thomas thought, feeling his own anger light up. They'd been working hard all day and this was their thanks?

"What do you mean?" Minho asked. "What else happened?"

Newt answered, nodding toward the Box as he did so. "Bloody supplies didn't come today. Come every week for two years, same time, same day. But not today."

All four of them looked over at the steel doors attached to the ground. To Thomas, there seemed to be a shadow hovering over it darker than the gray air surrounding everything else.

"Oh, we're shucked for good now," Minho whispered, his reaction alerting Thomas to how grave the situation really was.

"No sun for the plants," Newt said, "no supplies from the bloody Box—yeah, I'd say we're shucked, all right."

Alby had folded his arms, still glaring at the Box as if trying to open the doors with his mind. Thomas hoped their leader didn't bring up what he'd seen in the Changing—or anything related to Thomas, for that matter. Especially now.

"Yeah, anyway," Minho continued. "We found something weird."

Thomas waited, hoping that Newt or Alby would have a positive reaction to the news, maybe even have further information to shed light on the mystery.

Newt raised his eyebrows. "What?"

Minho took a full three minutes to explain, starting with the Griever they followed and ending with the results of their rock-throwing experiment.

"Must lead to where the ... ya know ... Grievers *live*," he said when finished.

"The Griever Hole," Thomas added. All three of them looked at him, annoyed, as if he had no right to speak. But for the first time, being treated like the Greenie didn't bother

him that much.

"Gotta bloody see that for myself," Newt said. Then murmured, "Hard to believe." Thomas couldn't have agreed more.

"I don't know what we can do," Minho said. "Maybe we could build something to block off that corridor."

"No way," Newt said. "Shuck things can climb the bloody walls, remember? Nothing *we* could build would keep them out."

But a commotion outside the Homestead shifted their attention away from the conversation. A group of Gladers stood at the front door of the house, shouting to be heard over each other. Chuck was in the group, and when he saw Thomas and the others he ran over, a look of excitement spread across his face. Thomas could only wonder what crazy thing had happened now.

"What's going on?" Newt asked.

"She's awake!" Chuck yelled. "The girl's awake!"

Thomas's insides twisted; he leaned against the concrete wall of the Map Room. The girl. The girl who spoke in his head. He wanted to run before it happened again, before she spoke to him in his mind.

But it was too late.

Tom, I don't know any of these people. Come get me! It's all fading.... I'm forgetting everything but you.... I have to tell you things! But it's all fading....

He couldn't understand how she did it, how she was inside his head.

Teresa paused, then said something that made no sense.

The Maze is a code, Tom. The Maze is a code.

Thomas didn't want to see her. He didn't want to see anybody.

As soon as Newt set off to go and talk to the girl, Thomas silently slipped away, hoping no one would notice him in the excitement. With everyone's thoughts on the stranger waking up from her coma, it proved easy. He skirted the edge of the Glade, then, breaking into a run, he headed for his place of seclusion behind the Deadhead forest.

He crouched in the corner, nestled in the ivy, and threw his blanket over himself, head and all. Somehow, it seemed like a way to hide from Teresa's intrusion into his mind. A few minutes passed, his heart finally calming to a slow roll.

"Forgetting about you was the worst part."

At first, Thomas thought it was another message in his head; he squeezed his fists against his ears. But no, it'd been ... different. He'd heard it with his ears. A girl's voice. Chills creeping up his spine, he slowly lowered the blanket.

Teresa stood to his right, leaning against the massive stone wall. She looked so different now, awake and alert—*standing*. Wearing a long-sleeved white shirt, blue jeans, and brown shoes, she looked—impossibly—even more striking than when he'd seen her in the coma. Black hair framed the fair skin of her face, with eyes the blue of pure flame.

"Tom, do you really not remember me?" Her voice was soft, a contrast from the crazed, hard sound he'd heard from her after she first arrived, when she'd delivered the message that *everything was going to change*.

"You mean ... you remember *me*?" he asked, embarrassed at the squeak that escaped on the last word.

"Yes. No. Maybe." She threw her arms up in disgust. "I can't explain it."

Thomas opened his mouth, then closed it without saying anything.

"I remember *remembering*," she muttered, sitting down with a heavy sigh; she pulled her legs up to wrap her arms around her knees. "Feelings. Emotions. Like I have all these shelves in my head, labeled for memories and faces, but they're empty. As if everything before this is just on the other side of a white curtain. Including you."

"But how do you know me?" He felt like the walls were spinning around him.

Teresa turned toward him. "I don't know. Something about before we came to the Maze. Something about us. It's mostly empty, like I said."

"You know about the Maze? Who told you? You just woke up."

"I ... It's all very confusing right now." She held a hand out. "But I know you're my friend."

Almost in a daze, Thomas pulled the blanket completely off and leaned forward to shake her hand. "I like how you call me Tom." As soon as it came out, he was sure he couldn't have possibly said anything dumber.

Teresa rolled her eyes. "That's your *name*, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but most people call me Thomas. Well, except Newt—he calls me Tommy. Tom makes me feel ... like I'm at home or something. Even though I don't know what home *is*."

He let out a bitter laugh. "Are we messed up or what?"

She smiled for the first time, and he almost had to look away, as if something that nice didn't belong in such a glum and gray place, as if he had no right to look at her expression.

"Yeah, we're messed up," she said. "And I'm scared."

"So am I, trust me." Which was definitely the understatement of the day.

A long moment passed, both of them looking toward the ground.

"What's ...," he began, not sure how to ask it. "How ... did you talk to me inside my mind?"

Teresa shook her head. *No idea—I can just do it*, she thought to him. Then she spoke aloud again. "It's like if you tried to ride a bicycle here—if they had one. I bet you could do it without thinking. But do you remember learning to ride one?"

"No. I mean ... I remember riding one, but not learning." He paused, feeling a wave of sadness. "Or who taught me."

"Well," she said, her eyes flickering as if she was embarrassed by his sudden gloom. "Anyway ... it's kind of like that."

"Really clears things up."

Teresa shrugged. "You didn't tell anyone, did you? They'd think we're crazy."

"Well ... when it first happened, I did. But I think Newt just thinks I was stressed out or something." Thomas felt fidgety, like he'd go nuts if he didn't move. He stood up, started pacing in front of her. "We need to figure things out. That weird note you had about being the last person to ever come here, your coma, the fact you can talk to me telepathically. Any ideas?"

Teresa followed him with her eyes as he walked back and forth. "Save your breath and quit asking. All I have are faint impressions—that you and I were important, that we were used somehow. That we're smart. That we came here for a reason. I know I triggered the Ending, whatever that means." She groaned, her face reddening. "My memories are as useless as yours."

Thomas knelt down in front of her. "No, they're not. I mean, the fact that you knew my memory had been wiped without asking me—and this other stuff. You're way ahead of me and everybody else."

Their eyes met for a long time; it looked like her mind was spinning, trying to make sense of it all.

I just don't know, she said in his mind.

"There you go again," Thomas said aloud, though he was relieved that her trick didn't really freak him out anymore. "How do you do that?"

"I just do, and I bet you can, too."

"Well, can't say I'm too anxious to try." He sat back down and pulled his legs up, much like she had done. "You said something to me—in my head—right before you found me over here. You said 'The Maze is a code.' What did you mean?"

She shook her head slightly. "When I first woke up, it was like I'd entered an insane asylum—these strange guys hovering over my bed, the world tipping around me, memories swirling in my brain. I tried to reach out and grasp a few, and that was one of them. I can't really remember *why* I said it."

"Was there anything else?"

"Actually, yeah." She pulled up the sleeve of her left arm, exposing her bicep. Small letters were written across the skin in thin black ink.

"What's that?" he asked, leaning in for a better look.

"Read it yourself."

The letters were messy, but he could make them out when he got close enough.

WICKED is good

Thomas's heart beat faster. "I've seen that word—*wicked*." He searched his mind for what the phrase could possibly mean. "On the little creatures that live here. The beetle blades."

"What are those?" she asked.

"Just little lizardlike machines that spy on us for the Creators—the people who sent us here."

Teresa considered that for a moment, looking off into space. Then she focused on her arm. "I can't remember why I wrote this," she said as she wet her thumb and started rubbing off the words. "But don't let me forget—it has to mean something."

The three words ran through Thomas's mind over and over. "When did you write it?"

"When I woke up. They had a pen and notepad next to the bed. In the commotion I wrote it down."

Thomas was baffled by this girl—first the connection he'd felt to her from the very beginning, then the mind-speaking, now this. "Everything about you is weird. You know that, right?"

"Judging by your little hiding spot, I'd say you're not so normal yourself. Like living in the woods, do ya?"

Thomas tried to scowl, then smiled. He felt pathetic, and embarrassed about hiding. "Well, you look familiar to me and you claim we're friends. Guess I'll trust you."

He held out his hand for another shake, and she took it, holding on for a long time. A chill swept through Thomas that was surprisingly pleasant.

"All I want is to get back home," she said, finally letting go of his hand. "Just like the rest of you."

Thomas's heart sank as he snapped back to reality and remembered how grim the world had become. "Yeah, well, things pretty much suck right about now. The sun disappeared and the sky's gone gray, they didn't send us the weekly supplies—looks like things are going to end one way or another."

But before Teresa could answer, Newt was running out of the woods. "How in the ...," he said as he pulled up in front of them. Alby and a few others were right behind him. Newt looked at Teresa. "How'd you get here? Med-jack said you were there one second and buggin' gone the next."

Teresa stood up, surprising Thomas with her confidence. "Guess he forgot to tell the little part about me kicking him in the groin and climbing out the window."

Thomas almost laughed as Newt turned to an older boy standing nearby, whose face had turned bright red.

"Congrats, Jeff," Newt said. "You're officially the first guy here to get your butt beat by a girl."

Teresa didn't stop. "Keep talking like that and you'll be next."

Newt turned back to face them, but his face showed anything but fear. He stood, silently, just staring at them. Thomas stared back, wondering what was going through the older boy's head.

Alby stepped up. "I'm sick of this." He pointed at Thomas's chest, almost tapping it. "I wanna know who you are, who this shank girl is, and how you guys know each other."

Thomas almost wilted. "Alby, I swear—"

"She came straight to you after waking up, shuck-face!"

Anger surged inside Thomas—and worry that Alby would go off like Ben had. "So what? I know her, she knows me—or at least, we used to. That doesn't mean anything! I can't remember anything. Neither can she."

Alby looked at Teresa. "What did you do?"

Thomas, confused by the question, glanced at Teresa to see if *she* knew what he meant. But she didn't reply.

"What did you do!" Alby screamed. "First the sky, now this."

"I triggered something," she replied in a calm voice. "Not on purpose, I swear it. The Ending. I don't know what it means."

"What's wrong, Newt?" Thomas asked, not wanting to talk to Alby directly. "What happened?"

But Alby grabbed him by the shirt. "What happened? I'll tell ya what happened, shank. Too busy makin' lovey eyes to bother lookin' around? To bother noticing what freaking time it is!"

Thomas looked at his watch, realizing with horror what he'd missed, knowing what Alby was about to say before he said it.

"The *walls*, you shuck. The *Doors*. They didn't close tonight."

CHAPTER 37

Thomas was speechless. Everything would be different now. No sun, no supplies, no protection from the Grievers. Teresa had been right from the beginning—everything had changed. Thomas felt as if his breath had solidified, lodged itself in his throat.

Alby pointed at the girl. “I want her locked up. Now. Billy! Jackson! Put her in the Slammer, and ignore every word that comes out of her shuck mouth.”

Teresa didn’t react, but Thomas did enough for the both of them. “What’re you talking about? Alby, you can’t—” He stopped when Alby’s fiery eyes shot such a look of anger at him he felt his heart stutter. “But … how could you possibly blame her for the walls not closing?”

Newt stepped up, lightly placed a hand on Alby’s chest and pushed him back. “How could we not, Tommy? She bloody admitted it herself.”

Thomas turned to look at Teresa, paled at the sadness in her blue eyes. It felt like something had reached through his chest and squeezed his heart.

“Just be glad you ain’t goin’ with her, Thomas,” Alby said; he gave both of them one last glare before leaving. Thomas had never wanted so badly to punch someone.

Billy and Jackson came forward and grabbed Teresa by both arms, started escorting her away.

Before they could enter the trees, though, Newt stopped them. “Stay with her. I don’t care what happens, no one’s gonna touch this girl. Swear your lives on it.”

The two guards nodded, then walked away, Teresa in tow. It hurt Thomas even more to see how willingly she went. And he couldn’t believe how sad he felt—he wanted to keep talking to her. *But I just met her*, he thought. *I don’t even know her*. Yet he knew that wasn’t true. He already felt a closeness that could only have come from knowing her before the memory-wiped existence of the Glade.

Come see me, she said in his mind.

He didn’t know how to do it, how to talk to her like that. But he tried anyway.

I will. At least you’ll be safe in there.

She didn’t respond.

Teresa?

Nothing.

The next thirty minutes were an eruption of mass confusion.

Though there had been no discernible change in the light since the sun and blue sky hadn’t appeared that morning, it still felt like a darkness spread over the Glade. As Newt and Alby gathered the Keepers and put them in charge of making assignments and getting their groups inside the Homestead within the hour, Thomas felt like nothing more than a spectator, not sure how he could help.

The Builders—without their leader, Gally, who was still missing—were ordered to put up barricades at each open Door; they obeyed, although Thomas knew there wasn’t enough

time and there weren't materials to do much good. It almost seemed to him as if the Keepers wanted people busy, wanted to delay the inevitable panic attacks. Thomas helped as the Builders gathered every loose item they could find and piled them in the gaps, nailing things together as best they could. It looked ugly and pathetic and scared him to death—no way that'd keep the Grievers out.

As Thomas worked, he caught glimpses of the other jobs going on across the Glade.

Every flashlight in the compound was gathered and distributed to as many people as possible; Newt said he planned for everyone to sleep in the Homestead that night, and that they'd kill the lights, except for emergencies. Frypan's task was to take all the nonperishable food out of the kitchen and store it in the Homestead, in case they got trapped there—Thomas could only imagine how horrible that'd be. Others were gathering supplies and tools; Thomas saw Minho carrying weapons from the basement to the main building. Alby had made it clear they could take no chances: they'd make the Homestead their fortress, and must do whatever it took to defend it.

Thomas finally snuck away from the Builders and helped Minho, carrying up boxes of knives and barbwire-wrapped clubs. Then Minho said he had a special assignment from Newt, and more or less told Thomas to get lost, refusing to answer any of his questions.

This hurt Thomas's feelings, but he left anyway, really wanting to talk to Newt about something else. He finally found him, crossing the Glade on his way to the Blood House.

"Newt!" he called out, running to catch up. "You have to listen to me."

Newt stopped so suddenly Thomas almost ran into him. The older boy turned to give Thomas such an annoyed look he thought twice about saying anything.

"Make it quick," Newt said.

Thomas almost balked, not sure how to say what he was thinking. "You've gotta let the girl go. Teresa." He knew that she could only help, that she might still remember something valuable.

"Ah, glad to know you guys are buddies now." Newt started walking off. "Don't waste my time, Tommy."

Thomas grabbed his arm. "Listen to me! There's something about her—I think she and I were sent here to help end this whole thing."

"Yeah—end it by lettin' the bloody Grievers waltz in here and kill us? I've heard some sucky plans in my day, Greenie, but that's got 'em all beat."

Thomas groaned, wanting Newt to know how frustrated he felt. "No, I don't think that's what it means—the walls not closing."

Newt folded his arms; he looked exasperated. "Greenie, what're you yappin' about?"

Ever since Thomas had seen the words on the wall of the Maze—*world in catastrophe, killzone experiment department*—he'd been thinking about them. He knew if there was anyone who would believe him, it would be Newt. "I think ... I think we're here as part of some weird experiment, or test, or something like that. But it's supposed to end somehow. We can't live here forever—whoever sent us here wants it to end. One way or another." Thomas was relieved to get it off his chest.

Newt rubbed his eyes. "And that's supposed to convince me that everything's jolly—that I should let the girl go? Because she came and everything is suddenly do-or-die?"

"No, you're missing the point. I don't think she has anything to do with us being here."

She's just a pawn—they sent her here as our last tool or hint or whatever to help us get out.” Thomas took a deep breath. “And I think they sent me, too. Just because she was the trigger for the Ending doesn’t make her bad.”

Newt looked toward the Slammer. “You know what, I don’t buggin’ care right now. She can handle one night in there—if anything, she’ll be safer than us.”

Thomas nodded, sensing a compromise. “Okay, we get through tonight, somehow. Tomorrow, when we have a whole day of safety, we can figure out what to do with her. Figure out what we’re supposed to do.”

Newt snorted. “Tommy, what’s gonna make tomorrow any different? It’s been two bloody years, ya know.”

Thomas had an overwhelming feeling that all of these changes were a spur, a catalyst for the endgame. “Because now we *have* to solve it. We’ll be forced to. We can’t live that way anymore, day to day, thinking that what matters most is getting back to the Glade before the Doors close, snug and safe.”

Newt thought a minute as he stood there, the bustle of the Glader preparations surrounding both of them. “Dig deeper. Stay out there while the walls move.”

“Exactly,” Thomas said. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about. And maybe we could barricade or blow up the entrance to the Griefer Hole. Buy time to analyze the Maze.”

“Alby’s the one who won’t let the girl out,” Newt said with a nod toward the Homestead. “That guy’s not too high on you two shanks. But right now we just gotta slim ourselves and get to the wake-up.”

Thomas nodded. “We can fight ‘em off.”

“Done it before, haven’t you, Hercules?” Without smiling or even waiting for a response, Newt walked away, yelling at people to finish up and get inside the Homestead.

Thomas was happy with the conversation—it had gone about as well as he could’ve possibly hoped. He decided to hurry and talk to Teresa before it was too late. As he sprinted for the Slammer on the back side of the Homestead, he watched as Gladers started moving inside, most of them with arms full of one thing or another.

Thomas pulled up outside the small jail and caught his breath. “Teresa?” he finally asked through the barred window of the lightless cell.

Her face popped up on the other side, startling him.

He let out a small yelp before he could stop it—it took him a second to recover his wits. “You can be downright spooky, ya know?”

“That’s very sweet,” she said. “Thanks.” In the darkness her blue eyes seemed to glow like a cat’s.

“You’re welcome,” he answered, ignoring her sarcasm. “Listen, I’ve been thinking.” He paused to gather his thoughts.

“More than I can say for that Alby schmuck,” she muttered.

Thomas agreed, but was anxious to say what he’d come to say. “There’s gotta be a way out of this place—we just have to push it, stay out in the Maze longer. And what you wrote on your arm, and what you said about a code, it all has to mean something, right?” *It has to*, he thought. He couldn’t help feeling some hope.

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking the same thing. But first—can’t you get me out of here?” Her hands appeared, gripping the bars of the window. Thomas felt the ridiculous urge to reach

out and touch them.

"Well, Newt said maybe tomorrow." Thomas was just glad he'd gotten that much of a concession. "You'll have to make it through the night in there. It might actually be the safest place in the Glade."

"Thanks for asking him. Should be fun sleeping on this cold floor." She motioned behind her with a thumb. "Though I guess a Griever can't squeeze through this window, so I'll be happy, right?"

The mention of Grievers surprised him—he didn't remember talking about them to her yet. "Teresa, are you sure you've forgotten everything?"

She thought a second. "It's weird—I guess I do remember some stuff. Unless I just heard people talking while I was in the coma."

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter right now. I just wanted to see you before I went inside for the night." But he didn't want to leave; he almost wished he could get thrown in the Slammer with her. He grinned inside—he could only imagine Newt's response to *that* request.

"Tom?" Teresa said.

Thomas realized he was staring off in a daze. "Oh, sorry. Yeah?"

Her hands slipped back inside, disappeared. All he could see were her eyes, the pale glow of her white skin. "I don't know if I can do this—stay in this jail all night."

Thomas felt an incredible sadness. He wanted to steal Newt's keys and help her escape. But he knew that was a ridiculous idea. She'd just have to suffer and make do. He stared into those glowing eyes. "At least it won't get completely dark—looks like we're stuck with this twilight junk twenty-four hours a day now."

"Yeah...." She looked past him at the Homestead, then focused on him again. "I'm a tough girl—I'll be okay."

Thomas felt horrible leaving her there, but he knew he had no choice. "I'll make sure they let you out first thing tomorrow, okay?"

She smiled, making him feel better. "That's a promise, right?"

"Promise." Thomas tapped his right temple. "And if you get lonely, you can talk to me with your ... trick all you want. I'll try to answer back." He'd accepted it now, almost wanted it. He just hoped he could figure out how to talk back, so they could have a conversation.

You'll get it soon, Teresa said in his mind.

"I wish." He stood there, really not wanting to leave. At all.

"You better go," she said. "I don't want your brutal murder on my conscience."

Thomas managed his own smile at that. "All right. See you tomorrow."

And before he could change his mind, he slipped away, heading around the corner toward the front door of the Homestead, just as the last couple of Gladers were entering, Newt shooing them in like errant chickens. Thomas stepped inside as well, followed by Newt, who closed the door behind him.

Just before it latched shut, Thomas thought he heard the first eerie moan of the Grievers, coming from somewhere deep in the Maze.

The night had begun.

CHAPTER 38

Most of them slept outside in normal times, so packing all those bodies into the Homestead made for a tight fit. The Keepers had organized and distributed the Gladers throughout the rooms, along with blankets and pillows. Despite the number of people and the chaos of such a change, a disturbing silence hung over the activities, as if no one wanted to draw attention to themselves.

When everyone was settled, Thomas found himself upstairs with Newt, Alby and Minho, and they were finally able to finish their discussion from earlier in the courtyard. Alby and Newt sat on the only bed in the room while Thomas and Minho sat next to them in chairs. The only other furniture was a crooked wooden dresser and a small table, on top of which rested a lamp providing what light they had. The gray darkness seemed to press on the window from outside, with promises of bad things to come.

"Closest I've come so far," Newt was saying, "to hangin' it all up. Shuck it all and kiss a Griever goodnight. Supplies cut, bloody gray skies, walls not closing. But we can't give up, and we all know it. The buggers who sent us here either want us dead or they're givin' us a spur. This or that, we gotta work our arses off till we're dead or not dead."

Thomas nodded, but didn't say anything. He agreed completely but had no concrete ideas on what to do. If he could just make it to tomorrow, maybe he and Teresa could come up with something to help.

Thomas glanced over at Alby, who was staring at the floor, seemingly lost in his own gloomy thoughts. His face still wore the long, weary look of depression, his eyes sunken and hollow. The Changing had been aptly named, considering what it had done to him.

"Alby?" Newt asked. "Are you gonna pitch in?"

Alby looked up, surprise crossing his face as if he hadn't known that anyone else was in the room. "Huh? Oh. Yeah. Good that. But you've seen what happens at night. Just because Greenie the freaking superboy made it doesn't mean the rest of us can."

Thomas rolled his eyes ever so slightly at Minho—so tired of Alby's attitude.

If Minho felt the same way, he did a good job of hiding it. "I'm with Thomas and Newt. We gotta quit boohooing and feeling sorry for ourselves." He rubbed his hands together and sat forward in his chair. "Tomorrow morning, first thing, you guys can assign teams to study the Maps full-time while the Runners go out. We'll pack our stuff shuck-full so we can stay out there a few days."

"What?" Alby asked, his voice finally showing some emotion. "What do you mean, *days*?"

"I mean, *days*. With open Doors and no sunset, there's no point in coming back here, anyway. Time to stay out there and see if anything opens up when the walls move. *If* they still move."

"No way," Alby said. "We have the Homestead to hide in—and if that ain't workin', the Map Room and the Slammer. We can't freaking ask people to go out there and die, Minho! Who'd volunteer for that?"

"Me," Minho said. "And Thomas."

Everyone looked at Thomas; he simply nodded. Although it scared him to death, exploring the Maze—really exploring it—was something he'd wanted to do from the first time he'd learned about it.

"I will if I have to," Newt said, surprising Thomas; though he'd never talk about it, the older boy's limp was a constant reminder that something horrible had happened to him out in the Maze. "And I'm sure all the Runners'll do it."

"With your bum leg?" Alby asked, a harsh laugh escaping his lips.

Newt frowned, looked at the ground. "Well, I don't feel good askin' Gladers to do something if I'm not bloody willing to do it myself."

Alby scooted back on the bed and propped his feet up. "Whatever. Do what you want."

"Do what I want?" Newt asked, standing up. "What's wrong with you, man? Are you tellin' me we have a choice? Should we just sit around on our butts and wait to be snuffed by the Grievers?"

Thomas wanted to stand up and cheer, sure that Alby would finally snap out of his doldrums.

But their leader didn't look in the least bit reprimanded or remorseful. "Well, it sounds better than running *to* them."

Newt sat back down. "Alby. You gotta start talkin' reason."

As much as he hated to admit it, Thomas knew they needed Alby if they were going to accomplish anything. The Gladers looked up to him.

Alby finally took a deep breath, then looked at each of them in turn. "You guys know I'm all screwed up. Seriously, I'm ... sorry. I shouldn't be the stupid leader anymore."

Thomas held his breath. He couldn't believe Alby had just said that.

"Oh bloody—" Newt started.

"No!" Alby shouted, his face showing humility, surrender. "That's not what I meant. Listen to me. I ain't saying we should switch or any of that klunk. I'm just saying ... I think I need to let you guys make the decisions. I don't trust myself. So ... yeah, I'll do whatever."

Thomas could see that both Minho and Newt were as surprised as he was.

"Uh ... okay," Newt said slowly. As if he was unsure. "We'll make it work, I promise. You'll see."

"Yeah," Alby muttered. After a long pause, he spoke up, a hint of odd excitement in his voice. "Hey, tell you what. Put me in charge of the Maps. I'll freaking work every Glader to the bone studying those things."

"Works for me," Minho said. Thomas wanted to agree, but didn't know if it was his place.

Alby put his feet back on the floor, sat up straighter. "Ya know, it was really stupid for us to sleep in here tonight. We should've been out in the Map Room, working."

Thomas thought that was the smartest thing he'd heard Alby say in a long time.

Minho shrugged. "Probably right."

"Well ... I'll go," Alby said with a confident nod. "Right now."

Newt shook his head. "Forget that, Alby. Already heard the bloody Grievers moaning out there. We can wait till the wake-up."

Alby leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Hey, you shucks are the ones giving me all the pep talks. Don't start whining when I actually listen. If I'm gonna do this, I gotta do it, be the old me. I need something to dive into."

Relief flooded Thomas. He'd grown sick of all the contention.

Alby stood up. "Seriously, I need this." He moved toward the door of the room as if he really meant to leave.

"You can't be serious," Newt said. "You can't go out there now!"

"I'm going, and that's that." Alby took his ring of keys from his pocket and rattled them mockingly—Thomas couldn't believe the sudden bravery. "See you shucks in the morning."

And then he walked out.

It was strange to know that the night grew later, that darkness should've swallowed the world around them, but to see only the pale gray light outside. It made Thomas feel off-kilter, as if the urge to sleep that grew steadily with every passing minute were somehow unnatural. Time slowed to an agonizing crawl; he felt as if the next day might never come.

The other Gladers settled themselves, turning in with their pillows and blankets for the impossible task of sleeping. No one said much, the mood somber and grim. All you could hear were quiet shuffles and whispers.

Thomas tried hard to force himself to sleep, knowing it would make the time pass faster, but after two hours he'd still had no luck. He lay on the floor in one of the upper rooms, on top of a thick blanket, several other Gladers crammed in there with him, almost body to body. The bed had gone to Newt.

Chuck had ended up in another room, and for some reason Thomas pictured him huddled in a dark corner, crying, squeezing his blankets to his chest like a teddy bear. The image saddened Thomas so deeply he tried to replace it, but to no avail.

Almost every person had a flashlight by their side in case of emergency. Otherwise, Newt had ordered all lights extinguished despite the pale, deathly glow of their new sky—no sense attracting any more attention than necessary. Anything that *could* be done on such short notice to prepare for a Griever attack had been done: windows boarded up, furniture moved in front of doors, knives handed out as weapons ...

But none of that made Thomas feel safe.

The anticipation of what might happen was overpowering, a suffocating blanket of misery and fear that began to take on a life of its own. He almost wished the suckers would just come and get it over with. The waiting was unbearable.

The distant wails of the Grievers grew closer as the night stretched on, every minute seeming to last longer than the one before it.

Another hour passed. Then another. Sleep finally came, but in miserable fits. Thomas guessed it was about two in the morning when he turned from his back to his stomach for the millionth time that night. He put his hands under his chin and stared at the foot of the bed, almost a shadow in the dim light.

Then everything changed.

A mechanized surge of machinery sounded from outside, followed by the familiar rolling clicks of a Griever on the stony ground, as if someone had scattered a handful of nails. Thomas shot to his feet, as did most of the others.

But Newt was up before anyone, waving his arms, then shushing the room by putting a finger to his lips. Favoring his bad leg, he tiptoed toward the lone window in the room, which was covered by three hastily nailed boards. Large cracks allowed for plenty of space

to peek outside. Carefully, Newt leaned in to take a look, and Thomas crept over to join him.

He crouched below Newt against the lowest of the wooden boards, pressing his eye against a crack—it was terrifying being so close to the wall. But all he saw was the open Glade; he didn't have enough space to look up or down or to the side, just straight ahead. After a minute or so, he gave up and turned to sit with his back against the wall. Newt walked over and sat back down on the bed.

A few minutes passed, various Grievers sounds penetrating the walls every ten to twenty seconds. The squeal of small engines followed by a grinding spin of metal. The clicking of spikes against the hard stone. Things snapping and opening and snapping. Thomas winced in fear every time he heard something.

Sounded like three or four of them were just outside. At least.

He heard the twisted animal-machines come closer, so close, waiting on the stone blocks below. All hums and metallic clatter.

Thomas's mouth dried up—he'd seen them face to face, remembered it all too well; he had to remind himself to breathe. The others in the room were still; no one made a sound. Fear seemed to hover in the air like a blizzard of black snow.

One of the Grievers sounded like it was moving toward the house. Then the clicking of its spikes against the stone suddenly turned into a deeper, hollower sound. Thomas could picture it all: the creature's metal spikes digging into the wooden sides of the Homestead, the massive creature rolling its body, climbing up toward their room, defying gravity with its strength. Thomas heard the Grievers' spikes shred the wood siding in their path as they tore out and rotated around to take hold once again. The whole building shuddered.

The crunching and groaning and snapping of the wood became the only sounds in the world to Thomas, horrifying. They grew louder, *closer*—the other boys had shuffled across the room and as far away from the window as possible. Thomas finally followed suit, Newt right beside him; everyone huddled against the far wall, staring at the window.

Just when it grew unbearable—just as Thomas realized the Griever was right outside the window—everything fell silent. Thomas could almost hear his own heart beating.

Lights flickered out there, casting odd beams through the cracks between the wooden boards. Then a thin shadow interrupted the light, moving back and forth. Thomas knew that the Griever's probes and weapons had come out, searching for a feast. He imagined beetle blades out there, helping the creatures find their way. A few seconds later the shadow stopped; the light settled to a standstill, casting three unmoving planes of brightness into the room.

The tension in the air was thick; Thomas couldn't hear anyone breathing. He thought much the same must be going on in the other rooms of the Homestead. Then he remembered Teresa in the Slammer.

He was just wishing she'd say something to him when the door from the hallway suddenly whipped open. Gasps and shouts exploded throughout the room. The Gladers had been expecting something from the window, not from behind them. Thomas turned to see who'd opened the door, expecting a frightened Chuck or maybe a reconsidering Alby. But when he saw who stood there, his skull seemed to contract, squeezing his brain in shock.

It was Gally.

CHAPTER 39

Gally's eyes raged with lunacy; his clothes were torn and filthy. He dropped to his knees and stayed there, his chest heaving with deep, sucking breaths. He looked about the room like a rabid dog searching for someone to bite. No one said a word. It was as if they all believed as Thomas did—that Gally was only a figment of their imagination.

"They'll kill you!" Gally screamed, spittle flying everywhere. "The Grievers will kill you all—one every night till it's over!"

Thomas watched, speechless, as Gally staggered to his feet and walked forward, dragging his right leg with a heavy limp. No one in the room moved a muscle as they watched, obviously too stunned to do anything. Even Newt stood mouth agape. Thomas was almost more afraid of their surprise visitor than he was of the Grievers just outside the window.

Gally stopped, standing just a few feet in front of Thomas and Newt; he pointed at Thomas with a bloody finger. "You," he said with a sneer so pronounced it went past comical to flat-out disturbing. "It's all your fault!" Without warning he swung his left hand, forming it into a fist as it came around and crashed into Thomas's ear. Crying out, Thomas crumpled to the ground, more taken by surprise than pain. He scrambled to his feet as soon as he'd hit the floor.

Newt had finally snapped out of his daze and pushed Gally away. Gally stumbled backward and crashed into the desk by the window. The lamp scooted off the side and broke into pieces on the ground. Thomas assumed Gally would retaliate, but he straightened instead, taking everyone in with his mad gaze.

"It can't be solved," he said, his voice now quiet and distant, spooky. "The shuck Maze'll kill all you shanks.... The Grievers'll kill you ... one every night till it's over.... I ... It's better this way...." His eyes fell to the floor. "They'll only kill you one a night ... their stupid Variables ..."

Thomas listened in awe, trying to suppress his fear so he could memorize everything the crazed boy said.

Newt took a step forward. "Gally, shut your bloody hole—there's a Griever right out the window. Just sit on your butt and be quiet—maybe it'll go away."

Gally looked up, his eyes narrowing. "You don't get it, Newt. You're too stupid—you've always been too stupid. There's no way out—there's no way to win! They're gonna kill you, all of you—one by *one!*"

Screaming the last word, Gally threw his body toward the window and started tearing at the wooden boards like a wild animal trying to escape a cage. Before Thomas or anyone else could react, he'd already ripped one board free; he threw it to the ground.

"No!" Newt yelled, running forward. Thomas followed to help, in utter disbelief at what was happening.

Gally ripped off the second board just as Newt reached him. He swung it backward with both hands and connected with Newt's head, sent him sprawling across the bed as a small spray of blood sprinkled the sheets. Thomas pulled up short, readying himself for a fight.

“Gally!” Thomas yelled. “What’re you *doing!*”

The boy spat on the ground, panting like a winded dog. “You shut your shuck-face, *Thomas*. You shut up! I know who you are, but I don’t care anymore. I can only do what’s right.”

Thomas felt as if his feet were rooted to the ground. He was completely baffled by what Gally was saying. He watched the boy reach back and rip loose the final wooden board. The instant the discarded slab hit the floor of the room, the glass of the window exploded inward like a swarm of crystal wasps. Thomas covered his face and fell to the floor, kicking his legs out to scoot his body as far away as possible. When he bumped into the bed, he gathered himself and looked up, ready to face his world coming to an end.

A Griever’s pulsating, bulbous body had squirmed halfway through the destroyed window, metallic arms with pincers snapping and clawing in all directions. Thomas was so terrified, he barely registered that everyone else in the room had fled to the hallway—all except Newt, who lay unconscious on the bed.

Frozen, Thomas watched as one of the Griever’s long arms reached for the lifeless body. That was all it took to break him from his fear. He scrambled to his feet, searched the floor around him for a weapon. All he saw were knives—they couldn’t help him now. Panic exploded within him, consumed him.

Then Gally was speaking again; the Griever pulled back its arm, as if it needed the thing to be able to observe and listen. But its body kept churning, trying to squeeze its way inside.

“No one ever understood!” the boy screamed over the horrible noise of the creature, crunching its way deeper into the Homestead, ripping the wall to pieces. “No one ever understood what I saw, what the Changing did to me! Don’t go back to the real world, Thomas! You *don’t* … *want* … to remember!”

Gally gave Thomas a long, haunted look, his eyes full of terror; then he turned and dove onto the writhing body of the Griever. Thomas yelled out as he watched every extended arm of the monster immediately retract and clasp onto Gally’s arms and legs, making escape or rescue impossible. The boy’s body sank several inches into the creature’s squishy flesh, making a horrific squelching sound. Then, with surprising speed, the Griever pushed itself back outside the shattered frame of the window and began descending toward the ground below.

Thomas ran to the jagged, gaping hole, looked down just in time to see the Griever land and start scooting across the Glade, Gally’s body appearing and disappearing as the thing rolled. The lights of the monster shone brightly, casting an eerie yellow glow across the stone of the open West Door, where the Griever exited into the depths of the Maze. Then, seconds later, several other monsters followed close behind their companion, whirring and clicking as if celebrating their victory.

Thomas was sickened to the verge of throwing up. He began to back away from the window, but something outside caught his eye. He quickly leaned out of the building to get a better look. A lone shape was sprinting across the courtyard of the Glade toward the exit through which Gally had just been taken.

Despite the poor light, Thomas realized who it was immediately. He screamed—yelled at him to stop—but it was too late.

Minho, running full speed, disappeared into the Maze.

CHAPTER 40

Lights blazed throughout the Homestead. Gladers ran about, everyone talking at once. A couple of boys cried in a corner. Chaos ruled.

Thomas ignored all of it.

He ran into the hallway, then leaped down the stairs three at a time. He pushed his way through a crowd in the foyer, tore out of the Homestead and toward the West Door, sprinting. He pulled up just short of the threshold of the Maze, his instincts forcing him to think twice about entering. Newt called to him from behind, delaying the decision.

"Minho followed it out there!" Thomas yelled when Newt caught up to him, a small towel pressed against the wound on his head. A patchy spot of blood had already seeped through the white material.

"I saw," Newt said, pulling the towel away to look at it; he grimaced and put it back. "Shuck it, that hurts like a mother. Minho must've finally fried his last bit of brain cells—not to mention Gally. Always knew he was crazy."

Thomas could only worry about Minho. "I'm going after him."

"Time to be a bloody hero again?"

Thomas looked at Newt sharply, hurt by the rebuke. "You think I do things to impress you shanks? Please. All I care about is getting out of here."

"Yeah, well, you're a regular toughie. But right now we've got worse problems."

"What?" Thomas knew if he wanted to catch up with Minho he had no time for this.

"Somebody—" Newt began.

"There he is!" Thomas shouted. Minho had just turned a corner up ahead and was coming straight for them. Thomas cupped his hands. "What were you doing, idiot!"

Minho waited until he made it back through the Door, then bent over, hands on his knees, and sucked in a few breaths before answering. "I just ... wanted to ... make sure."

"Make sure of what?" Newt asked. "Lotta good you'd be, taken with Gally."

Minho straightened and put his hands on his hips, still breathing heavily. "Slim it, boys! I just wanted to see if they went toward the Cliff. Toward the Grievers Hole."

"And?" Thomas said.

"Bingo." Minho wiped sweat from his forehead.

"I just can't believe it," Newt said, almost whispering. "What a night."

Thomas's thoughts tried to drift toward the Hole and what it all meant, but he couldn't shake the thought of what Newt had been about to say before they saw Minho return. "What were you about to tell me?" he asked. "You said we had worse—"

"Yeah." Newt pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "You can still see the buggin' smoke."

Thomas looked in that direction. The heavy metal door of the Map Room was slightly ajar, a wispy trail of black smoke drifting out and into the gray sky.

"Somebody burned the Map trunks," Newt said. "Every last one of 'em."

For some reason, Thomas didn't care about the Maps that much—they seemed pointless

anyway. He stood outside the window of the Slammer, having left Newt and Minho when they went to investigate the sabotage of the Map Room. Thomas had noticed them exchange an odd look before they split up, almost as if communicating some secret with their eyes. But Thomas could think of only one thing.

"Teresa?" he asked.

Her face appeared, hands rubbing her eyes. "Was anybody killed?" she asked, somewhat groggy.

"Were you *sleeping?*" Thomas asked. He was relieved to see that she appeared okay, felt himself relax.

"I was," she responded. "Until I heard something shred the Homestead to bits. What happened?"

Thomas shook his head in disbelief. "I don't know how you could've slept through the sound of all those Grievers out here."

"You try coming out of a coma sometime. See how you do." *Now answer my question,* she said inside his head.

Thomas blinked, momentarily surprised by the voice since she hadn't done it in a while. "Cut that junk out."

"Just tell me what happened."

Thomas sighed; it was such a long story, and he didn't feel like telling the whole thing. "You don't know Gally, but he's a psycho kid who ran away. He showed up, jumped on a Griever, and they all took off into the Maze. It was really weird." He still couldn't believe it had actually happened.

"Which is saying a lot," Teresa said.

"Yeah." He looked behind him, hoping to see Alby somewhere. Surely he'd let Teresa out now. Gladers were scattered all over the complex, but there was no sign of their leader. He turned back to Teresa. "I just don't get it. Why would the Grievers have left after getting Gally? He said something about them killing us one a night until we were all dead—he said it at least twice."

Teresa put her hands through the bars, rested her forearms against the concrete sill. "Just one a night? Why?"

"I don't know. He also said it had to do with ... trials. Or variables. Something like that." Thomas had the same strange urge he'd had the night before—to reach out and take one of her hands. He stopped himself, though.

"Tom, I was thinking about what you told me I said. That the Maze is a code. Being holed up in here does wonders for making the brain do what it was made for."

"What do you think it means?" Intensely interested, he tried to block out the shouts and chatter rumbling through the Glade as others found out about the Map Room being burned.

"Well, the walls move every day, right?"

"Yeah." He could tell she was really on to something.

"And Minho said they think there's a pattern, right?"

"Right." Gears were starting to shift into place inside Thomas's head as well, almost as if a prior memory was beginning to break loose.

"Well, I can't remember why I said that to you about the code. I know when I was coming out of the coma all sorts of thoughts and memories swirled through my head like

crazy, almost as if I could feel someone *emptying* my mind, sucking them out. And I felt like I needed to say that thing about the code before I lost it. So there must be an important reason.”

Thomas almost didn’t hear her—he was thinking harder than he had in a while. “They always compare each section’s Map to the one from the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that, day by day, each Runner just analyzing their own Section. What if they’re supposed to compare the Maps to *other* sections ...” He trailed off, feeling like he was on the cusp of something.

Teresa seemed to ignore him, doing her own theorizing. “The first thing the word *code* makes me think of is letters. Letters in the alphabet. Maybe the Maze is trying to *spell* something.”

Everything came together so quickly in Thomas’s mind, he almost heard an audible click, as if the pieces all snapped into place at once. “You’re right—you’re right! But the Runners have been looking at it wrong this whole time. They’ve been analyzing it the wrong way!”

Teresa gripped the bars now, her knuckles white, her face pressed against the iron rods. “What? What’re you talking about?”

Thomas grabbed the two bars outside of where she held on, moved close enough to smell her—a surprisingly pleasant scent of sweat and flowers. “Minho said the patterns repeat themselves, only they can’t figure out what it means. But they’ve always studied them section by section, comparing one day to the next. What if each day is a separate piece of the code, and they’re supposed to use all eight sections together somehow?”

“You think maybe each day is trying to reveal a word?” Teresa asked. “With the wall movements?”

Thomas nodded. “Or maybe a letter a day, I don’t know. But they’ve always thought the movements would reveal how to escape, not spell something. They’ve been studying it like a map, not like a picture of something. We’ve gotta—” Then he stopped, remembering what he’d just been told by Newt. “Oh, no.”

Teresa’s eyes flared with worry. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh no oh no oh no ...” Thomas let go of the bars and stumbled back a step as the realization hit him. He turned to look at the Map Room. The smoke had lessened, but it still wafted out the door, a dark, hazy cloud covering the entire area.

“What’s wrong?” Teresa repeated. She couldn’t see the Map Room from her angle.

Thomas faced her again. “I didn’t think it mattered....”

“*What!*” she demanded.

“Someone *burned* all the Maps. If there was a code, it’s gone.”

CHAPTER 41

"I'll be back," Thomas said, turning to go. His stomach was full of acid. "I gotta find Newt, see if any of the Maps survived."

"Wait!" Teresa yelled. "Get me out of here!"

But there was no time, and Thomas felt awful about it. "I can't—I'll be back, I promise." He turned before she could protest and set off at a sprint for the Map Room and its foggy black cloud of smoke. Needles of pain pricked his insides. If Teresa was right, and they'd been that close to figuring out some kind of clue to get out of there, only to see it literally lost in flames ... It was so upsetting it hurt.

The first thing Thomas saw when he ran up was a group of Gladers huddled just outside the large steel door, still ajar, its outer edge blackened with soot. But as he got closer, he realized they were surrounding something on the ground, all of them looking down at it. He spotted Newt, kneeling there in the middle, leaning over a body.

Minho was standing behind him, looking distraught and dirty, and spotted Thomas first. "Where'd you go?" he asked.

"To talk to Teresa—what happened?" He waited anxiously for the next dump of bad news.

Minho's forehead creased in anger. "Our Map Room was set on fire and you ran off to talk to your shuck girlfriend? What's wrong with you?"

Thomas knew the rebuke should've stung, but his mind was too preoccupied. "I didn't think it mattered anymore—if you haven't figured out the Maps by now ..."

Minho looked disgusted, the pale light and fog of smoke making his face seem almost sinister. "Yeah, this'd be a great freaking time to give up. What the—"

"I'm sorry—just tell me what happened." Thomas leaned over the shoulder of a skinny boy standing in front of him to get a look at the body on the ground.

It was Alby, flat on his back, a huge gash on his forehead. Blood seeped down both sides of his head, some into his eyes, crusting there. Newt was cleaning it with a wet rag, gingerly, asking questions in a whisper too low to hear. Thomas, concerned for Alby despite his recent ill-tempered ways, turned back to Minho and repeated his question.

"Winston found him out here, half dead, the Map Room blazing. Some shanks got in there and put it out, but way too late. All the trunks are burned to a freaking crisp. I suspected Alby at first, but whoever did it slammed his shuck head against the table—you can see where. It's nasty."

"Who do you think did it?" Thomas was hesitant to tell him about the possible discovery he and Teresa had made. With no Maps, the point was moot.

"Maybe Gally before he showed up in the Homestead and went psycho? Maybe the Grievers? I don't know, and I don't care. Doesn't matter."

Thomas was surprised at the sudden change of heart. "Now who's the one giving up?"

Minho's head snapped up so quickly, Thomas took a step backward. There was a flash of anger there, but it quickly melted into an odd expression of surprise or confusion. "That's

not what I meant, shank.”

Thomas narrowed his eyes in curiosity. “What did—”

“Just shut your hole for now.” Minho put his fingers to his lips, his eyes darting around to see if anyone was looking at him. “Just shut your hole. You’ll find out soon enough.”

Thomas took a deep breath and thought. If he expected the other boys to be honest, he should be honest too. He decided he’d better share about the possible Maze code, Maps or no Maps. “Minho, I need to tell you and Newt something. And we need to let Teresa out—she’s probably starving and we could use her help.”

“That stupid girl is the last thing I’m worried about.”

Thomas ignored the insult. “Just give us a few minutes—we have an idea. Maybe it’ll still work if enough Runners remember their Maps.”

This seemed to get Minho’s full attention—but again, there was that same strange look, as if Thomas was missing something very obvious. “An idea? What?”

“Just come over to the Slammer with me. You and Newt.”

Minho thought for a second. “Newt!” he called out.

“Yeah?” Newt stood up, refolding his bloody rag to find a clean spot. Thomas couldn’t help noticing that every inch was drenched in red.

Minho pointed down at Alby. “Let the Med-jacks take care of him. We need to talk.”

Newt gave him a questioning look, then handed the rag to the closest Glader. “Go find Clint—tell him we got worse problems than guys with buggin’ splinters.” When the kid ran off to do as he was told, Newt stepped away from Alby. “Talk about what?”

Minho nodded at Thomas, but didn’t say anything.

“Just come with me,” Thomas said. Then he turned and headed for the Slammer without waiting for a response.

“Let her out.” Thomas stood by the cell door, arms folded. “Let her out, and then we’ll talk. Trust me—you wanna hear it.”

Newt was covered in soot and dirt, his hair matted with sweat. He certainly didn’t seem to be in a very good mood. “Tommy, this is—”

“Please. Just open it—let her out. Please.” He wouldn’t give up this time.

Minho stood in front of the door with his hands on his hips. “How can we trust her?” he asked. “Soon as she woke up, the whole place fell to pieces. She even *admitted* she triggered something.”

“He’s got a point,” Newt said.

Thomas gestured through the door at Teresa. “We can trust her. Every time I’ve talked to her, it’s something about trying to get out of here. She was sent here just like the rest of us—it’s stupid to think she’s responsible for any of this.”

Newt grunted. “Then what the bloody shuck did she mean by sayin’ she triggered something?”

Thomas shrugged, refusing to admit that Newt had a good point. There had to be an explanation. “Who knows—her mind was doing all kinds of weird stuff when she woke up. Maybe we all went through that in the Box, talking gibberish before we came totally awake. Just let her out.”

Newt and Minho exchanged a long look.

"Come on," Thomas insisted. "What's she gonna do, run around and stab every Glader to death? Come on."

Minho sighed. "Fine. Just let the stupid girl out."

"I'm not stupid!" Teresa shouted, her voice muffled by the walls. "And I can hear every word you morons are saying!"

Newt's eyes widened. "Real sweet girl you picked up, Tommy."

"Just hurry," Thomas said. "I'm sure we have a lot to do before the Grievers come back tonight—if they don't come during the day."

Newt grunted and stepped up to the Slammer, pulling his keys out as he did so. A few clinks later the door swung wide open. "Come on."

Teresa walked out of the small building, glowering at Newt as she passed him. She gave a just-as-unpleasant glance toward Minho, then stopped to stand right next to Thomas. Her arm brushed against his; tingles shot across his skin, and he felt mortally embarrassed.

"All right, talk," Minho said. "What's so important?"

Thomas looked at Teresa, wondering how to say it.

"What?" she said. "You talk—they obviously think I'm a serial killer."

"Yeah, you look so dangerous," Thomas muttered, but he turned his attention to Newt and Minho. "Okay, when Teresa was first coming out of her deep sleep, she had memories flashing through her mind. She, um"—he just barely stopped himself from saying she'd said it inside his mind—"she told me later that she remembers that the Maze is a *code*. That maybe instead of solving it to find a way out, it's trying to send us a message."

"A *code*?" Minho asked. "How's it a *code*?"

Thomas shook his head, wishing he could answer. "I don't know for sure—you're way more familiar with the Maps than I am. But I have a theory. That's why I was hoping you guys could remember some of them."

Minho glanced at Newt, his eyebrows raised in question. Newt nodded.

"What?" Thomas asked, fed up with them keeping information from him. "You guys keep acting like you have a secret."

Minho rubbed his eyes with both hands, took a deep breath. "We hid the Maps, Thomas."

At first it didn't compute. "Huh?"

Minho pointed at the Homestead. "We hid the freaking Maps in the weapons room, put dummies in their place. Because of Alby's warning. And because of the so-called *Ending* your girlfriend triggered."

Thomas was so excited to hear this news he temporarily forgot how awful things had become. He remembered Minho acting suspicious the day before, saying he had a special assignment. Thomas looked over at Newt, who nodded.

"They're all safe and sound," Minho said. "Every last one of those suckers. So if you have a theory, get talking."

"Take me to them," Thomas said, itching to have a look.

"Okay, let's go."

CHAPTER 42

Minho switched on the light, making Thomas squint for a second until his eyes got used to it. Menacing shadows clung to the boxes of weapons scattered across the table and floor, blades and sticks and other nasty-looking devices seeming to wait there, ready to take on a life of their own and kill the first person stupid enough to come close. The dank, musty smell only added to the creepy feel of the room.

"There's a hidden storage closet back here," Minho explained, walking past some shelves into a dark corner. "Only a couple of us know about it."

Thomas heard the creak of an old wooden door, and then Minho was dragging a cardboard box across the floor; the scrape of it sounded like a knife on bone. "I put each trunk's worth in its own box, eight boxes total. They're all in there."

"Which one is this?" Thomas asked; he knelt down next to it, eager to get started.

"Just open it and see—each page is marked, remember?"

Thomas pulled on the crisscrossed lid flaps until they popped open. The Maps for Section Two lay in a messy heap. Thomas reached in and pulled out a stack.

"Okay," he said. "The Runners have always compared these day to day, looking to see if there was a pattern that would somehow help figure out a way to an exit. You even said you didn't really know *what* you were looking for, but you kept studying them anyway. Right?"

Minho nodded, arms folded. He looked as if someone were about to reveal the secret of immortal life.

"Well," Thomas continued, "what if all the wall movements had nothing to do with a map or a maze or anything like that? What if instead the pattern spelled *words*? Some kind of clue that'll help us escape."

Minho pointed at the Maps in Thomas's hand, letting out a frustrated sigh. "Dude, you have any idea how much we've studied these things? Don't you think we would've noticed if it were spelling out freaking *words*?"

"Maybe it's too hard to see with the naked eye, just comparing one day to the next. And maybe you weren't supposed to compare one day to the next, but look at it one day at a time?"

Newt laughed. "Tommy, I might not be the sharpest guy in the Glade, but sounds like you're talkin' straight out your butt to me."

While he'd been talking, Thomas's mind had been spinning even faster. The answer was within his grasp—he knew he was almost there. It was just so hard to put into words.

"Okay, okay," he said, starting over. "You've always had one Runner assigned to one section, right?"

"Right," Minho replied. He seemed genuinely interested and ready to understand.

"And that Runner makes a Map every day, and then compares it to Maps from previous days, *for that section*. What if, instead, you were supposed to compare the eight sections to *each other*, every day? Each day being a separate clue or code? Did you ever compare

sections to other sections?"

Minho rubbed his chin, nodding. "Yeah, kind of. We tried to see if they made something when put together—of course we did that. We've tried everything."

Thomas pulled his legs up underneath him, studying the Maps in his lap. He could just barely see the lines of the Maze written on the second page through the page resting on top. In that instant, he knew what they had to do. He looked up at the others.

"Wax paper."

"Huh?" Minho asked. "What the—"

"Just trust me. We need wax paper and scissors. And every black marker and pencil you can find."

Frypan wasn't too happy having a whole box of his wax paper rolls taken away from him, especially with their supplies being cut off. He argued that it was one of the things he always requested, that he used it for baking. They finally had to tell him what they needed it for to convince him to give it up.

After ten minutes of hunting down pencils and markers—most had been in the Map Room and were destroyed in the fire—Thomas sat around the worktable in the weapons basement with Newt, Minho and Teresa. They hadn't found any scissors, so Thomas had grabbed the sharpest knife he could find.

"This better be good," Minho said. Warning laced his voice, but his eyes showed some interest.

Newt leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table, as if waiting for a magic trick. "Get on with it, Greenie."

"Okay." Thomas was eager to do so, but was also scared to death it might end up being nothing. He handed the knife to Minho, then pointed at the wax paper. "Start cutting rectangles, about the size of the Maps. Newt and Teresa, you can help me grab the first ten or so Maps from each section box."

"What is this, kiddie craft time?" Minho held up the knife and looked at it with disgust. "Why don't you just tell us what the klunk we're doing this for?"

"I'm done explaining," Thomas said, knowing they just had to see what he was picturing in his mind. He stood to go rummage through the storage closet. "It'll be easier to show you. If I'm wrong, I'm wrong, and we can go back to running around the Maze like mice."

Minho sighed, clearly irritated, then muttered something under his breath. Teresa had stayed quiet for a while, but she spoke up inside Thomas's head.

I think I know what you're doing. Brilliant, actually.

Thomas was startled, but he tried his best to cover it up. He knew he had to pretend he didn't have voices in his head—the others would think he was a lunatic.

Just ... come ... help ... me, he tried to say back, thinking each word separately, trying to visualize the message, *send* it. But she didn't respond.

"Teresa," he said aloud. "Can you help me a second?" He nodded toward the closet.

The two of them went into the dusty little room and opened up all the boxes, grabbing a small stack of Maps from each one. Returning to the table, Thomas found that Minho had cut twenty sheets already, making a messy pile to his right as he threw each new piece on top.

Thomas sat down and grabbed a few. He held one of the papers up to the light, saw how

it shone through with a milky glow. It was exactly what he needed.

He grabbed a marker. "All right, everybody trace the last ten or so days onto a piece of this stuff. Make sure you write the info on top so we can keep track of what's what. When we're done, I think we might see something."

"What—" Minho began.

"Just bloody keep cutting," Newt ordered. "I think I know where he's going with this." Thomas was relieved someone was finally getting it.

They got to work, tracing from original Maps to wax paper, one by one, trying to keep it clean and correct while hurrying as fast as possible. Thomas used the side of a stray slab of wood as a makeshift ruler, keeping his lines straight. Soon he'd completed five maps, then five more. The others kept the same pace, working feverishly.

As Thomas drew, he started to feel a tickle of panic, a sick feeling that what they were doing was a complete waste of time. But Teresa, sitting next to him, was a study in concentration, her tongue sticking out the corner of her mouth as she traced lines up and down, side to side. She seemed way more confident that they were definitely on to something.

Box by box, section by section, they continued on.

"I've had enough," Newt finally announced, breaking the quiet. "My fingers are bloody burning like a mother. See if it's working."

Thomas put his marker down, then flexed his fingers, hoping he'd been right about all this. "Okay, give me the last few days of each section—make piles along the table, in order from Section One to Section Eight. One here"—he pointed at an end—"to Eight here." He pointed at the other end.

Silently, they did as he asked, sorting through what they'd traced until eight low stacks of wax paper lined the table.

Jittery and nervous, Thomas picked up one page from each pile, making sure they were all from the same day, keeping them in order. He then laid them one on top of the other so that each drawing of the Maze matched the same day above it and below it, until he was looking at eight different sections of the Maze at once. What he saw amazed him. Almost magically, like a picture coming into focus, an image developed. Teresa let out a small gasp.

Lines crossed each other, up and down, so much so that what Thomas held in his hands looked like a checkered grid. But certain lines in the middle—lines that happened to appear more often than any other—made a slightly darker image than the rest. It was subtle, but it was, without a doubt, there.

Sitting in the exact center of the page was the letter *F*.

CHAPTER 43

Thomas felt a rush of different emotions: relief that it had worked, surprise, excitement, wonder at what it could lead to.

“Man,” Minho said, summing up Thomas’s feelings with one word.

“Could be a coincidence,” Teresa said. “Do more, quick.”

Thomas did, putting together the eight pages of each day, in order from Section One to Section Eight. Each time, an obvious letter formed in the center of the crisscrossed mass of lines. After the *F* was an *L*, then an *O*, then an *A*, and a *T*. Then *C* … *A* … *T*.

“Look,” Thomas said, pointing down the line of stacks they’d formed, confused, but happy that the letters were so obvious. “It spells *FLOAT* and then it spells *CAT*.”

“Float cat?” Newt asked. “Doesn’t sound like a bloody rescue code to me.”

“We just need to keep working,” Thomas said.

Another couple of combinations made them realize that the second word was actually *CATCH*. *FLOAT* and *CATCH*.

“Definitely not a coincidence,” Minho said.

“Definitely not,” Thomas agreed. He couldn’t wait to see more.

Teresa gestured toward the storage closet. “We need to go through all of them—all those boxes in there.”

“Yeah,” Thomas nodded. “Let’s get on it.”

“We can’t help,” Minho said.

All three of them looked at him. He returned their glares. “At least not me and Thomas here. We need to get the Runners out in the Maze.”

“What?” Thomas asked. “This is way more important!”

“Maybe,” Minho answered calmly, “but we can’t miss a day out there. Not now.”

Thomas felt a rush of disappointment. Running the Maze seemed like such a waste of time compared to figuring out the code. “Why, Minho? You said the pattern’s basically been repeating itself for months—one more day won’t mean a thing.”

Minho slammed his hand against the table. “That’s bullshit, Thomas! Of all days, this might be the most important to get out there. Something might’ve changed, something might’ve opened up. In fact, with the freaking walls not closing anymore, I think we should try your idea—stay out there overnight and do some deeper exploring.”

That piqued Thomas’s interest—he *had* been wanting to do that. Conflicted, he asked, “But what about this code? What about—”

“Tommy,” Newt said in a consoling voice. “Minho’s right. You shanks go out and get Runnin’. I’ll round up some Gladers we can trust and get workin’ on this.” Newt sounded more like a leader than ever before.

“Me too,” Teresa agreed. “I’ll stay and help Newt.”

Thomas looked at her. “You sure?” He was itching to figure out the code himself, but he decided Minho and Newt were right.

She smiled and folded her arms. “If you’re going to decipher a hidden code from a

complex set of different mazes, I'm pretty sure you need a girl's brain running the show." Her grin turned into a smirk.

"If you say so." He folded his own arms, staring at her with a smile, suddenly not wanting to leave again.

"Good that." Minho nodded and turned to go. "Everything's fine and dandy. Come on." He started toward the door, but stopped when he realized Thomas wasn't behind him.

"Don't worry, Tommy," Newt said. "Your girlfriend will be fine." Thomas felt a million thoughts go through his head in that moment. An itch to learn the code, embarrassment at what Newt thought of him and Teresa, the intrigue of what they might find out in the Maze—and fear.

But he pushed it all aside. Without even saying goodbye, he finally followed Minho and they went up the stairs.

Thomas helped Minho gather the Runners to give them the news and organize them for the big journey. He was surprised at how readily everyone agreed that it was time to do some more in-depth exploring of the Maze and stay out there overnight. Even though he was nervous and scared, he told Minho he could take one of the sections himself, but the Keeper refused. They had eight experienced Runners to do that. Thomas was to go with him—which made Thomas so relieved he was almost ashamed of himself.

He and Minho packed their backpacks with more supplies than usual; there was no telling how long they'd be out there. Despite his fear, Thomas couldn't help being excited as well—maybe this was the day they'd find an exit.

He and Minho were stretching their legs by the West Door when Chuck walked over to say goodbye.

"I'd go with you," the boy said in a far too jovial voice, "but I don't wanna die a gruesome death."

Thomas laughed, surprising himself. "Thanks for the words of encouragement."

"Be careful," Chuck said, his tone quickly melting into genuine concern. "I wish I could help you guys."

Thomas was touched—he bet that if it really came down to it, Chuck *would* go out there if he were asked to. "Thanks, Chuck. We'll definitely be careful."

Minho grunted. "Being careful hasn't gotten us squat. It's all or nothing now, baby."

"We better get going," Thomas said. Butterflies swarmed in his gut, and he just wanted to move, to quit thinking about it. After all, going out in the Maze was no worse than staying in the Glade with open Doors. Though the thought didn't make him feel much better.

"Yeah," Minho responded evenly. "Let's go."

"Well," Chuck said, looking down at his feet before returning his gaze to Thomas. "Good luck. If your girlfriend gets lonely for you, I'll give her some lovin'."

Thomas rolled his eyes. "She's not my girlfriend, shuck-face."

"Wow," Chuck said. "You're already using Alby's dirty words." He was obviously trying hard to pretend he wasn't scared of all the recent developments, but his eyes revealed the truth. "Seriously, good luck."

"Thanks, that means a lot," Minho answered with his own eye roll. "See ya, shank."

"Yeah, see ya," Chuck muttered, then turned to walk away.

Thomas felt a pang of sadness—it was possible he might never see Chuck or Teresa or any of them again. A sudden urge gripped him. “Don’t forget my promise!” he yelled. “I’ll get you home!”

Chuck turned and gave him a thumbs-up; his eyes glimmered with tears.

Thomas flipped up double thumbs; then he and Minho pulled on their backpacks and entered the Maze.

CHAPTER 44

Thomas and Minho didn't stop until they were halfway to the last dead end of Section Eight. They made good time—Thomas was glad for his wristwatch, with the skies being gray—because it quickly became obvious that the walls hadn't moved from the day before. Everything was exactly the same. There was no need for Mapmaking or taking notes; their only task was to get to the end and start making their way back, searching for things previously unnoticed—anything. Minho allowed a twenty-minute break and then they were back at it.

They were silent as they ran. Minho had taught Thomas that speaking only wasted energy, so he concentrated on his pace and his breaths. Regular. Even. In, out. In, out. Deeper and deeper into the Maze they went, with only their thoughts and the sounds of their feet thumping against the hard stone floor.

In the third hour, Teresa surprised him, speaking in his mind from back in the Glade.

We're making progress—found a couple more words already. But none of it makes sense yet.

Thomas's first instinct was to ignore her, to deny once again that someone had the ability to enter his mind, invade his privacy. But he wanted to talk to her.

Can you hear me? he asked, picturing the words in his mind, mentally throwing them out to her in some way he could never have explained. Concentrating, he said it again. *Can you hear me?*

Yes! she replied. *Really clearly the second time you said it.*

Thomas was shocked. So shocked he almost quit running. It had worked!

Wonder why we can do this, he called out with his mind. The mental effort of speaking to her was already straining—he felt a headache forming like a bulge in his brain.

Maybe we were lovers, Teresa said.

Thomas tripped and crashed to the ground. Smiling sheepishly at Minho, who'd turned to look without slowing, Thomas got back up and caught up to him. *What?* he finally asked.

He sensed a laugh from her, a watery image full of color. *This is so bizarre,* she said. *It's like you're a stranger, but I know you're not.*

Thomas felt a pleasant chill even though he was sweating. *Sorry to break it to you, but we are strangers. I just met you, remember?*

Don't be stupid, Tom. I think someone altered our brains, put something in there so we could do this telepathy thing. Before we came here. Which makes me think we already knew each other.

It was something he'd wondered about, and he thought she was probably right. Hoped it, anyway—he was really starting to like her. *Brains altered?* he asked. *How?*

I don't know—some memory I can't quite grasp. I think we did something big.

Thomas thought about how he'd always felt a connection to her, ever since she arrived in the Glade. He wanted to dig a little more and see what she said. *What are you talking about?*

Wish I knew. I'm just trying to bounce ideas off you to see if it sparks anything in your mind.

Thomas thought about what Gally, Ben and Alby had said about him—their suspicions

that he was against them somehow, was someone not to trust. He thought about what Teresa had said to him, too, the very first time—that he and she had somehow done all of this to them.

This code has to mean something, she added. *And the thing I wrote on my arm—WICKED is good.*

Maybe it won't matter, he answered. *Maybe we'll find an exit. You never know.*

Thomas squeezed his eyes shut for a few seconds as he ran, trying to concentrate. A pocket of air seemed to float in his chest every time they spoke, a swelling that half annoyed and half thrilled him. His eyes popped back open when he realized she could maybe read his thoughts even when he wasn't trying to communicate. He waited for a response, but none came.

You still there? he asked.

Yeah, but this always gives me a headache.

Thomas was relieved to hear he wasn't the only one. *My head hurts, too.*

Okay, she said. *See you later.*

No, wait! He didn't want her to leave; she was helping the time pass. Making the running easier somehow.

Bye, Tom. I'll let you know if we figure anything out.

Teresa—what about the thing you wrote on your arm?

Several seconds passed. No reply.

Teresa?

She was gone. Thomas felt as if that bubble of air in his chest had burst, releasing toxins into his body. His stomach hurt, and the thought of running the rest of the day suddenly depressed him.

In some ways, he wanted to tell Minho about how he and Teresa could talk, to share what was happening before it made his brain explode. But he didn't dare. Throwing telepathy into the whole situation didn't seem like the grandest of ideas. Everything was weird enough already.

Thomas put his head down and drew in a long, deep breath. He would just keep his mouth shut and run.

Two breaks later, Minho finally slowed to a walk as they headed down a long corridor that ended in a wall. He stopped and took a seat against the dead end. The ivy was especially thick there; it made the world seem green and lush, hiding the hard, impenetrable stone.

Thomas joined him on the ground and they attacked their modest lunch of sandwiches and sliced fruit.

"This is it," Minho said after his second bite. "We've already run through the whole section. Surprise, surprise—no exits."

Thomas already knew this, but hearing it made his heart sink even lower. Without another word—from himself or Minho—he finished his food and readied himself to explore. To look for who-knew-what.

For the next few hours, he and Minho scoured the ground, felt along the walls, climbed up the ivy in random spots. They found nothing, and Thomas grew more and more discouraged. The only thing interesting was another one of those odd signs that read World

In Catastrophe—Killzone Experiment Department. Minho didn't even give it a second glance.

They had another meal, searched some more. They found nothing, and Thomas was beginning to get ready to accept the inevitable—that there was nothing to find. When wall-closing time rolled around, he started looking for signs of Grievers, was struck by an icy hesitation at every corner. He and Minho always had knives clasped firmly in both hands. But nothing showed up until almost midnight.

Minho spotted a Griever disappearing around a corner ahead of them; and it didn't come back. Thirty minutes later, Thomas saw one do the exact same thing. An hour after that, a Griever came charging through the Maze right past them, not even pausing. Thomas almost collapsed from the sudden rush of terror.

He and Minho continued on.

"I think they're playing with us," Minho said a while later.

Thomas realized he'd given up on searching the walls and was just heading back toward the Glade in a depressed walk. From the looks of it, Minho felt the same way.

"What do you mean?" Thomas asked.

The Keeper sighed. "I think the Creators want us to know there's no way out. The walls aren't even moving anymore—it's like this has all just been some stupid game and it's time to end. And they want us to go back and tell the other Gladers. How much you wanna bet when we get back we find out a Griever took one of them just like last night? I think Gally was right—they're gonna just keep killing us."

Thomas didn't respond—felt the truth of what Minho said. Any hope he'd felt earlier when they'd set out had crashed a long time ago.

"Let's just go home," Minho said, his voice weary.

Thomas hated to admit defeat, but he nodded in agreement. The code seemed like their only hope now, and he resolved to focus on that.

He and Minho made their way silently back to the Glade. They didn't see another Griever the whole way.

By Thomas's watch, it was midmorning when he and Minho stepped through the West Door back into the Glade. Thomas was so tired he wanted to lie down right there and take a nap. They'd been in the Maze for roughly twenty-four hours.

Surprisingly, despite the dead light and everything falling apart, the day in the Glade appeared to be proceeding business as usual—farming, gardening, cleaning. It didn't take long for some of the boys to notice them standing there. Newt was notified and he came running.

"You're the first to come back," he said as he walked up to them. "What happened?" The childlike look of hope on his face broke Thomas's heart—he obviously thought they'd found something important. "Tell me you've got good news."

Minho's eyes were dead, staring at a spot somewhere in the gray distance. "Nothing," he said. "The Maze is a big freaking joke."

Newt looked at Thomas, confused. "What's he talking about?"

"He's just discouraged," Thomas said with a weary shrug. "We didn't find anything different. The walls haven't moved, no exits, nothing. Did the Grievers come last night?"

Newt paused, darkness passing over his face. Finally, he nodded. "Yeah. They took Adam."

Thomas didn't know the name, and felt guilty for feeling nothing. *Just one person again*, he thought. *Maybe Gally was right*.

Newt was about to say something else when Minho freaked out, startling Thomas.

"I'm sick of this!" Minho spat in the ivy, veins popping out of his neck. "I'm sick of it! It's over! It's all over!" He took off his backpack and threw it on the ground. "There's no exit, never was, never will be. We're all shucked."

Thomas watched, his throat dry, as Minho stomped off toward the Homestead. It worried him—if Minho gave up, they were all in big trouble.

Newt didn't say a word. He left Thomas standing there, now in his own daze. Despair hung in the air like the smoke from the Map Room, thick and acrid.

The other Runners returned within the hour, and from what Thomas heard, none of them had found anything and they'd eventually given up as well. Glum faces were everywhere throughout the Glade, and most of the workers had abandoned their daily jobs.

Thomas knew that the code of the Maze was their only hope now. It had to reveal something. It had to. And after aimlessly wandering the Glade to hear the other Runners' stories, he snapped out of his funk.

Teresa? he said in his mind, closing his eyes, as if that would do the trick. *Where are you? Did you figure anything out?*

After a long pause, he almost gave up, thinking it didn't work.

Huh? Tom, did you say something?

Yeah, he said, excited he'd made contact again. *Can you hear me? Am I doing this thing*

right?

Sometimes it's choppy, but it's working. Kinda freaky, huh?

Thomas thought about that—actually, he was sort of getting used to it. *It's not so bad. Are you guys still in the basement? I saw Newt but then he disappeared again.*

Still here. Newt had three or four Gladers help us trace the Maps. I think we have the code all figured out.

Thomas's heart leaped into his throat. *Serious?*

Get down here.

I'm coming. He was already moving as he said it, somehow not feeling so exhausted anymore.

Newt let him in.

"Minho still hasn't shown up," he said as they walked down the stairs to the basement. "Sometimes he turns into a buggin' hothead."

Thomas was surprised Minho was wasting time sulking, especially with the code possibilities. He pushed the thought aside as he entered the room. Several Gladers he didn't know were gathered around the table, standing; they all looked exhausted, their eyes sunken. Piles of Maps lay scattered all over the place, including the floor. It looked as if a tornado had touched down right in the middle of the room.

Teresa was leaning against a stack of shelves, reading a single sheet of paper. She glanced up when he entered, but then returned her gaze to whatever it was she held. This saddened him a little—he'd hoped she'd be happy to see him—but then he felt really stupid for even having the thought. She was obviously busy figuring out the code.

You have to see this, Teresa said to him just as Newt dismissed his helpers—they clomped up the wooden stairs, a couple of them grumbling about doing all that work for nothing.

Thomas started, for a brief moment worried that Newt could tell what was going on. *Don't talk in my head while Newt's around. I don't want him knowing about our ... gift.*

"Come check this out," she said aloud, barely hiding the smirk that flashed across her face.

"I'll get down on my knees and kiss your bloody feet if you can figure it out," Newt said.

Thomas walked over to Teresa, eager to see what they'd come up with. She held out the paper, eyebrows raised.

"No doubt this is right," she said. "Just don't have a clue what it means."

Thomas took the paper and scanned it quickly. There were numbered circles running down the left side, one to six. Next to each one was a word written in big blocky letters.

FLOAT

CATCH

BLEED

DEATH

STIFF

PUSH

That was it. Six words.

Disappointment washed over Thomas—he'd been sure the purpose of the code would be

obvious once they had it figured out. He looked up at Teresa with a sunken heart. “That’s all? Are you sure they’re in the right order?”

She took the paper back from him. “The Maze has been repeating those words for months—we finally quit when that became clear. Each time, after the word *PUSH*, it goes a full week without showing any letter at all, and then it starts over again with *FLOAT*. So we figured that’s the first word, and that’s the order.”

Thomas folded his arms and leaned against the shelves next to Teresa. Without thinking about it, he’d memorized the six words, welded them to his mind. *Float. Catch. Bleed. Death. Stiff. Push.* That didn’t sound good.

“Cheerful, don’t ya think?” Newt said, mirroring his thoughts exactly.

“Yeah,” Thomas replied with a frustrated groan. “We need to get Minho down here—maybe he knows something we don’t. If we just had more clues—” He froze, hit by a dizzy spell; he would’ve fallen to the floor if he hadn’t had the shelves to lean on. An idea had just occurred to him. A horrible, terrible, awful idea. The worst idea in the history of horrible, terrible, awful ideas.

But instinct told him he was right. That it was something he had to do.

“Tommy?” Newt asked, stepping closer with a look of concern creasing his forehead. “What’s wrong with you? Your face just went white as a ghost.”

Thomas shook his head, composing himself. “Oh … nothing, sorry. My eyes are hurting—I think I need some sleep.” He rubbed his temples for effect.

Are you okay? Teresa asked in his mind. He looked to see that she was as worried as Newt, which made him feel good.

Yeah. Seriously, I’m tired. I just need some rest.

“Well,” Newt said, reaching out to squeeze Thomas’s shoulder. “You spent all bloody night out in the Maze—go take a nap.”

Thomas looked at Teresa, then at Newt. He wanted to share his idea, but decided against it. Instead, he just nodded and headed for the stairs.

All the same, Thomas now had a plan. As bad as it was, he had a plan.

They needed more clues about the code. They needed *memories*.

So he was going to get stung by a Griever. Go through the Changing. On purpose.

CHAPTER 46

Thomas refused to talk to anyone the rest of the day.

Teresa tried several times. But he kept telling her he didn't feel good, that he just wanted to be alone and sleep in his spot behind the forest, maybe spend some time thinking. Try to discover a hidden secret within his mind that would help them know what to do.

But in truth, he was psyching himself up for what he had planned for that evening, convincing himself it was the right thing to do. The *only* thing to do. Plus, he was absolutely terrified and he didn't want the others to notice.

Eventually, when his watch showed that evening had arrived, he went to the Homestead with everyone else. He barely noticed he'd been hungry until he started eating Frypan's hastily prepared meal of biscuits and tomato soup.

And then it was time for another sleepless night.

The Builders had boarded up the gaping holes left by the monsters who'd carried off Gally and Adam. The end result looked to Thomas like an army of drunk guys had done the work, but it was solid enough. Newt and Alby, who finally felt well enough to walk around again, his head heavily bandaged, insisted on a plan for everyone to rotate where they slept each night.

Thomas ended up in the large living room on the bottom floor of the Homestead with the same people he'd slept with two nights before. Silence settled over the room quickly, though he didn't know if it was because people were actually asleep or just scared, quietly hoping against hope the Grievers didn't come again. Unlike two nights ago, Teresa was allowed to stay in the building with the rest of the Gladers. She was near him, curled up in two blankets. Somehow, he could sense that she was sleeping. Actually *sleeping*.

Thomas certainly couldn't sleep, even though he knew his body needed it desperately. He tried—he tried so hard to keep his eyes closed, force himself to relax. But he had no luck. The night dragged on, the heavy sense of anticipation like a weight on his chest.

Then, just as they'd all expected, came the mechanical, haunted sounds of the Grievers outside. The time had come.

Everyone crowded together against the wall farthest from the windows, doing their best to keep quiet. Thomas huddled in a corner next to Teresa, hugging his knees, staring at the window. The reality of the dreadful decision he'd made earlier squeezed his heart like a crushing fist. But he knew that everything might depend on it.

The tension in the room rose at a steady pace. The Gladers were quiet, not a soul moved. A distant scraping of metal against wood echoed through the house; it sounded to Thomas like a Griever was climbing on the back side of the Homestead, opposite where they were. More noises joined in a few seconds later, coming from all directions, the closest right outside their own window. The air in the room seemed to freeze into solid ice, and Thomas pressed his fists against his eyes, the anticipation of the attack killing him.

A booming explosion of ripping wood and broken glass thundered from somewhere upstairs, shaking the whole house. Thomas went numb as several screams erupted, followed

by the pounding of fleeing footsteps. Loud creaks and groans announced a whole horde of Gladers running to the first floor.

"It's got Dave!" someone yelled, the voice high-pitched with terror.

No one in Thomas's room moved a muscle; he knew each of them was probably feeling guilty about their relief—that at least it wasn't them. That maybe they were safe for one more night. Two nights in a row only one boy had been taken, and people had started to believe that what Gally had said was true.

Thomas jumped as a terrible crash sounded right outside their door, accompanied by screams and the splintering of wood, like some iron-jawed monster was eating the entire stairwell. A second later came another explosion of ripping wood: the front door. The Griever had come right through the house and was now leaving.

An explosion of fear ripped through Thomas. It was now or never.

He jumped up and ran to the door of the room, yanking it open. He heard Newt yell, but he ignored him and ran down the hall, sidestepping and jumping over hundreds of splintered pieces of wood. He could see that where the front door had been there now stood a jagged hole leading out into the gray night. He headed straight for it and ran out into the Glade.

Tom! Teresa screamed inside his head. What are you doing!

He ignored her. He just kept running.

The Griever holding Dave—a kid Thomas had never spoken to—was rolling along on its spikes toward the West Door, churning and whirring. The other Grievers had already gathered in the courtyard and followed their companion toward the Maze. Without hesitating, knowing the others would think he was trying to commit suicide, Thomas sprinted in their direction until he found himself in the middle of the pack of creatures. Having been taken by surprise, the Grievers hesitated.

Thomas jumped on the one holding Dave, tried to jerk the kid free, hoping the creature would retaliate. Teresa's scream inside his mind was so loud it felt as if a dagger had been driven through his skull.

Three of the Grievers swarmed on him at once, their long pincers and claspers and needles flying in from all directions. Thomas flailed his arms and legs, knocking away the horrible metallic arms as he kicked at the pulsating blubber of the Grievers' bodies—he only wanted to be stung, not taken like Dave. Their relentless attack intensified, and Thomas felt pain erupt over every inch of his body—needle pricks that told him he'd succeeded. Screaming, he kicked and pushed and thrashed, throwing his body into a roll, trying to get away from them. Struggling, bursting with adrenaline, he finally found an open spot to get his feet under him and ran with all his power.

As soon as he escaped the immediate reach of the Grievers' instruments, they gave up and retreated, disappearing into the Maze. Thomas collapsed to the ground, groaning from the pain.

Newt was on him in a second, followed immediately by Chuck, Teresa, several others. Newt grabbed him by the shoulders and lifted him up, gripping him under both arms. "Get his legs!" he yelled.

Thomas felt the world swimming around him, felt delirious, nauseated. Someone, he couldn't tell who, obeyed Newt's order; he was being carried across the courtyard, through

the front door of the Homestead, down the shattered hall, into a room, placed on a couch. The world continued to twist and pitch.

"What were you *doing!*" Newt yelled in his face. "How could you be so bloody stupid!"

Thomas had to speak before he faded into blackness. "No ... Newt ... you don't understand...."

"Shut up!" Newt shouted. "Don't waste your energy!"

Thomas felt someone examining his arms and legs, ripping his clothes away from his body, checking for damage. He heard Chuck's voice, couldn't help feeling relief that his friend was okay. A Med-jack said something about him being stung dozens of times.

Teresa was by his feet, squeezing his right ankle with her hand. *Why, Tom? Why would you do that?*

Because... He didn't have the strength to concentrate.

Newt yelled for the Grief Serum; a minute later Thomas felt a pinprick on his arm. Warmth spread from that point throughout his body, calming him, lessening the pain. But the world still seemed to be collapsing in on itself, and he knew it would all be gone from him in just a few seconds.

The room spun, colors morphing into each other, churning faster and faster. It took all of his effort, but he said one last thing before the darkness took him for good.

"Don't worry," he whispered, hoping they could hear him. "I did it on purpose...."

Thomas had no concept of time as he went through the Changing.

It started much like his first memory of the Box—dark and cold. But this time he had no sensation of anything touching his feet or body. He floated in emptiness, stared into a void of black. He saw nothing, heard nothing, smelled nothing. It was as if someone had stolen his five senses, leaving him in a vacuum.

Time stretched on. And on. Fear turned into curiosity, which turned into boredom.

Finally, after an interminable wait, things began to change.

A distant wind picked up, unfelt but heard. Then a swirling mist of whiteness appeared far in the distance—a spinning tornado of smoke that formed into a long funnel, stretching out until he could see neither the top nor the bottom of the white whirlwind. He felt the gales then, sucking into the cyclone so that it blew past him from behind, ripping at his clothes and hair like they were shredded flags caught in a storm.

The tower of thick mist began to move toward him—or *he* was moving toward *it*, he couldn't tell—increasing its speed at an alarming rate. Where seconds before he'd been able to see the distinct form of the funnel, he now could see only a flat expanse of white.

And then it consumed him; he felt his mind taken by the mist, felt memories flood into his thoughts.

Everything else turned into pain.

CHAPTER 48

“Thomas.”

The voice was distant, warbled, like an echo in a long tunnel.

“Thomas, can you hear me?”

He didn’t want to answer. His mind had shut down when it could no longer take the pain; he feared it would all return if he allowed himself back into consciousness. He sensed light on the other side of his eyelids, but knew it would be unbearable to open them. He did nothing.

“Thomas, it’s Chuck. Are you okay? Please don’t die, dude.”

Everything came crashing back into his mind. The Glade, the Grievers, the stinging needle, the Changing. *Memories*. The Maze couldn’t be solved. Their only way out was something they’d never expected. Something terrifying. He was crushed with despair.

Groaning, he forced his eyes open, squinting at first. Chuck’s pudgy face was there, staring with frightened eyes. But then they lit up and a smile spread across his face. Despite it all, despite the terrible crappiness of it all, Chuck smiled.

“He’s awake!” the boy yelled to no one in particular. “Thomas is awake!”

The booming sound of his voice made Thomas wince; he shut his eyes again. “Chuck, do you have to scream? I don’t feel so good.”

“Sorry—I’m just glad you’re alive. You’re lucky I don’t give you a big kiss.”

“Please don’t do that, Chuck.” Thomas opened his eyes again and forced himself to sit up in the bed in which he lay, pushing his back against the wall and stretching out his legs. Soreness ate at his joints and muscles. “How long did it take?” he asked.

“Three days,” Chuck answered. “We put you in the Slammer at night to keep you safe—brought you back here during the days. Thought you were dead for sure about thirty times since you started. But check you out—you look brand-new!”

Thomas could only imagine how *non-great* he looked. “Did the Grievers come?”

Chuck’s jubilation visibly crashed to the ground as his eyes sank down toward the floor. “Yeah—they got Zart and a couple others. One a night. Minho and the Runners have scoured the Maze, trying to find an exit or some use for that stupid code you guys came up with. But nothing. Why do you think the Grievers are only taking one shank at a time?”

Thomas’s stomach turned sour—he knew the exact answer to that question, and some others now. Enough to know that sometimes knowing sucked.

“Get Newt and Alby,” he finally said in answer. “Tell them we need to have a Gathering. Soon as possible.”

“Serious?”

Thomas let out a sigh. “Chuck, I just went through the Changing. Do you think I’m serious?”

Without a word, Chuck jumped up and ran out of the room, his calls for Newt fading the farther he went.

Thomas closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall. Then he called out to her

with his mind.

Teresa.

She didn't answer at first, but then her voice popped into his thoughts as clearly as if she were sitting next to him. *That was really stupid, Tom. Really, really stupid.*

Had to do it, he answered.

I pretty much hated you the last couple days. You should've seen yourself. Your skin, your veins...

You hated me? He was thrilled she'd cared so much about him.

She paused. *That's just my way of saying I would've killed you if you'd died.*

Thomas felt a burst of warmth in his chest, reached up and actually touched it, surprised at himself. *Well ... thanks. I guess.*

So, how much do you remember?

He paused. *Enough. What you said about the two of us and what we did to them...*

It was true?

We did some bad things, Teresa. He sensed frustration from her, like she had a million questions and no idea where to start.

Did you learn anything to help us get out of here? she asked, as if she didn't want to know what part she'd had in all of this. *A purpose for the code?*

Thomas paused, not really wanting to talk about it yet—not before he really gathered his thoughts. Their only chance for escape might be a death wish. *Maybe*, he finally said, *but it won't be easy. We need a Gathering. I'll ask for you to be there—I don't have the energy to say it all twice.*

Neither one of them said anything for a while, a sense of hopelessness wafting between their minds.

Teresa?

Yeah?

The Maze can't be solved.

She paused for a long time before answering. *I think we all know that now.*

Thomas hated the pain in her voice—he could feel it in his mind. *Don't worry; the Creators meant for us to escape, though. I have a plan.* He wanted to give her some hope, no matter how scarce.

Oh, really.

Yeah. It's terrible, and some of us might die. Sound promising?

Big-time. What is it?

We have to—

Before he could finish, Newt walked into the room, cutting him off.

I'll tell you later, Thomas quickly finished.

Hurry! she said, then was gone.

Newt had walked over to the bed and sat down next to him. “Tommy—you barely look sick.”

Thomas nodded. “I feel a little queasy, but other than that, I’m fine. Thought it’d be a lot worse.”

Newt shook his head, his face a mixture of anger and awe. “What you did was half brave and half bloody stupid. Seems like you’re pretty good at that.” He paused, shook his head.

"I know why you did it. What memories came back? Anything that'll help?"

"We need to have a Gathering," Thomas said, shifting his legs to get more comfortable. Surprisingly, he didn't feel much pain, just wooziness. "Before I start forgetting some of this stuff."

"Yeah, Chuck told me—we'll do it. But why? What did you figure out?"

"It's a test, Newt—the whole thing is a test."

Newt nodded. "Like an experiment."

Thomas shook his head. "No, you don't get it. They're weeding us out, seeing if we'll give up, finding the best of us. Throwing variables at us, trying to make us quit. Testing our ability to hope and fight. Sending Teresa here and shutting everything down was only the last part, one more ... final analysis. Now it's time for the last test. To escape."

Newt's brow crinkled in confusion. "What do you mean? You know a way out?"

"Yeah. Call the Gathering. Now."

CHAPTER 49

An hour later, Thomas sat in front of the Keepers for the Gathering, just like he had a week or two before. They hadn't let Teresa in, which ticked him off just as much as it did her. Newt and Minho trusted her now, but the others still had their doubts.

"All right, Greenie," Alby said, looking much better as he sat in the middle of the semicircle of chairs, next to Newt. The other chairs were all occupied except two—a stark reminder that Zart and Gally had been taken by the Grievers. "Forget all the beat-around-the-bush klunk. Start talking."

Thomas, still a bit queasy from the Changing, forced himself to take a second and gain his composure. He had a lot to say, but wanted to be sure it came out sounding as non-stupid as possible.

"It's a long story," he began. "We don't have time to go through it all, but I'll tell you the gist of it. When I went through the Changing, I saw flashes of images—hundreds of them—like a slide show in fast forward. A lot came back to me, but only some of it's clear enough to talk about. Other stuff has faded or is fading." He paused, gathering his thoughts one last time. "But I remember enough. The Creators are testing us. The Maze was never meant to be solved. It's all been a trial. They want the winners—or survivors—to do something important." He trailed off, already confused at what order he should tell things in.

"What?" Newt asked.

"Let me start over," Thomas said, rubbing his eyes. "Every single one of us was taken when we were really young. I don't remember how or why—just glimpses and feelings that things had changed in the world, that something really bad happened. I have no idea what. The Creators stole us, and I think they felt justified in doing it. Somehow they figured out that we have above-average intelligence, and that's why they chose us. I don't know, most of this is sketchy and doesn't matter that much anyway."

"I can't remember anything about my family or what happened to them. But after we were taken, we spent the next few years learning in special schools, living somewhat normal lives until they were finally able to finance and build the Maze. All our names are just stupid nicknames they made up—like Alby for Albert Einstein, Newt for Isaac Newton, and me—Thomas. As in Edison."

Alby looked like he'd been slapped in the face. "Our names ... these ain't even our real names?"

Thomas shook his head. "As far as I can tell, we'll probably never know what our names were."

"What are you saying?" Frypan asked. "That we're freakin' orphans raised by scientists?"

"Yes," Thomas said, hoping his expression didn't give away just how depressed he felt. "Supposedly we're really smart and they're studying every move we make, analyzing us. Seeing who'd give up and who wouldn't. Seeing who'd survive it all. No wonder we have so many beetle blade spies running around this place. Plus, some of us have had things ... altered in our brains."

"I believe this klunk about as much as I believe Frypan's food is good for you," Winston grumbled, looking tired and indifferent.

"Why would I make this up?" Thomas said, his voice rising. He'd gotten stung on purpose to remember these things! "Better yet, what do *you* think is the explanation? That we live on an alien planet?"

"Just keep talking," Alby said. "But I don't get why none of us remembered this stuff. I've been through the Changing, but everything I saw was ..." He looked around quickly, like he'd just said something he shouldn't have. "I didn't learn nothin'."

"I'll tell you in a minute why I think I learned more than others," Thomas said, dreading that part of the story. "Should I keep going or not?"

"Talk," Newt said.

Thomas sucked in a big breath, as if he were about to start a race. "Okay, somehow they wiped our memories—not just our childhood, but all the stuff leading up to entering the Maze. They put us in the Box and sent us up here—a big group to start and then one a month over the last two years."

"But why?" Newt asked. "What's the bloody point?"

Thomas held up a hand for silence. "I'm getting there. Like I said, they wanted to test us, see how we'd react to what they call the Variables, and to a problem that has no solution. See if we could work together—build a community, even. Everything was provided for us, and the problem was laid out as one of the most common puzzles known to civilization—a maze. All this added up to making us think there *had* to be a solution, just encouraging us to work all the harder while at the same time magnifying our discouragement at not finding one." He paused to look around, making sure they were all listening. "What I'm saying is, there *is* no solution."

Chatter broke out, questions overlapping each other.

Thomas held his hands up again, wishing he could just zap his thoughts into everyone else's brains. "See? Your reaction proves my point. Most people would've given up by now. But I think we're different. We couldn't accept that a problem *can't* be solved—especially when it's something as simple as a maze. And we've kept fighting no matter how hopeless it's gotten."

Thomas realized his voice had steadily risen as he spoke, and he felt heat in his face. "Whatever the reason, it makes me sick! All of this—the Grievers, the walls moving, the Cliff—they're just elements of a stupid *test*. We're being used and manipulated. The Creators wanted to keep our minds working toward a solution that was never there. Same thing goes for Teresa being sent here, her being used to trigger the Ending—whatever *that* means—the place being shut down, gray skies, on and on and on. They're throwing crazy things at us to see our response, test our will. See if we'll turn on each other. In the end, they want the survivors for something important."

Frypan stood up. "And killing people? That's a nice little part of their plan?"

Thomas felt a moment of fear, worried that the Keepers might take out their anger on him for knowing so much. And it was only about to get worse. "Yes, Frypan, killing people. The only reason the Grievers are doing it one by one is so we don't all die before it ends the way it's supposed to. Survival of the fittest. Only the best of us will escape."

Frypan kicked his chair. "Well, you better start talking about this magical escape, then!"

“He will,” Newt said, quietly. “Shut up and listen.”

Minho, who’d been mostly silent the whole time, cleared his throat. “Something tells me I’m not gonna like what I’m about to hear.”

“Probably not,” Thomas said. He closed his eyes for a second and folded his arms. The next few minutes were going to be crucial. “The Creators want the best of us for whatever it is they have planned. But we have to earn it.” The room fell completely silent, every eye on him. “The code.”

“The code?” Frypan repeated, his voice lighting up with a trace of hope. “What about it?”

Thomas looked at him, paused for effect. “It was hidden in the wall movements of the Maze for a reason. I should know—I was there when the Creators did it.”

For a long moment, no one said anything, and all Thomas saw were blank faces. He felt the sweat beading on his forehead, slicking his hands; he was terrified to keep going.

Newt looked completely baffled and finally broke the silence. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, first there's something I have to share. About me and Teresa. There's a reason Gally accused me of so much stuff, and why everyone who's gone through the Changing recognizes me."

He expected questions—an eruption of voices—but the room was dead silent.

"Teresa and I are ... different," he continued. "We were part of the Maze Trials from the very beginning—but against our will, I swear it."

Minho was the one to speak up now. "Thomas, what're you talking about?"

"Teresa and I were used by the Creators. If you had your full memories back, you'd probably want to kill us. But I had to tell you this myself to show you we can be trusted now. So you'll believe me when I tell you the only way we can get out of here."

Thomas quickly scanned the faces of the Keepers, wondering one last time if he should say it, if they would understand. But he knew he had to. He *had* to.

Thomas took a deep breath, then said it. "Teresa and I helped design the Maze. We helped create the whole thing."

Everyone seemed too stunned to respond. Blank faces stared back at him once again. Thomas figured they either didn't understand or didn't believe him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Newt finally asked. "You're a bloody sixteen-year-old. How could you have created the Maze?"

Thomas couldn't help doubting it a little himself—but he knew what he'd remembered. As crazy as it was, he knew it for the truth. "We were ... smart. And I think it might be part of the Variables. But most importantly, Teresa and I have a ... gift that made us very valuable as they designed and built this place." He stopped, knowing it must all sound absurd.

"Speak!" Newt yelled. "Spit it out!"

"We're telepathic! We can talk to each other in our freaking heads!" Saying it out loud almost made him feel ashamed, as if he'd just admitted he was a thief.

Newt blinked in surprise; someone coughed.

"But listen to me," Thomas continued, in a hurry to defend himself. "They forced us to help. I don't know how or why, but they did." He paused. "Maybe it was to see if we could gain your trust despite having been a part of them. Maybe we were meant all along to be the ones to reveal how to escape. Whatever the reason, with your Maps we figured out the code and we need to use it now."

Thomas looked around, and surprisingly, astonishingly, no one seemed angry. Most of the Gladers continued to stare blankly at him or shook their heads in wonder or disbelief. And for some odd reason, Minho was smiling.

"It's true, and I'm sorry," Thomas continued. "But I can tell you this—I'm in the same

boat with you now. Teresa and I were sent here just like anyone else, and we can die just as easily. But the Creators have seen enough—it's time for the final test. I guess I needed the Changing to add the final pieces of the puzzle. Anyway, I wanted you to know the truth, to know there's a chance we can do this."

Newt shook his head back and forth, staring at the ground. Then he looked up, took in the other Keepers. "The Creators—those shanks did this to us, not Tommy and Teresa. The Creators. And they'll be sorry."

"Whatever," Minho said, "who gives a klunk about all that—just get on with the escape already."

A lump formed in Thomas's throat. He was so relieved he almost couldn't speak. He'd been sure they'd put him under major heat for his confession, if not throw him off the Cliff. The rest of what he had to say almost seemed easy now. "There's a computer station in a place we've never looked before. The code will open a door for us to get out of the Maze. It also shuts down the Grievers so they can't follow us—if we can just survive long enough to get to that point."

"A place we've never *looked* before?" Alby asked. "What do you think we've been doing for two years?"

"Trust me, you've never been to this spot."

Minho stood up. "Well, where is it?"

"It's almost suicide," Thomas said, knowing he was putting off the answer. "The Grievers will come after us whenever we try to do it. All of them. The final test." He wanted to make sure they understood the stakes. The odds of everyone surviving were slim.

"So where is it?" Newt asked, leaning forward in his chair.

"Over the Cliff," Thomas answered. "We have to go through the Grievers Hole."

CHAPTER 51

Alby stood up so quickly his chair fell over backward. His bloodshot eyes stood out against the white bandage on his forehead. He took two steps forward before stopping, as if he'd been about to charge and attack Thomas.

"Now you're being a shuck idiot," he said, glaring at Thomas. "Or a traitor. How can we trust a word you say if you helped design this place, put us here! We can't handle one Griever on our own ground, much less fight a whole horde of them in their little hole. What are you really up to?"

Thomas was furious. "What am I up to? Nothing! Why would I make all this up?"

Alby's arms stiffened, fists clenched. "For all we know you were sent here to get us all killed. Why should we trust you?"

Thomas stared, incredulous. "Alby, do you have a short-term memory problem? I risked my life to save you out in the Maze—you'd be dead if it wasn't for me!"

"Maybe that was a trick to gain our trust. If you're in league with the shucks who sent us here, you wouldn't have had to worry about the Grievers hurting you—maybe it was all an act."

Thomas's anger lessened slightly at that, turned into pity. Something was odd here—suspicious.

"Alby," Minho finally interjected, relieving Thomas. "That's about the dumbest theory I've ever heard. He just about got freaking torn apart three nights ago. You think that's part of the act?"

Alby nodded once, curtly. "Maybe."

"I did it," Thomas said, throwing all the annoyance he could into his voice, "on the chance that I could get my memories back, help all of us get out of here. Do I need to show you the cuts and bruises all over my body?"

Alby said nothing, his face still quivering with rage. His eyes watered and veins popped out on his neck. "We can't go back!" he finally yelled, turning to look at everyone in the room. "I've seen what our lives were like—we can't go back!"

"Is that what this is about?" Newt asked. "Are you kidding?"

Alby turned on him, fiercely, even held up a clenched fist. But he stopped, lowered his arm, then went over and sank into his chair, put his face in his hands, and broke down. Thomas couldn't have been more surprised. The fearless leader of the Gladers was crying.

"Alby, talk to us," Newt pressed, not willing to let it drop. "What's going on?"

"I did it," Alby said through a racking sob. "I did it."

"Did what?" Newt asked. He looked as confused as Thomas felt.

Alby looked up, his eyes wet with tears. "I burned the Maps. I did it. I slammed my head on the table so you'd think it was someone else, I lied, burned it all. I did it!"

The Keepers exchanged looks, shock clear in their wide eyes and raised eyebrows. For Thomas, though, it all made sense now. Alby remembered how awful his life was before he came here and he didn't want to go back.

"Well, it's a good thing we saved those Maps," Minho said, completely straight-faced, almost mocking. "Thanks for the tip you gave us after the Changing—to protect them."

Thomas looked to see how Alby would respond to Minho's sarcastic, almost cruel, remark, but he acted as if he hadn't even heard.

Newt, instead of showing anger, asked Alby to explain. Thomas knew why Newt wasn't mad—the Maps were safe, the code figured out. It didn't matter.

"I'm telling you." Alby sounded like he was begging—near hysterical. "We can't go back to where we came from. I've seen it, remembered awful, awful things. Burned land, a disease—something called the Flare. It was horrible—way worse than we have it here."

"If we stay *here*, we'll all die!" Minho yelled. "It's worse than that?"

Alby stared at Minho a long time before answering. Thomas could only think of the words he'd just said. *The Flare*. Something about it was familiar, right on the edge of his mind. But he was certain he hadn't remembered anything about that when he'd gone through the Changing.

"Yes," Alby finally said. "It's worse. Better to die than go home."

Minho snickered and leaned back in his chair. "Man, you are one butt-load of sunshine, let me tell you. I'm with Thomas. I'm with Thomas one hundred percent. If we're gonna die, let's freakin' do it fighting."

"Inside the Maze or out of it," Thomas added, relieved that Minho was firmly on his side. He turned to Alby then, and looked at him gravely. "We still live inside the world you remembered."

Alby stood again, his face showing his defeat. "Do what you want." He sighed. "Doesn't matter. We'll die no matter what." And with that, he walked to the door and left the room.

Newt let out a deep breath and shook his head. "He's never been the same since being stung—must've been one bugger of a memory. What in the world is the Flare?"

"I don't care," Minho said. "Anything's better than dying here. We can deal with the Creators once we're out. But for now we gotta do what they planned. Go through the Grievers Hole and escape. If some of us die, so be it."

Frypan snorted. "You shanks are driving me nuts. Can't get out of the Maze, and this idea of hanging with the Grievers at their bachelor pad sounds as stupid as anything I've ever heard in my life. Might as well slit our wrists."

The other Keepers burst out in argument, everyone talking over everyone else. Newt finally screamed for them to shut up.

Thomas spoke again once things settled. "I'm going through the Hole or I'll die trying to get there. Looks like Minho will, too. And I'm sure Teresa's in. If we can fight off the Grievers long enough for someone to punch in the code and shut them down, then we can go through the door *they* come through. We'll have passed the tests. Then we can face the Creators themselves."

Newt's grin had no humor in it. "And you think we can fight off Grievers? Even if we don't die, we'll probably all get stung. Every last one of them might be waiting for us when we get to the Cliff—the beetle blades are out there constantly. The Creators'll know when we make our run for it."

He'd been dreading it, but Thomas knew it was time to tell them the last part of his plan. "I don't think they'll sting us—the Changing was a Variable meant for us while we lived

here. But that part will be over. Plus, we might have one thing going for us.”

“Yeah?” Newt asked, rolling his eyes. “Can’t wait to hear it.”

“It doesn’t do the Creators any good if we all die—this thing is meant to be hard, not impossible. I think we finally know for sure that the Grievers are programmed to only kill one of us each day. So somebody can sacrifice himself to save the others while we run to the Hole. I think this might be how it’s supposed to happen.”

The room went silent until the Blood House Keeper barked a loud laugh. “Excuse me?” Winston asked. “So your suggestion is that we throw some poor kid to the wolves so the rest of us can escape? *This is your brilliant suggestion?*”

Thomas refused to admit how bad that sounded, but an idea hit him. “Yes, Winston, I’m glad you’re so good at paying attention.” He ignored the glare that got him. “And it seems obvious who the poor kid should be.”

“Oh, yeah?” Winston asked. “Who?”

Thomas folded his arms. “Me.”

The meeting erupted into a chorus of arguments. Newt very calmly stood up, walked over to Thomas and grabbed him by the arm; he pulled him toward the door. “You’re leaving. Now.”

Thomas was stunned. “Leaving? Why?”

“Think you’ve said enough for one meeting. We need to talk and decide what to do —*without* you here.” They had reached the door and Newt gave him a gentle push outside. “Wait for me by the Box. When we’re done, you and I’ll talk.”

He started to turn around, but Thomas reached out and grabbed him. “You gotta believe me, Newt. It’s the only way out of here—we can do it, I swear. We’re *meant* to.”

Newt got in his face and spoke in an angry rasp of a whisper. “Yeah, I especially loved the bit where you volunteered to get yourself killed.”

“I’m perfectly willing to do it.” Thomas meant it, but only because of the guilt that racked him. Guilt that he’d somehow helped design the Maze. But deep down, he held on to the hope that he could fight long enough for someone to punch in the code and shut down the Grievers before they killed him. Open the door.

“Oh, really?” Newt asked, seeming irritated. “Mr. Noble himself, aren’t ya?”

“I have plenty of my own reasons. In some ways it’s my fault we’re here in the first place.” He stopped, took a breath to compose himself. “Anyway, I’m going no matter what, so you better not waste it.”

Newt frowned, his eyes suddenly filled with compassion. “If you really did help design the Maze, Tommy, it’s not your fault. You’re a *kid*—you can’t help what they forced you to do.”

But it didn’t matter what Newt said. What anyone said. Thomas bore the responsibility anyway—and it was growing heavier the more he thought about it. “I just ... feel like I need to save everyone. To redeem myself.”

Newt stepped back, slowly shaking his head. “You know what’s funny, Tommy?”

“What?” Thomas replied, wary.

“I actually believe you. You just don’t have an ounce of lying in those eyes of yours. And I can’t bloody believe I’m about to say this.” He paused. “But I’m going back in there to convince those shanks we should go through the Griefer Hole, just like you said. Might as well fight the Grievers rather than sit around letting them pick us off one by one.” He held up a finger. “But listen to me—I don’t want another buggin’ word about you dying and all that heroic klunk. If we’re gonna do this, we’ll take our chances—all of us. You hear me?”

Thomas held his hands up, overwhelmed with relief. “Loud and clear. I was just trying to make the point that it’s worth the risk. If someone’s going to die every night anyway, we might as well use it to our advantage.”

Newt frowned. “Well, ain’t that just cheery?”

Thomas turned to walk away, but Newt called out to him. “Tommy?”

“Yeah?” He stopped, but didn’t look back.

"If I can convince those shanks—and that's a big *if*—the best time to go would be at night. We can hope that a lot of the Grievers might be out and about in the Maze—not in that Hole of theirs."

"Good that." Thomas agreed with him—he just hoped Newt could convince the Keepers. He turned to look at Newt and nodded.

Newt smiled, a barely-there crack in his worried grimace. "We should do it tonight, before anyone else is killed." And before Thomas could say anything, Newt disappeared back into the Gathering.

Thomas, a little shocked at the last statement, left the Homestead and walked to an old bench near the Box and took a seat, his mind a whirlwind. He kept thinking of what Alby had said about the Flare, and what it could mean. The older boy had also mentioned burned earth and a disease. Thomas didn't remember anything like that, but if it was all true, the world they were trying to get back to didn't sound so good. Still—what other choice did they have? Besides the fact that the Grievers were attacking every night, the Glade had basically shut down.

Frustrated, worried, tired of his thoughts, he called out to Teresa. *Can you hear me?*

Yeah, she replied. Where are you?

By the Box.

I'll come in a minute.

Thomas realized how badly he needed her company. *Good. I'll tell you the plan; I think it's on.*

What is it?

Thomas leaned back on the bench and put his right foot up on his knee, wondering how Teresa would react to what he was going to say. *We gotta go through the Griever Hole. Use that code to shut the Grievers down and open a door out of here.*

A pause. *I figured it was something like that.*

Thomas thought for a second, then added, *Unless you've got any better ideas?*

No. It's gonna be awful.

He punched his right fist against his other hand, even though he knew she couldn't see him. *We can do this.*

Doubtful.

Well, we have to try.

Another pause, this one longer. He could feel her resolve. *You're right.*

I think we're leaving tonight. Just come out here and we can talk more about it.

I'll be there in a few minutes.

Thomas's stomach tightened into a knot. The reality of what he had suggested, the plan Newt was trying to convince the Keepers to accept, was starting to hit him. He knew it was dangerous, but the idea of actually fighting the Grievers—not just running from them—was terrifying. The absolute best-case scenario was that only one of them would die—but even that couldn't be trusted. Maybe the Creators would just reprogram the creatures. And then all bets were off.

He tried not to think about it.

Sooner than Thomas expected, Teresa had found him and was sitting next to him, her body

pressed against his despite plenty of room on the bench. She reached out and took his hand. He squeezed back, so hard he knew it must've hurt.

"Tell me," she said.

Thomas did, reciting every word he'd told the Keepers, hating how Teresa's eyes filled with worry—and terror. "The plan was easy to talk about," he said after he'd told her everything. "But Newt thinks we should go *tonight*. It doesn't sound so good now." It especially terrified him to think about Chuck and Teresa out there—he'd faced the Grievers down already and knew all too well what it was like. He wanted to be able to protect his friends from the horrible experience, but he knew he couldn't.

"We can do it," she said in a quiet voice.

Hearing her say that only made him worry more. "Holy crap, I'm scared."

"Holy crap, you're human. You *should* be scared."

Thomas didn't respond, and for a long time they just sat there, holding hands, no words spoken, in their minds or aloud. He felt the slightest hint of peace, as fleeting as it was, and tried to enjoy it for however long it might last.

CHAPTER 53

Thomas was almost sad when the Gathering finally ended. When Newt came out of the Homestead he knew that the time for rest was over.

The Keeper spotted them and approached at a limping run. Thomas noticed he'd let go of Teresa's hand without thinking about it. Newt finally came to a halt and crossed his arms over his chest as he looked down at them sitting on the bench. "This is bloody nuts, you know that, right?" His face was impossible to read, but there seemed to be a hint of victory in his eyes.

Thomas stood up, feeling a rush of excitement flooding his body. "So they agreed to go?"

Newt nodded. "All of them. Wasn't as hard as I thought it'd be. Those shanks've seen what happens at night with those bloody Doors open. We can't get out of the stupid Maze. Gotta try *something*." He turned and looked at the Keepers, who'd started to gather their respective work groups. "Now we just have to convince the Gladers."

Thomas knew that would be even more difficult than persuading the Keepers had been.

"You think they'll go for it?" Teresa asked, finally standing to join them.

"Not all of them," Newt said, and Thomas could see the frustration in his eyes. "Some'll stay and take their chances—guarantee it."

Thomas didn't doubt people would blanch at the thought of making a run for it. Asking them to fight the Grievers was asking a lot. "What about Alby?"

"Who knows?" Newt responded, looking around the Glade, observing the Keepers and their groups. "I'm convinced that bugger really is more scared to go back home than he is of the Grievers. But I'll get him to go with us, don't worry."

Thomas wished he could bring back memories of those things that were tormenting Alby, but there was nothing. "How are you going to convince him?"

Newt laughed. "I'll make up some klunk. Tell him we'll all find a new life in another part of the world, live happily ever after."

Thomas shrugged. "Well, maybe we can. I promised Chuck I'd get him home, you know. Or at least find him a home."

"Yeah, well," Teresa murmured. "Anything's better than this place."

Thomas looked around at the arguments breaking out across the Glade, Keepers doing their best to convince people they should take a chance and battle their way through the Grievers Hole. Some Gladers stomped away, but most seemed to listen and at least consider.

"So what's next?" Teresa asked.

Newt took a deep breath. "Figure out who's going, who's staying. Get ready. Food, weapons, all that. Then we go. Thomas, I'd put you in charge since it was your idea, but it's going to be hard enough to get people on our side without making the Greenie our leader—no offense. So just lay low, okay? We'll leave the code business to you and Teresa—you can handle that from the background."

Thomas was more than fine with lying low—finding that computer station and punching in the code was more than enough responsibility for him. Even with that much on his

shoulders he had to fight the rising flood of panic he felt. "You sure make it sound easy," he finally said, trying his best to lighten up the situation. Or at least *sound* like he was.

Newt folded his arms again, looked at him closely. "Like you said—stay here, one shank'll die tonight. Go, one shank'll die. What's the difference?" He pointed at Thomas. "If you're right."

"I am." Thomas knew he was right about the Hole, the code, the door, the need to fight. But whether one person or many would die, he had no clue. However, if there was one thing his gut told him, it was not to admit to any doubt.

Newt clapped him on the back. "Good that. Let's get to work."

The next few hours were frantic.

Most of the Gladers ended up agreeing to go—even more than Thomas would've guessed. Even Alby decided to make the run. Though no one admitted it, Thomas bet most of them were banking on the theory that only one person would be killed by the Grievers, and they figured their chances of *not* being the unlucky sap were decent. Those who decided to stay in the Glade were few but adamant and loud. They mainly walked around sulking, trying to tell others how stupid they were. Eventually, they gave up and kept their distance.

As for Thomas and the rest of those committed to the escape, there was a ton of work to be done.

Backpacks were handed out and stuffed full of supplies. Frypan—Newt told Thomas that the Cook had been one of the last Keepers to agree to go—was in charge of gathering all the food and figuring out a way to distribute it evenly among the packs. Syringes of Grief Serum were included, even though Thomas didn't think the Grievers would sting them. Chuck was in charge of filling water bottles and getting them out to everyone. Teresa helped him, and Thomas asked her to sugarcoat the trip as much as she could, even if she had to flat-out lie, which was mostly the case. Chuck had tried to act brave from the time he first found out they were going for it, but his sweaty skin and dazed eyes revealed the truth.

Minho went to the Cliff with a group of Runners, taking ivy ropes and rocks to test the invisible Griever Hole one last time. They had to hope the creatures would keep to their normal schedule and not come out during daytime hours. Thomas had contemplated just jumping into the Hole right away and trying to punch in the code quickly, but he had no idea what to expect or what might be waiting for him. Newt was right—they'd better wait until night and hope that most of the Grievers were in the Maze, not inside their Hole.

When Minho returned, safe and sound, Thomas thought he seemed very optimistic that it really was an exit. Or entrance. Depending on how you looked at it.

Thomas helped Newt distribute the weapons, and even more innovative ones were created in their desperation to be prepared for the Grievers. Wooden poles were carved into spears or wrapped in barbwire; the knives were sharpened and fastened with twine to the ends of sturdy branches hacked from trees in the woods; chunks of broken glass were duct-taped to shovels. By the end of the day, the Gladers had turned into a small army. A very pathetic, ill-prepared army, Thomas thought, but an army all the same.

Once he and Teresa were done helping, they went to the secret spot in the Deadheads to strategize about the station inside the Griever Hole and how they planned to punch in the

code.

"We have to be the ones to do it," Thomas said as they leaned their backs against craggy trees, the once-green leaves already starting to turn gray from the lack of artificial sunlight. "That way if we get separated, we can be in contact and still help each other."

Teresa had grabbed a stick and was peeling off the bark. "But we need backup in case something happens to us."

"Definitely. Minho and Newt know the code words—we'll tell them they have to get them punched into the computer if we ... well, you know." Thomas didn't want to think about all the bad things that might happen.

"Not much to the plan, then." Teresa yawned, as if life were completely normal.

"Not much at all. Fight the Grievers, punch in the code, escape through the door. Then we deal with the Creators—whatever it takes."

"Six code words, who knows how many Grievers." Teresa broke the stick in half. "What do you think *WICKED* stands for, anyway?"

Thomas felt like he'd been hit in the stomach. For some reason, hearing the word at that moment, from someone else, knocked something loose in his mind and it clicked. He was stunned he hadn't made the connection sooner. "That sign I saw out in the Maze—remember? The metal one with words stamped on it?" Thomas's heart had started to race with excitement.

Teresa crinkled her forehead in confusion for a second, but then a light seemed to blink on behind her eyes. "Whoa. World In Catastrophe: Killzone Experiment Department. *WICKED*. *WICKED* is good—what I wrote on my arm. What does that even *mean*?"

"No idea. Which is why I'm scared to death that what we're about to do is a whole pile of stupid. Could be a bloodbath."

"Everyone knows what they're getting into." Teresa reached out and took his hand. "Nothing to lose, remember?"

Thomas remembered, but for some reason Teresa's words fell flat—they didn't have much hope in them. "Nothing to lose," he repeated.

Just before the normal Door-closing time, Frypan prepared one last meal to carry them through the night. The mood hanging over the Gladers as they ate couldn't have been more somber or sodden with fear. Thomas found himself sitting next to Chuck, absently picking at his food.

"So ... Thomas," the boy said through a huge bite of mashed potatoes. "Who am I nicknamed after?"

Thomas couldn't help shaking his head—here they were, about to embark on probably the most dangerous task of their lives, and Chuck was curious where he'd gotten his nickname. "I don't know, Darwin, maybe? The dude who figured out evolution."

"I bet no one's ever called him a dude before." Chuck took another big bite, and seemed to think that was the best time to talk, full mouth and all. "You know, I'm really not all that scared. I mean, last few nights, sitting in the Homestead, just waiting for a Griever to come in and steal one of us was the worst thing I've ever done. At least now we're taking it to them, *trying* something. And at least ..."

"At least what?" Thomas asked. He didn't believe for a second that Chuck wasn't scared; it almost hurt to see him acting brave.

"Well, everyone's speculating they can only kill one of us. Maybe I sound like a shuck, but it gives me some hope. At least most of us will make it through—just leaves one poor sucker to die. Better than all of us."

It made Thomas sick to think people were hanging on to that hope of just one person dying; the more he thought about it, the less he believed it was true. The Creators knew the plan—they might reprogram the Grievers. But even false hope was better than nothing. "Maybe we can all make it. As long as everyone fights."

Chuck stopped stuffing his face for a second and looked at Thomas carefully. "You really think that, or you just trying to cheer me up?"

"We can do it." Thomas ate his last bite, took a big drink of water. He'd never felt like such a liar in his life. People were going to die. But he was going to do everything possible to make sure Chuck wasn't one of them. And Teresa. "Don't forget my promise. You can still plan on it."

Chuck frowned. "Big deal—I keep hearing the world is in klunky shape."

"Hey, maybe so, but we'll find the people who care about us—you'll see."

Chuck stood up. "Well, I don't wanna think about it," he announced. "Just get me out of the Maze, and I'll be one happy dude."

"Good that," Thomas agreed.

A commotion from the other tables caught his attention. Newt and Alby were gathering the Gladers, telling everyone it was time to go. Alby seemed mostly himself, but Thomas still worried about the guy's mental state. In Thomas's mind, Newt was in charge, but he could also be a loose cannon sometimes.

The icy fear and panic Thomas had experienced so often the last few days swept over

him once again in full force. This was it. They were going. Trying not to think about it, to just act, he grabbed his backpack. Chuck did the same, and they headed for the West Door, the one leading to the Cliff.

Thomas found Minho and Teresa talking to each other near the left side of the Door, going over the hastily made plans to enter the escape code once they got into the Hole.

"You shanks ready?" Minho asked when they came up. "Thomas, this was all your idea, so it better work. If not, I'll kill ya before the Grievers can."

"Thanks," Thomas said. But he couldn't shake the twisting feeling in his gut. What if somehow he *was* wrong? What if the memories he'd had were false ones? *Planted* somehow? The thought terrified him, and he pushed it aside. There was no going back.

He looked at Teresa, who shifted from foot to foot, wringing her hands. "You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she answered with a small smile, clearly not fine at all. "Just anxious to get it over with."

"Amen, sister," Minho said. He looked the calmest to Thomas, the most confident, the least scared. Thomas envied him.

When Newt finally had everyone gathered, he called for quiet, and Thomas turned to hear what he had to say. "There're forty-one of us." He pulled the backpack he was holding onto his shoulders, and hoisted a thick wooden pole with barbwire wrapped around its tip. The thing looked deadly. "Make sure you've got your weapons. Other than that, isn't a whole lot to buggin' say—you've all been told the plan. We're gonna fight our way through to the Grievers Hole, and Tommy here's gonna punch in his little magic code and then we're gonna get payback on the Creators. Simple as that."

Thomas barely heard Newt, having seen Alby sulking over to the side, away from the main group of the Gladers, alone. Alby picked at the string of his bow while he stared at the ground. A quiver of arrows hung over his shoulder. Thomas felt a rising tide of worry that somehow Alby was unstable, that somehow he'd screw everything up. He decided to watch him carefully if he could.

"Shouldn't someone give a pep talk or something?" Minho asked, pulling Thomas's attention away from Alby.

"Go ahead," Newt replied.

Minho nodded and faced the crowd. "Be careful," he said dryly. "Don't die."

Thomas would have laughed if he could, but he was too scared for it to come out.

"Great. We're all bloody inspired," Newt answered, then pointed over his shoulder, toward the Maze. "You all know the plan. After two years of being treated like mice, tonight we're making a stand. Tonight we're taking the fight back to the Creators, no matter what we have to go through to get there. Tonight the Grievers better be scared."

Someone cheered, and then someone else. Soon shouts and battle calls broke out, rising in volume, filling the air like thunder. Thomas felt a trickle of courage inside him—he grasped it, clung to it, urged it to grow. Newt was right. Tonight, they'd fight. Tonight, they'd make their stand, once and for all.

Thomas was ready. He roared with the other Gladers. He knew they should probably be quiet, not bring any more attention to themselves, but he didn't care. The game was on.

Newt thrust his weapon into the air and yelled, "Hear that, Creators! We're coming!"

And with that, he turned and ran into the Maze, his limp barely noticeable. Into the gray air that seemed darker than the Glade, full of shadows and blackness. The Gladers around Thomas, still cheering, picked up their weapons and ran after him, even Alby. Thomas followed, falling into line between Teresa and Chuck, hefting a big wooden spear with a knife tied at its tip. The sudden feeling of responsibility for his friends almost overwhelmed him—made it hard to run. But he kept going, determined to win.

You can do this, he thought. Just make it to that Hole.

Thomas kept a steady pace as he ran with the other Gladers along the stone pathways toward the Cliff. He'd grown used to running the Maze, but this was completely different. The sounds of shuffling feet echoed up the walls and the red lights of the beetle blades flashed more menacingly in the ivy—the Creators were certainly watching, listening. One way or another, there was going to be a fight.

Scared? Teresa asked him as they ran.

No, I love things made out of blubber and steel. Can't wait to see them. He felt no mirth or humor and wondered if there'd ever be a time again when he would.

So funny, she responded.

She was right next to him, but his eyes stayed glued up ahead. *We'll be fine. Just stay close to me and Minho.*

Ah, my Knight in Shining Armor. What, you don't think I can fend for myself?

Actually, he thought quite the opposite—Teresa seemed as tough as anybody there. *No, I'm just trying to be nice.*

The group was spread out across the full width of the corridor, running at a steady but quick pace—Thomas wondered how long the non-Runners would hold up. As if in response to the thought, Newt fell back, finally tapping Minho on the shoulder. “You lead the way now,” Thomas heard him say.

Minho nodded and ran to the front, guiding the Gladers through all the turns necessary. Every step was agonizing for Thomas. What courage he'd gathered had turned to dread, and he wondered when the Grievers would finally give chase. Wondered when the fight would begin.

And so it went for him as they kept moving, those Gladers not used to running such distances gasping in huge gulps of air. But no one quit. On and on they ran, with no signs of Grievers. And as the time passed, Thomas let the slightest trickle of hope enter his system—maybe they'd make it before getting attacked. Maybe.

Finally, after the longest hour of Thomas's life, they reached the long alley that led to the last turn before the Cliff—a short corridor to the right that branched off like the stem of the letter *T*.

Thomas, his heart thumping, sweat slicking his skin, had moved up right behind Minho, Teresa at his side. Minho slowed at the corner, then stopped, holding up a hand to tell Thomas and the others to do the same. Then he turned, a look of horror on his face.

“Do you hear that?” he whispered.

Thomas shook his head, trying to squash the terror Minho's expression had given him.

Minho crept ahead and peeked around the sharp edge of stone, looking toward the Cliff. Thomas had seen him do that before, when they'd followed a Griever to this very spot. Just like that time, Minho jerked back and turned to face him.

“Oh, no,” the Keeper said through a moan. “Oh, no.”

Then Thomas heard it. Griever sounds. It was as if they'd been hiding, waiting, and now

were coming to life. He didn't even have to look—he knew what Minho was going to say before he said it.

"There's at least a dozen of them. Maybe fifteen." He reached up and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "They're just waiting for us!"

The icy chill of fear bit Thomas harder than ever before. He looked over at Teresa, about to say something, but stopped when he saw the expression on her pale face—he'd never seen terror present itself so starkly.

Newt and Alby had moved up the line of waiting Gladers to join Thomas and the others. Apparently Minho's pronouncement had already been whispered through the ranks, because the first thing Newt said was "Well, we knew we'd have to fight." But the tremor in his voice gave him away—he was just trying to say the right thing.

Thomas felt it himself. It'd been easy to talk about—the nothing-to-lose fight, the hope that just one of them would be taken, the chance to finally escape. But now it was here, literally around the corner. Doubts that he could go through with it seeped into his mind and heart. He wondered why the Grievers were just waiting—the beetle blades had obviously let them know the Gladers were coming. Were the Creators *enjoying* this?

He had an idea. "Maybe they've already taken a kid back at the Glade. Maybe we can get past them—why else would they just be sitting—"

A loud noise from behind cut him off—he spun to see more Grievers moving down the corridor toward them, spikes flaring, metal arms groping, coming from the direction of the Glade. Thomas was just about to say something when he heard sounds from the other end of the long alley—he looked to see yet more Grievers.

The enemy was on all sides, blocking them off completely.

The Gladers surged toward Thomas, forming a tight group, forcing him to move out into the open intersection where the Cliff corridor met the long alley. He saw the pack of Grievers between them and the Cliff, spikes extended, their moist skin pulsing in and out. Waiting, watching. The other two groups of Grievers had closed in and stopped just a few dozen feet from the Gladers, also waiting, watching.

Thomas slowly turned in a circle, fought the fear as he took it all in. They were surrounded. They had no choice now—there was nowhere to go. A sharp pulsing pain throbbed behind his eyes.

The Gladers compressed into a tighter group around him, everyone facing outward, huddled together in the center of the T intersection. Thomas was pressed between Newt and Teresa—he could feel Newt trembling. No one said a word. The only sounds were the eerie moans and whirrs of machinery coming from the Grievers, sitting there as if enjoying the little trap they'd set for the humans. Their disgusting bodies heaved in and out with mechanical wheezes of breath.

What are they doing? Thomas called out to Teresa. *What are they waiting for?*

She didn't answer, which worried him. He reached out and squeezed her hand. The Gladers around him stood silent, clutching their meager weapons.

Thomas looked over at Newt. "Got any ideas?"

"No," he replied, his voice just the tiniest bit shaky. "I don't understand what they're bloody waitin' for."

"We shouldn't have come," Alby said. He'd been so quiet, his voice sounded odd,

especially with the hollow echo the Maze walls created.

Thomas was in no mood for whining—they had to *do* something. “Well, we’d be no better off in the Homestead. Hate to say it, but if one of us dies, that’s better than all of us.” He really hoped the one-person-a-night thing was true now. Seeing all these Grievers close up hit home with an explosion of reality—could they really fight them all?

A long moment passed before Alby replied. “Maybe I should ...” He trailed off and started walking forward—in the direction of the Cliff—slowly, as if in a trance. Thomas watched in detached awe—he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Alby?” Newt said. “Get back here!”

Instead of responding, Alby took off running—he headed straight for the pack of Grievers between him and the Cliff.

“Alby!” Newt screamed.

Thomas started to say something himself, but Alby had already made it to the monsters and jumped on top of one. Newt moved away from Thomas’s side and toward Alby—but five or six Grievers had already burst to life and attacked the boy in a blur of metal and skin. Thomas reached out and grabbed Newt by the arms before he could go any farther, then pulled him backward.

“Let go!” Newt yelled, struggling to break loose.

“Are you nuts!” Thomas shouted. “There’s nothing you can do!”

Two more Grievers broke from the pack and swarmed over Alby, piling on top of each other, snapping and cutting at the boy, as if they wanted to rub it in, show their vicious cruelty. Somehow, impossibly, Alby didn’t scream. Thomas lost sight of the body as he struggled with Newt, thankful for the distraction. Newt finally gave up, collapsing backward in defeat.

Alby’d flipped once and for all, Thomas thought, fighting the urge to rid his stomach of its contents. Their leader had been so scared to go back to whatever he’d seen, he’d chosen to sacrifice himself instead. He was gone. Totally gone.

Thomas helped steady Newt on his feet; the Glader couldn’t stop staring at the spot where his friend had disappeared.

“I can’t believe it,” Newt whispered. “I can’t believe he just did that.”

Thomas shook his head, unable to reply. Seeing Alby go down like that ... a new kind of pain he’d never felt before filled his insides—an ill, disturbed pain; it felt worse than the physical kind. And he didn’t even know if it had anything to do with Alby—he’d never much liked the guy. But the thought that what he’d just seen might happen to Chuck—or Teresa ...

Minho moved closer to Thomas and Newt, squeezed Newt’s shoulder. “We can’t waste what he did.” He turned toward Thomas. “We’ll fight ’em if we have to, make a path to the Cliff for you and Teresa. Get in the Hole and do your thing—we’ll keep them off until you scream for us to follow.”

Thomas looked at each of the three sets of Grievers—not one had yet made a move toward the Gladers—and nodded. “Hopefully they’ll go dormant for a while. We should only need a minute or so to punch in the code.”

“How can you guys be so heartless?” Newt murmured, the disgust in his voice surprising Thomas.

"What do you want, Newt?" Minho said. "Should we all dress up and have a funeral?"

Newt didn't respond, still staring at the spot where the Grievers seemed to be feeding on Alby beneath them. Thomas couldn't help taking a peek—he saw a smear of bright red on one of the creatures' bodies. His stomach turned and he quickly looked away.

Minho continued. "Alby didn't wanna go back to his old life. He freaking *sacrificed* himself for us—and they aren't attacking, so maybe it worked. *We'd* be heartless if we wasted it."

Newt only shrugged, closed his eyes.

Minho turned and faced the huddled group of Gladers. "Listen up! Number one priority is to protect Thomas and Teresa. Get them to the Cliff and the Hole so—"

The sounds of the Grievers revving to life cut him off. Thomas looked up in horror. The creatures on both sides of their group seemed to have noticed them again. Spikes were popping in and out of blubbery skin; their bodies shuddered and pulsed. Then, in unison, the monsters moved forward, slowly, instrument-tipped appendages unfolding, pointed at Thomas and the Gladers, ready to kill. Tightening their trap formation like a noose, the Grievers steadily charged toward them.

Alby's sacrifice had failed miserably.

CHAPTER 56

Thomas grabbed Minho by the arm. “Somehow I have to get through that!” He nodded toward the rolling pack of Grievers between them and the Cliff—they looked like one big mass of rumbling, spiked blubber, glistening with flashes of lights off steel. They were even more menacing in the faded gray light.

Thomas waited for an answer as Minho and Newt exchanged a long glance. The anticipation of fighting was almost worse than the fear of it.

“They’re coming!” Teresa yelled. “We have to do something!”

“You lead,” Newt finally said to Minho, his voice barely more than a whisper. “Make a bloody path for Tommy and the girl. Do it.”

Minho nodded once, a steel look of resolve hardening his features. Then he turned toward the Gladers. “We head straight for the Cliff! Fight through the middle, push the shuckin’ things toward the walls. What matters most is getting Thomas and Teresa to the Grievers Hole!”

Thomas looked away from him, back at the approaching monsters—they were only a few feet away. He gripped his poor excuse for a spear.

We have to stay close together, he told Teresa. *Let them do the fighting—we have to get through that Hole.* He felt like a coward, but he knew that any fighting—and any deaths—would be in vain if they didn’t get that code punched, the door to the Creators opened.

I know, she replied. *Stick together.*

“Ready!” Minho yelled next to Thomas, raising his barbwire-wrapped club into the air with one hand, a long silver knife in the other. He pointed the knife at the horde of Grievers; a flash glinted off the blade. “Now!”

The Keeper ran forward without waiting for a response. Newt went after him, right on his heels, and then the rest of the Gladers followed, a tight pack of roaring boys charging ahead to a bloody battle, weapons raised. Thomas held Teresa’s hand, let them all go past, felt them bump him, smelled their sweat, sensed their terror, waiting for the perfect opportunity to make his own dash.

Just as the first sounds of boys crashing into Grievers filled the air—pierced with screams and roars of machinery and wood clacking against steel—Chuck ran past Thomas, who quickly reached out and grabbed his arm.

Chuck stumbled backward, then looked up at Thomas, his eyes so full of fright Thomas felt something shatter in his heart. In that split second, he’d made a decision.

“Chuck, you’re with me and Teresa.” He said it forcefully, with authority, leaving no room for doubt.

Chuck looked ahead at the engaged battle. “But ...” He trailed off, and Thomas knew the boy relished the idea though he was ashamed to admit it.

Thomas quickly tried to save his dignity. “We need your help in the Grievers Hole, in case one of those things is in there waiting for us.”

Chuck nodded quickly—too quickly. Again, Thomas felt the pang of sadness in his heart,

felt the urge to get Chuck home safely stronger than he'd ever felt it before.

"Okay, then," Thomas said. "Hold Teresa's other hand. Let's go."

Chuck did as he was told, trying so hard to act brave. And, Thomas noted, not saying a word, perhaps for the first time in his life.

They've made an opening! Teresa shouted in Thomas's mind—it sent a quick snap of pain shooting through his skull. She pointed ahead, and Thomas saw the narrow aisle forming in the middle of the corridor, Gladers fighting wildly to push the Grievers toward the walls.

"Now!" Thomas shouted.

He sprinted ahead, pulling Teresa behind him, Teresa pulling Chuck behind her, running at full speed, spears and knives cocked for battle, forward into the bloody, scream-filled hallway of stone. Toward the Cliff.

War raged around them. Gladers fought, panic-induced adrenaline driving them on. The sounds echoing off the walls were a cacophony of terror—human screams, metal clashing against metal, motors roaring, the haunted shrieks of the Grievers, saws spinning, claws clasping, boys yelling for help. All was a blur, bloody and gray and flashes of steel; Thomas tried not to look left or right, only ahead, through the narrow gap formed by the Gladers.

Even as they ran, Thomas went through the code words again in his mind. *FLOAT, CATCH, BLEED, DEATH, STIFF, PUSH.* They just had to make it a few dozen feet more.

Something just sliced my arm! Teresa screamed. Even as she said it, Thomas felt a sharp stab in his leg. He didn't look back, didn't bother answering. The seething impossibility of their predicament was like a heavy deluge of black water flooding around him, dragging him toward surrender. He fought it, pushed himself forward.

There was the Cliff, opening out into a gray-dark sky, about twenty feet away. He surged ahead, pulling his friends.

Battles clashed on both sides of them; Thomas refused to look, refused to help. A Griever spun directly in his path; a boy, his face hidden from sight, was clutched in its claws, stabbing viciously into the thick, whalish skin, trying to escape. Thomas dodged to the left, kept running. He heard a shriek as he passed by, a throat-scorching wail that could only mean the Glader had lost the fight, met a horrific end. The scream ran on, shattering the air, overpowering the other sounds of war, until it faded in death. Thomas felt his heart tremble, hoped it wasn't someone he knew.

Just keep going! Teresa said.

"*I know!*" Thomas shouted back, this time out loud.

Someone sprinted past Thomas, bumped him. A Griever charged in from the right, blades twirling. A Glader cut it off, attacked it with two long swords, metal clacking and clangling as they fought. Thomas heard a distant voice, screaming the same words over and over, something about him. About protecting him as he ran. It was Minho, desperation and fatigue radiant in his shouts.

Thomas kept going.

One almost got Chuck! Teresa yelled, a violent echo in his head.

More Grievers came at them, more Gladers helped. Winston had picked up Alby's bow and arrow, flinging the steel-pointed shafts at anything nonhuman that moved, missing more than he hit. Boys Thomas didn't know ran alongside him, whacking at Griever instruments with their makeshift weapons, jumping on them, attacking. The sounds—

clashes, clangs, screams, moaning wails, roars of engines, spinning saws, snapping blades, the screech of spikes against the floor, hair-raising pleas for help—it all grew to a crescendo, became unbearable.

Thomas screamed, but he kept running until they made it to the Cliff. He skidded to a stop, right on the edge. Teresa and Chuck bumped into him, almost sending all three of them to an endless fall. In a split second, Thomas surveyed his view of the Grievers Hole. Hanging out, in the middle of thin air, were ivy vines stretching to nowhere.

Earlier, Minho and a couple of Runners had pulled out ropes of ivy and knotted them to vines still attached to the walls. They'd then tossed the loose ends over the Cliff, until they hit the Grievers Hole, where now six or seven vines ran from the stone edge to an invisible rough square, hovering in the empty sky, where they disappeared into nothingness.

It was time to jump. Thomas hesitated, feeling one last moment of stark terror—hearing the horrible sounds behind him, seeing the illusion in front of him—then snapped out of it. “You first, Teresa.” He wanted to go last to make sure a Grievers didn’t get her or Chuck.

To his surprise, she didn’t hesitate. After squeezing Thomas’s hand, then Chuck’s shoulder, she leaped off the edge, immediately stiffening her legs, with her arms by her sides. Thomas held his breath until she slipped into the spot between the cut-off ivy ropes and disappeared. It looked as if she’d been erased from existence with one quick swipe.

“Whoa!” Chuck yelled, the slightest hint of his old self breaking through.

“Whoa is right,” Thomas said. “You’re next.”

Before the boy could argue, Thomas grabbed him under his arms, squeezed Chuck’s torso. “Push off with your legs and I’ll give you a lift. Ready? One, two, *three!*” He grunted with effort, heaved him over toward the Hole.

Chuck screamed as he flew through the air, and he almost missed the target, but his feet went through; then his stomach and arms slammed against the sides of the invisible hole before he disappeared inside. The boy’s bravery solidified something in Thomas’s heart. He loved the kid. He loved him as if they had the same mom.

Thomas tightened the straps on his backpack, held his makeshift fighting spear tightly in his right fist. The sounds behind him were awful, horrible—he felt guilty for not helping. *Just do your part*, he told himself.

Steeling his nerves, he tapped his spear against the stone ground, then planted his left foot on the very edge of the Cliff and jumped, catapulting up and into the twilight air. He pulled the spear close to his torso, pointed his toes downward, stiffened his body.

Then he hit the Hole.

CHAPTER 57

A line of icy cold shot across Thomas's skin as he entered the Grievers Hole, starting from his toes and continuing up his whole body, as if he'd jumped through a flat plane of freezing water. The world went even darker around him as his feet thumped to a landing on a slippery surface, then shot out from under him; he fell backward into Teresa's arms. She and Chuck helped him stand. It was a miracle Thomas hadn't stabbed someone's eye out with his spear.

The Grievers Hole would've been pitch-black if not for the beam of Teresa's flashlight cutting through the darkness. As Thomas got his bearings, he realized they were standing in a ten-foot-high stone cylinder. It was damp, and covered in shiny, grimy oil, and it stretched out in front of them for dozens of yards before it faded into darkness. Thomas peered up at the Hole through which they'd come—it looked like a square window into a deep, starless space.

"The computer's over there," Teresa said, grabbing his attention.

Several feet down the tunnel, she had aimed her light at a small square of grimy glass that shone a dull green color. Beneath it, a keyboard was set into the wall, angling out enough for someone to type on it with ease if standing. There it was, ready for the code. Thomas couldn't help thinking it seemed too easy, too good to be true.

"Put the words in!" Chuck yelled, slapping Thomas on the shoulder. "Hurry!"

Thomas motioned for Teresa to do it. "Chuck and I'll keep watch, make sure a Grievers doesn't come through the Hole." He just hoped the Gladers had turned their attention from making the aisle in the Maze to keeping the creatures away from the Cliff.

"Okay," Teresa said—Thomas knew she was too smart to waste time arguing about it. She stepped up to the keyboard and screen, then started typing.

Wait! Thomas called to her mind. *Are you sure you know the words?*

She turned to him and scowled. "I'm not an idiot, Tom. Yes, I'm perfectly capable of remembering—"

A loud bang from above and behind them cut her off, made Thomas jump. He spun around to see a Grievers plop through the Grievers Hole, appearing as if by magic from the dark square of black. The thing had retracted its spikes and arms to enter—when it landed with a squishy thump, a dozen sharp and nasty objects popped back out, looking deadlier than ever.

Thomas pushed Chuck behind him and faced the creature, holding out his spear as if that would ward it off. "Just keep typing, Teresa!" he yelled.

A skinny metallic rod burst out of the Grievers moist skin, unfolding into a long appendage with three spinning blades, which moved directly toward Thomas's face.

He gripped the end of his spear with both hands, squeezing tightly as he lowered the knife-laced point to the ground in front of him. The bladed arm moved within two feet, ready to slice his skin to bits. When it was just a foot away, Thomas tensed his muscles and swung the spear up, around, and toward the ceiling as hard as he could. It smacked the

metal arm and pivoted the thing skyward, revolving in an arc until it slammed back into the body of the Griever. The monster let out an angry shriek and pulled back several feet, its spikes retracting into its body. Thomas heaved breaths in and out.

Maybe I can hold it off, he said quickly to Teresa. Just hurry!

I'm almost done, she replied.

The Griever's spikes appeared again; it surged ahead and another arm popped out of its skin and shot forward, this one with huge claws, snapping to grab the spear. Thomas swung, this time from above his head, throwing every bit of strength into the attack. The spear crashed into the base of the claws. With a loud clunk, and then a squishing sound, the entire arm ripped free of its socket, falling to the floor. Then, from some kind of mouth that Thomas couldn't see, the Griever let out a long, piercing shriek and pulled back again; the spikes disappeared.

"These things are beatable!" Thomas shouted.

It won't let me enter the last word! Teresa said in his mind.

Barely hearing her, not quite understanding, he yelled out a roar and charged ahead to take advantage of the Griever's moment of weakness. Swinging his spear wildly, he jumped on top of the creature's bulbous body, whacking two metal arms away from him with a loud crack. He lifted the spear above his head, braced his feet—felt them sink into the disgusting blubber—then thrust the spear down and into the monster. A slimy yellow goo exploded from the flesh, splashing over Thomas's legs as he drove the spear as far as it would sink into the thing's body. Then he released the hilt of the weapon and jumped away, running back to Chuck and Teresa.

Thomas watched in sick fascination as the Griever twitched uncontrollably, spewing the yellow oil in every direction. Spikes popped in and out of the skin; its remaining arms swung around in mass confusion, at times impaling its own body. Soon it began to slow, losing energy with every ounce of blood—or fuel—it lost.

A few seconds later, it stopped moving altogether. Thomas couldn't believe it. He absolutely couldn't believe it. He'd just defeated a Griever, one of the monsters that had terrorized the Gladers for more than two years.

He glanced behind him at Chuck, standing there with eyes wide.

"You killed it," the boy said. He laughed, as if that one act had solved all their problems.

"Wasn't so hard," Thomas muttered, then turned to see Teresa frantically typing away at the keyboard. He knew immediately that something was wrong.

"What's the problem?" he asked, almost shouting. He ran up to look over her shoulder and saw that she kept typing the word *PUSH* over and over, but nothing appeared on the screen.

She pointed at the dirty square of glass, empty but for its greenish glow of life. "I put in all the words and one by one they appeared on the screen; then something beeped and they'd disappear. But it won't let me type in the last word. Nothing's happening!"

Cold filled Thomas's veins as Teresa's words sank in. "Well ... why?"

"I don't know!" She tried again, then again. Nothing appeared.

"*Thomas!*" Chuck screamed from behind them. Thomas turned to see him pointing at the Griever Hole—another creature was making its way through. As he watched, it plopped down on top of its dead brother and another Griever started entering the Hole.

"What's taking so long!" Chuck cried frantically. "You said they'd turn off when you punched in the code!"

Both Grievers had righted themselves and extended their spikes, had started moving toward them.

"It won't let us enter the word *PUSH*," Thomas said absently, not really speaking to Chuck but trying to think of a solution ...

I don't get it, Teresa said.

The Grievers were coming, only a few feet away. Feeling his will fade into blackness, Thomas braced his feet and held up his fists halfheartedly. It was supposed to work. The code was supposed to—

"Maybe you should just push that button," Chuck said.

Thomas was so surprised by the random statement that he turned away from the Grievers, looked at the boy. Chuck was pointing at a spot near the floor, right underneath the screen and keyboard.

Before he could move, Teresa was already down there, crouching on her knees. And consumed by curiosity, by a fleeting hope, Thomas joined her, collapsing to the ground to get a better look. He heard the Griever moan and roar behind him, felt a sharp claw grab his shirt, felt a prick of pain. But he could only stare.

A small red button was set into the wall only a few inches above the floor. Three black words were printed there, so obvious he couldn't believe he'd missed it earlier.

Kill the Maze

More pain snapped Thomas out of his stupor. The Griever had grabbed him with two instruments, had started dragging him backward. The other one had gone after Chuck and was just about to swipe at the kid with a long blade.

A button.

"Push!" Thomas screamed, louder than he'd thought possible for a human being to scream.

And Teresa did.

She pushed the button and everything went perfectly silent. Then, from somewhere down the dark tunnel, came the sound of a door sliding open.

Almost at once the Grievers had shut down completely, their instruments sucked back through their blubbery skin, their lights turned off, their inside machines dead quiet. And that door ...

Thomas fell to the floor after being released by his captor's claws, and despite the pain of several lacerations across his back and shoulders, elation surged through him so strongly he didn't know how to react. He gasped, then laughed, then choked on a sob before laughing again.

Chuck had scooted away from the Grievers, bumping into Teresa—she held him tightly, squeezing him in a fierce hug.

"You did it, Chuck," Teresa said. "We were so worried about the stupid code words, we didn't think to look around for something to *push*—the last word, the last piece of the puzzle."

Thomas laughed again, in disbelief that such a thing could be possible so soon after what they'd gone through. "She's right, Chuck—you saved us, man! I *told* you we needed you!" Thomas scrambled to his feet and joined the other two in a group hug, almost delirious. "Chuck's a shucking hero!"

"What about the others?" Teresa said with a nod toward the Griever Hole. Thomas felt his elation wither, and he stepped back and turned toward the Hole.

As if in answer to her question, someone fell through the black square—it was Minho, looking as if he'd been scratched or stabbed on ninety percent of his body.

"Minho!" Thomas shouted, filled with relief. "Are you okay? What about everybody else?"

Minho stumbled toward the curved wall of the tunnel, then leaned there, gulping big breaths. "We lost a ton of people.... It's a mess of blood up there ... then they all just shut down." He paused, taking in a really deep breath and letting it go in a rush of air. "You did it. I can't believe it actually worked."

Newt came through then, followed by Frypan. Then Winston and others. Before long eighteen boys had joined Thomas and his friends in the tunnel, making a total of twenty-one Gladers in all. Every last one of those who'd stayed behind and fought was covered in Griever sludge and human blood, their clothes ripped to shreds.

"The rest?" Thomas asked, terrified of the answer.

"Half of us," Newt said, his voice weak. "Dead."

No one said a word then. No one said a word for a very long time.

"You know what?" Minho said, standing up a little taller. "Half might've died, but half of us shucking lived. And nobody got stung—just like Thomas thought. We've gotta get out of here."

Too many, Thomas thought. *Too many by far*. His joy dribbled away, turned into a deep mourning for the twenty people who'd lost their lives. Despite the alternative, despite knowing that if they hadn't tried to escape, *all* of them might've died, it still hurt, even though he hadn't known them very well. Such a display of death—how could it be

considered a victory?

"Let's get out of here," Newt said. "Right now."

"Where do we go?" Minho asked.

Thomas pointed down the long tunnel. "I heard the door open down that way." He tried to push away the ache of it all—the horrors of the battle they'd just won. The losses. He pushed it away, knowing they were nowhere near safe yet.

"Well—let's go," Minho answered. And the older boy turned and started walking up the tunnel without waiting for a response.

Newt nodded, ushering the other Gladers past him to follow. One by one they went until only he remained with Thomas and Teresa.

"I'll go last," Thomas said.

No one argued. Newt went, then Chuck, then Teresa, into the black tunnel. Even the flashlights seemed to get swallowed by the darkness. Thomas followed, not even bothering to look back at the dead Grievers.

After a minute or so of walking, he heard a shriek from ahead, followed by another, then another. Their cries faded, as if they were falling....

Murmurs made their way down the line, and finally Teresa turned to Thomas. "Looks like it ends in a slide up there, shooting downward."

Thomas's stomach turned at the thought. It seemed like it *was* a game—for whoever had built the place, at least.

One by one he heard the Gladers' dwindling shouts and hoots up ahead. Then it was Newt's turn, then Chuck's. Teresa shone her light down on a steeply descending, slick black chute of metal.

Guess we have no choice, she said to his mind.

Guess not. Thomas had a strong feeling it wasn't a way out of their nightmare; he just hoped it didn't lead to another pack of Grievers.

Teresa slipped down the slide with an almost cheerful shriek, and Thomas followed her before he could talk himself out of it—anything was better than the Maze.

His body shot down a steep decline, slick with an oily goo that smelled awful—like burnt plastic and overused machinery. He twisted his body until he got his feet in front of him, then tried to hold his hands out to slow himself down. It was useless—the greasy stuff covered every inch of the stone; he couldn't grip anything.

The screams of the other Gladers echoed off the tunnel walls as they slid down the oily chute. Panic gripped Thomas's heart. He couldn't fight off the image that they'd been swallowed by some gigantic beast and were sliding down its long esophagus, about to land in its stomach at any second. And as if his thoughts had materialized, the smells changed—to something more like mildew and rot. He started gagging; it took all his effort not to throw up on himself.

The tunnel began to twist, turning in a rough spiral, just enough to slow them down, and Thomas's feet smacked right into Teresa, hitting her in the head; he recoiled and a feeling of complete misery sank over him. They were still falling. Time seemed to stretch out, endless.

Around and around they went down the tube. Nausea burned in his stomach—the squishing of the goo against his body, the smell, the circling motion. He was just about to

turn his head to the side to throw up when Teresa let out a sharp cry—this time there was no echo. A second later, Thomas flew out of the tunnel and landed on her.

Bodies scrambled everywhere, people on top of people, groaning and squirming in confusion as they tried to push away from each other. Thomas wiggled his arms and legs to scoot away from Teresa, then crawled a few more feet to throw up, emptying his stomach.

Still shuddering from the experience, he wiped at his mouth with his hand, only to realize it was covered in slimy filth. He sat up, rubbing both hands on the ground, and he finally got a good look at where they'd arrived. As he gaped, he saw, also, that everyone else had pulled themselves together into a group, taking in the new surroundings. Thomas had seen glimpses of it during the Changing, but didn't truly remember it until that very moment.

They were in a huge underground chamber big enough to hold nine or ten Homesteads. From top to bottom, side to side, the place was covered in all kinds of machinery and wires and ducts and computers. On one side of the room—to his right—there was a row of forty or so large white pods that looked like enormous coffins. Across from that on the other side stood large glass doors, although the lighting made it impossible to see what was on the other side.

“Look!” someone shouted, but he’d already seen it, his breath catching in his throat. Goose bumps broke out all over him, a creepy fear trickling down his spine like a wet spider.

Directly in front of them, a row of twenty or so darkly tinged windows stretched across the compound horizontally, one after the other. Behind each one, a person—some men, some women, all of them pale and thin—sat observing the Gladers, staring through the glass with squinted eyes. Thomas shuddered, terrified—they all looked like ghosts. Angry, starving, sinister apparitions of people who’d never been happy when alive, much less dead.

But Thomas knew they were not, of course, ghosts. They were the people who’d sent them all to the Glade. The people who’d taken their lives away from them.

The Creators.

CHAPTER 59

Thomas took a step backward, noticing others doing the same. A deathly silence sucked the life out of the air as every last Glader stared at the row of windows, at the row of observers. Thomas watched one of them look down to write something, another reach up and put on a pair of glasses. They all wore black coats over white shirts, a word stitched on their right breast—he couldn’t quite make out what it said. None of them wore any kind of discernible facial expression—they were all sallow and gaunt, miserably sad to look upon.

They continued to stare at the Gladers; a man shook his head, a woman nodded. Another man reached up and scratched his nose—the most human thing Thomas had seen any of them do.

“Who are those people?” Chuck whispered, but his voice echoed throughout the chamber with a raspy edge.

“The Creators,” Minho said; then he spat on the floor. “I’m gonna break your faces!” he screamed, so loudly Thomas almost held his hands over his ears.

“What do we do?” Thomas asked. “What are they waiting on?”

“They’ve probably revved the Grievers back up,” Newt said. “They’re probably coming right—”

A loud, slow beeping sound cut him off, like the warning alarm of a huge truck driving in reverse, but much more powerful. It came from everywhere, booming and echoing throughout the chamber.

“What now?” Chuck asked, not hiding the concern in his voice.

For some reason everyone looked at Thomas; he shrugged in answer—he’d only remembered so much, and now he was just as clueless as anyone else. And scared. He craned his neck as he scanned the place top to bottom, trying to find the source of the beeps. But nothing had changed. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the other Gladers looking in the direction of the doors. He did as well; his heart quickened when he saw that one of the doors was swinging open toward them.

The beeping stopped, and a silence as deep as outer space settled on the chamber. Thomas waited without breathing, braced himself for something horrible to come flying through the door.

Instead, two people walked into the room.

One was a woman. An actual grown-up. She seemed very ordinary, wearing black pants and a button-down white shirt with a logo on the breast—wicked spelled in blue capital letters. Her brown hair was cut at the shoulder, and she had a thin face with dark eyes. As she walked toward the group, she neither smiled nor frowned—it was almost as if she didn’t notice or care they were standing there.

I know her, Thomas thought. But it was a cloudy kind of recollection—he couldn’t remember her name or what she had to do with the Maze, but she seemed familiar. And not just her looks, but the way she walked, her mannerisms—stiff, without a hint of joy. She stopped several feet in front of the Gladers and slowly looked left to right, taking them all

in.

The other person, standing next to her, was a boy wearing an overly large sweatshirt, its hood pulled up over his head, concealing his face.

"Welcome back," the woman finally said. "Over two years, and so few dead. Amazing."

Thomas felt his mouth drop open—felt anger redden his face.

"Excuse me?" Newt asked.

Her eyes scanned the crowd again before falling on Newt. "Everything has gone according to plan, Mr. Newton. Although we expected a few more of you to give up along the way."

She glanced over at her companion, then reached out and pulled the hood off the boy. He looked up, his eyes wet with tears. Every Glader in the room sucked in a breath of surprise. Thomas felt his knees buckle.

It was Gally.

Thomas blinked, then rubbed his eyes, like something out of a cartoon. He was consumed with shock and anger.

It was *Gally*.

"What's *he* doing here!" Minho shouted.

"You're safe now," the woman responded as if she hadn't heard him. "Please, be at ease."

"At ease?" Minho barked. "Who are you, telling us to be at ease? We wanna see the police, the mayor, the president—somebody!" Thomas worried what Minho might do—then again, Thomas kind of wanted him to go punch her in the face.

She narrowed her eyes as she looked at Minho. "You have no idea what you're talking about, boy. I'd expect more maturity from someone who's passed the Maze Trials." Her condescending tone shocked Thomas.

Minho started to retort, but Newt elbowed him in the gut.

"Gally," Newt said. "What's going on?"

The dark-haired boy looked at him; his eyes flared for a moment, his head shaking slightly. But he didn't respond. *Something's off with him*, Thomas thought. Worse than before.

The woman nodded as if proud of him. "One day you'll all be grateful for what we've done for you. I can only promise this, and trust your minds to accept it. If you don't, then the whole thing was a mistake. Dark times, Mr. Newton. Dark times."

She paused. "There is, of course, one final Variable." She stepped back.

Thomas focused on Gally. The boy's whole body trembled, his face pasty white, making his wet, red eyes stand out like bloody splotches on paper. His lips pressed together; the skin around them twitched, as if he were trying to speak but couldn't.

"Gally?" Thomas asked, trying to suppress the complete hatred he had for him.

Words burst from Gally's mouth. "They ... can control me ... I don't—" His eyes bulged, a hand went to his throat as if he were choking. "I ... have ... to ..." Each word was a croaking cough. Then he stilled, his face calming, his body relaxing.

It was just like Alby in bed, back in the Glade, after he went through the Changing. The same type of thing had happened to him. What did it—

But Thomas didn't have time to finish his thought. Gally reached behind himself, pulled something long and shiny from his back pocket. The lights of the chamber flashed off the

silvery surface—a wicked-looking dagger, gripped tightly in his fingers. With unexpected speed, he reared back and threw the knife at Thomas. As he did so, Thomas heard a shout to his right, sensed *movement*. Toward him.

The blade windmilled, its every turn visible to Thomas, as if the world had turned to slow motion. As if it did so for the sole purpose of allowing him to feel the terror of seeing such a thing. On the knife came, flipping over and over, straight at him. A strangled cry was forming in his throat; he urged himself to move but he couldn't.

Then, inexplicably, Chuck was there, diving in front of him. Thomas felt as if his feet had been frozen in blocks of ice; he could only stare at the scene of horror unfolding before him, completely helpless.

With a sickening, wet thunk, the dagger slammed into Chuck's chest, burying itself to the hilt. The boy screamed, fell to the floor, his body already convulsing. Blood poured from the wound, dark crimson. His legs slapped against the floor, feet kicking aimlessly with onrushing death. Red spit oozed from between his lips. Thomas felt as if the world were collapsing around him, crushing his heart.

He fell to the ground, pulled Chuck's shaking body into his arms.

"Chuck!" he screamed; his voice felt like acid ripping through his throat. "Chuck!"

The boy shook uncontrollably, blood everywhere, wetting Thomas's hands. Chuck's eyes had rolled up in their sockets, dull white orbs. Blood trickled out of his nose and mouth.

"Chuck ..." Thomas said, this time a whisper. There had to be something they could do. They could save him. They—

The boy stopped convulsing, stilled. His eyes slid back into normal position, focused on Thomas, clinging to life. "Thom ... mas." It was one word, barely there.

"Hang on, Chuck," Thomas said. "Don't die—fight it. *Someone get help!*"

Nobody moved, and deep inside, Thomas knew why. Nothing *could* help now. It was over. Black spots swam before Thomas's eyes; the room tilted and swayed. *No*, he thought. *Not Chuck. Not Chuck. Anyone but Chuck.*

"Thomas," Chuck whispered. "Find ... my mom." A racking cough burst from his lungs, throwing a spray of blood. "Tell her ..."

He didn't finish. His eyes closed, his body went limp. One last breath wheezed from his mouth.

Thomas stared at him, stared at his friend's lifeless body.

Something happened within Thomas. It started deep down in his chest, a seed of rage. Of revenge. Of hate. Something dark and terrible. And then it exploded, bursting through his lungs, through his neck, through his arms and legs. Through his mind.

He let go of Chuck, stood up, trembling, turned to face their new visitors.

And then Thomas snapped. He completely and utterly *snapped*.

He rushed forward, threw himself on Gally, grasping with his fingers like claws. He found the boy's throat, squeezed, fell to the ground on top of him. He straddled the boy's torso, gripped him with his legs so he couldn't escape. Thomas started punching.

He held Gally down with his left hand, pushing down on the boy's neck, as his right fist rained punches upon Gally's face, one after another. Down and down and down, slamming his balled knuckles into the boy's cheek and nose. There was crunching, there was blood, there were horrible screams. Thomas didn't know which were louder—Gally's or his own.

He beat him—*beat* him as he released every ounce of rage he'd ever owned.

And then he was being pulled away by Minho and Newt, his arms still flailing even when they only hit air. They dragged him across the floor; he fought them, squirmed, yelled to be left alone. His eyes remained on Gally, lying there, still; Thomas could feel the hatred pouring out, as if a visible line of flame connected them.

And then, just like that, it all vanished. There were only thoughts of Chuck.

He threw off Minho's and Newt's grip, ran to the limp, lifeless body of his friend. He grabbed him, pulled him back into his arms, ignoring the blood, ignoring the frozen look of death on the boy's face.

"No!" Thomas shouted, sadness consuming him. "No!"

Teresa was there, put her hand on his shoulder. He shook it away.

"I promised him!" he screamed, realizing even as he did so that his voice was laced with something wrong. Almost insanity. "I promised I'd save him, take him home! I *promised* him!"

Teresa didn't respond, only nodded, her eyes cast to the ground.

Thomas hugged Chuck to his chest, squeezed him as tightly as possible, as if that could somehow bring him back, or show thanks for saving his life, for being his friend when no one else would.

Thomas cried, wept like he'd never wept before. His great, racking sobs echoed through the chamber like the sounds of tortured pain.

He finally pulled it all back into his heart, sucking in the painful tide of his misery. In the Glade, Chuck had become a symbol for him—a beacon that somehow they could make everything right again in the world. Sleep in beds. Get kissed goodnight. Have bacon and eggs for breakfast, go to a real school. Be happy.

But now Chuck was gone. And his limp body, to which Thomas still clung, seemed a cold talisman—that not only would those dreams of a hopeful future never come to pass, but that life had never been that way in the first place. That even in escape, dreary days lay ahead. A life of sorrow.

His returning memories were sketchy at best. But not much good floated in the muck.

Thomas reeled in the pain, locked it somewhere deep inside him. He did it for Teresa. For Newt and Minho. Whatever darkness awaited them, they'd be together, and that was all that mattered right then.

He let go of Chuck, slumped backward, trying not to look at the boy's shirt, black with blood. He wiped the tears from his cheeks, rubbed his eyes, thinking he should be embarrassed but not feeling that way. Finally, he looked up. Looked up at Teresa and her enormous blue eyes, heavy with sadness—just as much for him as for Chuck, he was sure of it.

She reached down, grabbed his hand, helped him stand. Once he was up, she didn't let go, and neither did he. He squeezed, tried to say what he felt by doing so. No one else said a word, most of them staring at Chuck's body without expression, as if they'd moved far beyond feeling. No one looked at Gally, breathing but still.

The woman from WICKED broke the silence.

"All things happen for a purpose," she said, any sign of malice now gone from her voice. "You must understand this."

Thomas looked at her, threw all his compressed hatred into the glare. But he did nothing. Teresa placed her other hand on his arm, gripped his bicep. *What now?* she asked.

I don't know, he replied. *I can't—*

His sentence was cut short by a sudden series of shouts and commotion outside the entrance through which the woman had come. She visibly panicked, the blood draining from her face as she turned toward the door. Thomas followed her gaze.

Several men and women dressed in grimy jeans and soaking-wet coats burst through the entrance with guns raised, yelling and screaming words over each other. It was impossible to understand what they were saying. Their guns—some were rifles, other pistols—looked ... archaic, rustic. Almost like toys abandoned in the woods for years, recently discovered by the next generation of kids ready to play war.

Thomas stared in shock as two of the newcomers tackled the WICKED woman to the floor. Then one stepped back and drew up his gun, aimed.

No way, Thomas thought. *No—*

Flashes lit the air as several shots exploded from the gun, slamming into the woman's

body. She was dead, a bloody mess.

Thomas took several steps backward, almost stumbled.

A man walked up to the Gladers as the others in his group spread out around them, sweeping their guns left and right as they shot at the observation windows, shattering them. Thomas heard screams, saw blood, looked away, focused on the man who approached them. He had dark hair, his face young but full of wrinkles around the eyes, as if he'd spent each day of his life worrying about how to make it to the next.

"We don't have time to explain," the man said, his voice as strained as his face. "Just follow me and run like your life depends on it. Because it does."

With that the man made a few motions to his companions, then turned and ran out the big glass doors, his gun held rigidly before him. Gunfire and cries of agony still rattled the chamber, but Thomas did his best to ignore them and follow instructions.

"Go!" one of the rescuers—that was the only way Thomas could think of them—screamed from behind.

After the briefest hesitation, the Gladers followed, almost stomping each other in their rush to get out of the chamber, as far away from the Grievers and the Maze as possible. Thomas, his hand still gripping Teresa's, ran with them, bunched up in the back of the group. They had no choice but to leave Chuck's body behind.

Thomas felt no emotion—he was completely numb. He ran down a long hallway, into a dimly lit tunnel. Up a winding flight of stairs. Everything was dark, smelled like electronics. Down another hallway. Up more stairs. More hallways. Thomas wanted to ache for Chuck, get excited about their escape, rejoice that Teresa was there with him. But he'd seen too much. There was only emptiness now. A void. He kept going.

On they ran, some of the men and women leading from ahead, some yelling encouragement from behind.

They reached another set of glass doors and went through them into a massive downpour of rain, falling from a black sky. Nothing was visible but dull sparkles flashing off the pounding sheets of water.

The leader didn't stop moving until they reached a huge bus, its sides dented and scarred, most of the windows webbed with cracks. Rain sluiced down it all, making Thomas imagine a huge beast cresting out of the ocean.

"Get on!" the man screamed. "Hurry!"

They did, forming into a tight pack behind the door as they entered, one by one. It seemed to take forever, Gladers pushing and scrambling their way up the three stairs and into the seats.

Thomas was at the back, Teresa right in front of him. Thomas looked up into the sky, felt the water beat against his face—it was warm, almost hot, had a weird thickness to it. Oddly, it helped break him out of his funk, snap him to attention. Maybe it was just the ferocity of the deluge. He focused on the bus, on Teresa, on escape.

They were almost to the door when a hand suddenly slammed against his shoulder, gripping his shirt. He cried out as someone jerked him backward, ripping his hand out of Teresa's—he saw her spin around just in time to watch as he slammed into the ground, throwing up a spray of water. A bolt of pain shot down his spine as a woman's head appeared two inches above him, upside down, blocking out Teresa.

Greasy hair hung down, touching Thomas, framing a face hidden in shadow. A horrible smell filled his nostrils, like eggs and milk gone rotten. The woman pulled back enough for someone's flashlight to reveal her features—pale, wrinkly skin covered in horrible sores, oozing with pus. Sheer terror filled Thomas, froze him.

"Gonna save us all!" the hideous woman said, spit flying out of her mouth, spraying Thomas. "Gonna save us from the Flare!" She laughed, not much more than a hacking cough.

The woman yelped when one of the rescuers grabbed her with both hands and yanked her off of Thomas, who recovered his wits and scrambled to his feet. He backed into Teresa, staring as the man dragged the woman away, her legs kicking out weakly, her eyes on Thomas. She pointed at him, called out, "Don't believe a word they tell ya! Gonna save us from the Flare, ya are!"

When the man was several yards from the bus, he tossed the woman to the ground. "Stay put or I'll shoot you dead!" he yelled at her; then he turned to Thomas. "Get on the bus!"

Thomas, so terrified by the ordeal that his body shook, turned and followed Teresa up the stairs and into the aisle of the bus. Wide eyes watched him as they walked all the way to the back seat and plopped down; they huddled together. Black water washed down the windows outside. The rain drummed on the roof, heavy; thunder shook the skies above them.

What was that? Teresa said in his mind.

Thomas couldn't answer, just shook his head. Thoughts of Chuck flooded him again, replacing the crazy woman, deadening his heart. He just didn't care, didn't feel any relief at escaping the Maze. *Chuck...*

One of the rescuers, a woman, sat across from Thomas and Teresa; the leader who'd spoken to them earlier climbed onto the bus and took a seat at the wheel, cranked up the engine. The bus started rolling forward.

Just as it did, Thomas saw a flash of movement outside the window. The sore-riddled woman had gotten to her feet, was sprinting toward the front of the bus, waving her arms wildly, screaming something drowned out by the sounds of the storm. Her eyes were lit with lunacy or terror—Thomas couldn't tell which.

He leaned toward the glass of the window as she disappeared from his view up ahead.

"Wait!" Thomas shrieked, but no one heard him. Or if they did, they didn't care.

The driver gunned the engine—the bus lurched as it slammed into the woman's body. A thump almost jolted Thomas out of his seat as the front wheels ran over her, quickly followed by a second thump—the back wheels. Thomas looked at Teresa, saw the sickened look on her face that surely mirrored his own.

Without a word, the driver kept his foot on the gas and the bus plowed forward, driving off into the rain-swept night.

The next hour or so was a blur of sights and sounds for Thomas.

The driver drove at reckless speeds, through towns and cities, the heavy rain obscuring most of the view. Lights and buildings were warped and watery, like something out of a drug-induced hallucination. At one point people outside rushed the bus, their clothes ratty, hair matted to their heads, strange sores like those Thomas had seen on the woman covering their terrified faces. They pounded on the sides of the vehicle as if they wanted to get on, wanted to escape whatever horrible lives they were living.

The bus never slowed. Teresa remained silent next to Thomas.

He finally got up enough nerve to speak to the woman sitting across the aisle.

"What's going on?" he asked, not sure how else to pose it.

The woman looked over at him. Wet, black hair hung in strings around her face. Dark eyes full of sorrow. "That's a very long story." The woman's voice came out much kinder than Thomas had expected, giving him hope that she truly was a friend—that all of their rescuers were friends. Despite the fact that they'd run over a woman in cold blood.

"Please," Teresa said. "Please tell us something."

The woman looked back and forth between Thomas and Teresa, then let out a sigh. "It'll take a while before you get your memories back, if ever—we're not scientists, we have no idea what they did to you, or how they did it."

Thomas's heart dropped at the thought of maybe having lost his memory forever, but he pressed on. "Who are they?" he asked.

"It started with the sun flares," the woman said, her gaze growing distant.

"What—" Teresa began, but Thomas shushed her.

Just let her talk, he said to her mind. *She looks like she will.*

Okay.

The woman almost seemed in a trance as she spoke, never taking her eyes off an indistinct spot in the distance. "The sun flares couldn't have been predicted. Sun flares are normal, but these were unprecedented, massive, spiking higher and higher—and once they were noticed, it was only minutes before their heat slammed into Earth. First our satellites were burned out, and thousands died instantly, millions within days, countless miles became wastelands. Then came the sickness."

She paused, took a breath. "As the ecosystem fell apart, it became impossible to control the sickness—even to keep it in South America. The jungles were gone, but the insects weren't. People call it the Flare now. It's a horrible, horrible thing. Only the richest can be treated, no one can be cured. Unless the rumors from the Andes are true."

Thomas almost broke his own advice—questions filled his mind. Horror grew in his heart. He sat and listened as the woman continued.

"As for you, all of you—you're just a few of millions orphaned. They tested thousands, chose you for the big one. The ultimate test. Everything you lived through was calculated and thought through. Catalysts to study your reactions, your brain waves, your thoughts.

All in an attempt to find those capable of helping us find a way to beat the Flare.”

She paused again, pulled a string of hair behind her ear. “Most of the physical effects are caused by something else. First the delusions start, then animal instincts begin to overpower the human ones. Finally it consumes them, destroys their humanity. It’s all in the brain. The Flare *lives* in their brains. It is an awful thing. Better to die than catch it.”

The woman broke her gaze into nothingness and focused on Thomas, then looked at Teresa, then Thomas again. “We won’t let them do this to children. We’ve sworn our lives to fighting WICKED. We can’t lose our humanity, no matter the end result.”

She folded her hands in her lap, looked down at them. “You’ll learn more in time. We live far in the north. We’re separated from the Andes by thousands of miles. They call it the Scorch—it lies between here and there. It’s centered mainly around what they used to call the equator—it’s just heat and dust now, filled with savages consumed by the Flare beyond help. We’re trying to cross that land—to find the cure. But until then, we’ll fight WICKED and stop the experiments and tests.” She looked carefully at Thomas, then Teresa. “It’s our hope that you’ll join us.”

She looked away then, gazing out her window.

Thomas looked at Teresa, raised his eyebrows in question. She simply shook her head and then laid it on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

I’m too tired to think about it, she said. *Let’s just be safe for now.*

Maybe we are, he replied. *Maybe.*

He heard the soft sounds of her sleep, but he knew that sleep would be impossible for him. He felt such a raging storm of conflicting emotions, he couldn’t identify any of them. Still—it was better than the dull void he’d experienced earlier. He could only sit and stare out the window into the rain and blackness, pondering words like *Flare* and *sickness* and *experiment* and *Scorch* and *WICKED*. He could only sit and hope that things might be better now than they’d been in the Maze.

But as he jiggled and swayed with the movements of the bus, felt Teresa’s head thump against his shoulder every once in a while when they hit big bumps, heard her stir and fall back to sleep, heard the murmurs of other conversations from other Gladers, his thoughts kept returning to one thing.

Chuck.

Two hours later, the bus stopped.

They had pulled into a muddy parking lot that surrounded a nondescript building with several rows of windows. The woman and other rescuers shuffled the nineteen boys and one girl through the front door and up a flight of stairs, then into a huge dormitory with a series of bunk beds lined up along one of the walls. On the opposite side were some dressers and tables. Curtain-covered windows checkered each wall of the room.

Thomas took it all in with a distant and muted wonder—he was far past being surprised or overcome by anything ever again.

The place was full of color. Bright yellow paint, red blankets, green curtains. After the drab grayness of the Glade, it was as if they’d been transported to a living rainbow. Seeing it all, seeing the beds and the dressers, all made up and fresh—the sense of normalcy was almost overwhelming. Too good to be true. Minho said it best on entering their new world:

"I've been shucked and gone to heaven."

Thomas found it hard to feel joy, as if he'd betray Chuck by doing so. But there was something there. Something.

Their bus-driving leader left the Gladers in the hands of a small staff—nine or ten men and women dressed in pressed black pants and white shirts, their hair immaculate, their faces and hands clean. They were smiling.

The colors. The beds. The staff. Thomas felt an impossible happiness trying to break through inside him. An enormous pit lurked in the middle of it, though. A dark depression that might never leave—memories of Chuck and his brutal murder. His sacrifice. But despite that, despite everything, despite all the woman on the bus had told them about the world they'd reentered, Thomas felt safe for the very first time since coming out of the Box.

Beds were assigned, clothes and bathroom things were passed out, dinner was served. Pizza. Real, bona fide, greasy-fingers pizza. Thomas devoured each bite, hunger trumping everything else, the mood of contentment and relief around him palpable. Most of the Gladers had remained quiet through it all, perhaps worried that speaking would make everything vanish. But there were plenty of smiles. Thomas had gotten so used to looks of despair, it was almost unsettling to see happy faces. Especially when he was having such a hard time feeling it himself.

Soon after eating, no one argued when they were told it was time for bed.

Certainly not Thomas. He felt as if he could sleep for a month.

CHAPTER 62

Thomas shared a bunk with Minho, who insisted on sleeping up top; Newt and Frypan were right next to them. The staff put Teresa up in a separate room, shuffling her away before she could even say goodbye. Thomas missed her desperately three seconds after she was gone.

As Thomas was settling into the soft mattress for the night, he was interrupted.

“Hey, Thomas,” Minho said from above him.

“Yeah?” Thomas was so tired the word barely came out.

“What do you think happened to the Gladers who stayed behind?”

Thomas hadn’t thought about it. His mind had been occupied with Chuck and now Teresa. “I don’t know. But based on how many of us died getting here, I wouldn’t like to be one of them right now. Grievers are probably swarming all over them.” He couldn’t believe how nonchalant his voice sounded as he said it.

“You think we’re safe with these people?” Minho asked.

Thomas pondered the question for a moment. There was only one answer to hold on to.
“Yeah, I think we’re safe.”

Minho said something else, but Thomas didn’t hear. Exhaustion consuming him, his mind wandered to his short time in the Maze, his time as a Runner and how much he’d wanted it —ever since that first night in the Glade. It felt like a hundred years ago. Like a dream.

Murmurs of conversation floated through the room, but to Thomas they seemed to come from another world. He stared at the crossed wooden boards of the bed above him, feeling the pull of sleep. But wanting to talk to Teresa, he fought it off.

How’s your room? he asked in his mind. Wish you were in here.

Oh, yeah? she replied. With all those stinky boys? Think not.

Guess you’re right. I think Minho’s farted three times in the last minute. Thomas knew it was a lame attempt at a joke, but it was the best he could do.

He sensed her laughing, wished he could do the same. There was a long pause. *I’m really sorry about Chuck, she finally said.*

Thomas felt a sharp pang and closed his eyes as he sank deeper into the misery of the night. *He could be so annoying, he said.* He paused, thought of that night when Chuck had scared the crap out of Gally in the bathroom. *But it hurts. Feels like I lost a brother.*

I know.

I promised—

Stop, Tom.

What? He wanted Teresa to make him feel better, say something magic to make the pain go away.

Stop with the promise stuff. Half of us made it. We all would’ve died if we’d stayed in the Maze.

But Chuck didn’t make it, Thomas said. Guilt racked him because he knew for a certainty he would trade any one of the Gladers in that room for Chuck.

He died saving you, Teresa said. He made the choice himself. Just don't ever waste it.

Thomas felt tears swell under his eyelids; one escaped and trickled down his right temple, into his hair. A full minute passed without any words between them. Then he said, *Teresa?*

Yeah?

Thomas was scared to share his thoughts, but did. *I wanna remember you. Remember us. Ya know, before.*

Me too.

Seems like we... He didn't know how to say it after all.

I know.

Wonder what tomorrow'll be like.

We'll find out in a few hours.

Yeah. Well, good night. He wanted to say more, much more. But nothing came.

Good night, she said, just as the lights went out.

Thomas rolled over, glad it was dark so no one could see the look that had settled across his face.

It wasn't a smile, exactly. Not quite a happy expression. But almost.

And for now, almost was good enough.

EPILOGUE

WICKED Memorandum, Date 232.1.27, Time 22:45

TO: My Associates

FROM: Ava Paige, Chancelor

RE: THOUGHTS ON MAZE TRIALS, Group A

By any reckoning, I think we'd all agree that the Trials were a success. Twenty survivors, all well qualified for our planned endeavor. The responses to the Variables were satisfactory and encouraging. The boy's murder and the "rescue" proved to be a valuable finale. We needed to shock their systems, see their responses. Honestly, I'm amazed that in the end, despite everything, we were able to collect such a large population of kids that just never gave up.

Oddly enough, seeing them this way, thinking all is well, has been the hardest thing for me to observe. But there's no time for regret. For the good of our people, we will move forward.

I know I have my own feelings as to who should be chosen as the leader, but I'll refrain from saying at this time so as not to influence any decisions. But to me, it's an obvious choice.

We are all well aware of what's at stake. I, for one, am encouraged. Remember what the girl wrote on her arm before losing her memory? The one thing she chose to clasp on to? *WICKED is good.*

The subjects will eventually recall and understand the purpose of the hard things we have done and plan to do to them. The mission of WICKED is to serve and preserve humanity, no matter the cost. We are, indeed, "good."

Please respond with your own reactions. The subjects will be allowed one full night's sleep before Stage 2 implementation. At this time, let's allow ourselves to feel hopeful.

Group B's trial results were also most extraordinary. I need time to process the data, but we can touch on it in the morning.

Until tomorrow, then.

END OF BOOK ONE

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JAMES DASHNER

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Contents

Master - Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)
[Chapter 40](#)
[Chapter 41](#)
[Chapter 42](#)
[Chapter 43](#)
[Chapter 44](#)
[Chapter 45](#)
[Chapter 46](#)
[Chapter 47](#)
[Chapter 48](#)
[Chapter 49](#)
[Chapter 50](#)
[Chapter 51](#)
[Chapter 52](#)
[Chapter 53](#)
[Chapter 54](#)
[Chapter 55](#)
[Chapter 56](#)
[Chapter 57](#)
[Chapter 58](#)
[Chapter 59](#)
[Chapter 60](#)
[Chapter 61](#)
[Chapter 62](#)
[Chapter 63](#)
[Chapter 64](#)
[Chapter 65](#)
[Epilogue](#)

Acknowledgments

She spoke to him before the world fell apart.

Hey, are you still asleep?

Thomas shifted in his bed, felt a darkness around him like air turned solid, pressing in. At first he panicked; his eyes snapped open as he imagined himself back in the Box—that horrible cube of cold metal that had delivered him to the Glade and the Maze. But there was a faint light, and lumps of dim shadow gradually emerged throughout the huge room. Bunk beds. Dressers. The soft breaths and gurgly snores of boys deep in slumber.

Relief filled him. He was safe now, rescued and delivered to this dormitory. No more worries. No more Grievers. No more death.

Tom?

A voice in his head. A girl's. Not audible, not visible. But he heard it all the same, though never could he have explained to anyone how it worked.

Exhaling a deep breath, he relaxed into his pillow, his razor-edged nerves settling down from that fleeting moment of terror. He spoke back, forming the words with his thoughts.

Teresa? What time is it?

No idea, she replied. But I can't sleep. I probably dozed for an hour or so. Maybe more. I was hoping you were awake to keep me company.

Thomas tried not to smile. Even though she wouldn't be able to see it, it would be embarrassing all the same. *Didn't give me much choice in the matter, did you? Kind of hard to sleep when someone's talking directly into your skull.*

Waa, waa. Go back to bed, then.

No. I'm good. He stared at the bottom of the bunk above him—featureless and darkly fuzzy in the shadow—where Minho was currently breathing like a guy with ungodly amounts of phlegm lodged in his throat. *What've you been thinking about?*

What do you think? Somehow she projected a jab of cynicism into the words. *I keep seeing Grievers. Their disgusting skin and blubber bodies, all those metal arms and spikes. It was way too close for comfort, Tom. How're we gonna get something like that out of our heads?*

Thomas knew what he thought. Those images would never leave—the Gladers would be haunted by the horrible things that had happened in the Maze for the rest of their lives. He figured that most if not all of them would have major psychological problems. Maybe even go completely nutso.

And above it all, he had one image burned into his memories as strongly as a branded mark from a searing hot iron. His friend Chuck, stabbed in the chest, bleeding, dying as Thomas held him.

Thomas knew he would *never* forget that. But what he said to Teresa was: *It'll go away. Just takes a little time, that's all.*

You're so full of it, she said.

I know. How ridiculous was it that he loved hearing her say something like that to him? That her sarcasm meant things were going to be okay? *You're an idiot,* he told himself, then

hoped she didn't hear that thought.

I hate that they separated me from you guys, she said.

Thomas understood why they had, though. She was the only girl and the rest of the Gladers were teenage boys—a bunch of shanks they didn't trust yet. *Guess they were protecting you.*

Yeah. I guess. Melancholy seeped into his brain with her words, stuck to them like syrup. *But it sucks being alone after everything we went through.*

Where'd they take you, anyway? She sounded so sad that he almost wanted to get up and look for her, but he knew better.

Just on the other side of that big common room where we ate last night. It's a small room with a few bunks. I'm pretty sure they locked the door when they left.

See, told ya they wanted to protect you. Then he quickly added, *Not that you need protecting. I'd put my money on you against at least half these shanks.*

Only half?

Okay, three-quarters. Including me.

A long stretch of silence followed, though somehow Thomas could still sense her presence. He *felt* her. It was almost like how, even though he couldn't see Minho, he knew his friend lay only a few feet above him. And it wasn't just the snoring. When someone is close by, you just know it.

Despite all the memories of the last few weeks, Thomas was surprisingly calm, and soon sleep overpowered him once more. Darkness settled on his world, but she was there, next to him in so many ways. Almost ... touching.

He had no concept of time passing while in that state. Half asleep, half enjoying her presence and the thought that they'd been rescued from that horrible place. That they were safe, that he and Teresa could get to know each other all over again. That life could be good.

Blissful sleep. Hazy darkness. Warmth. A physical glow. Almost floating.

The world seemed to fade away. All became numb and sweet. And the darkness, somehow comforting. He slipped into a dream.

He's very young. Four, maybe? Five? Lying in a bed with blankets pulled to his chin.

A woman sits next to him, her hands folded in her lap. She has long brown hair, a face just beginning to show signs of age. Her eyes are sad. He knows this even though she's trying very hard to hide it with a smile.

He wants to say something, ask her a question. But he can't. He's not really here. Just witnessing it all from a place he doesn't quite understand. She begins to talk, a sound so simultaneously sweet and angry it disturbs him.

"I don't know why they chose you, but I do know this. You're special somehow. Never forget that. And never forget how much"—her voice cracks and tears run down her face—"never forget how much I love you."

The boy replies, but it's not really Thomas speaking. Even though it *is* him. None of it makes sense. "Are you gonna be crazy like all those people on TV, Mommy? Like ... Daddy?"

The woman reaches out and runs her fingers through his hair. Woman? No, he can't call

her that. This is his mother. His ... mommy.

"Don't you worry about that, honey," she says. "You won't be here to see it."

Her smile has gone away.

Too fast the dream faded into blackness, leaving Thomas in a void with nothing but his thoughts. Had he seen another memory crawl up from the depths of his amnesia? Had he really seen his mom? There'd been something about his dad being crazy. The ache inside Thomas was deep and gnawing, and he tried to sink further into oblivion.

Later—how much later he had no idea—Teresa spoke to him again.

Tom, something's wrong.

That was how it started. He heard Teresa say those three words, but it seemed from far away, as if spoken down a long and cluttered tunnel. His slumber had become a viscous liquid, thick and sticky, trapping him. He became aware of himself, but realized he was removed from the world, entombed by exhaustion. He couldn't wake up.

Thomas!

She screamed it. A piercing rattle in his head. He felt the first trickle of fear, but it was more like a dream. He could only sleep. And they were safe now, nothing to worry about anymore. Yeah, it had to be a dream. Teresa was fine, they were all fine. He relaxed again, let himself drown in slumber.

Other sounds snuck their way into his consciousness. Thumps. The clang of metal against metal. Something shattering. Boys shouting. More like the echo of shouts, very distant, muted. Suddenly they became more like screams. Unearthly cries of anguish. But still distant. As if he'd been wrapped in a thick cocoon of dark velvet.

Finally something pricked the comfort of sleep. This wasn't right. Teresa had called for him, told him something was wrong! He fought the deep sleep that had consumed him, clawed at the heavy weight pinning him down.

Wake up! he yelled at himself. *Wake up!*

Then something disappeared from inside him. There one instant, gone the next. He felt as if a major organ had just been ripped from his body.

It had been her. She was gone.

Teresa! he screamed out with his mind. *Teresa! Are you there?*

But there was nothing, and he no longer felt that comforting sense of her closeness. He called her name again, then again, as he continued to struggle against the dark pull of sleep.

Finally, reality swept in, washed away the darkness. Engulfed in terror, Thomas opened his eyes and shot to a sitting position on his bed, scooted out until he got his feet under him and jumped up. Looked around.

Everything had gone crazy.

The other Gladers in the room were running around, shouting. And terrible, horrible, awful sounds filled the air, like the wretched squeals of animals being tortured. There was Frypan, pointing out a window, his face pale. Newt and Minho were running to the door. Winston, hands held up to his frightened, acne-plagued face like he'd just seen a flesh-eating zombie. Others stumbling over each other to look out the different windows, but keeping their distance from the glass. Achingly, Thomas realized he didn't even know most of the names of the twenty boys who'd survived the Maze, an odd thought to have in the middle of all that chaos.

Something at the corner of his eye made him turn to look toward the wall. What he saw immediately wiped away any peace and safety he'd felt talking to Teresa in the night. Made him doubt such emotions could even exist in the same world in which he now stood.

Three feet from his bed, draped by colorful curtains, a window looked out into a bright, blinding light. The glass was broken, jagged shards leaning against crisscrossed steel bars. A man stood on the other side, gripping the bars with bloody hands. His eyes were wide and bloodshot, filled with madness. Sores and scars covered his thin, sun-burnt face. He had no hair, only diseased splotches of what looked like greenish moss. A vicious slit stretched across his right cheek; Thomas could see teeth through the raw, festering wound. Pink saliva dribbled in swaying lines from the man's chin.

"I'm a Crank!" the horror of a man yelled. "I'm a bloody Crank!"

And then he started screaming two words over and over and over, spit flying with every shriek.

"Kill me! Kill me! Kill me! ..."

CHAPTER 3

A hand slammed down on Thomas's shoulder from behind; he cried out and spun around to see Minho staring past him at the maniac screaming through the window.

"They're everywhere," Minho said. His voice had a gloom to it that perfectly matched how Thomas felt. It seemed as if everything they'd dared hope for the previous night had dissolved to nothing. "And there's no sign of those shanks who rescued us," he added.

Thomas had lived in fear and terror the past few weeks, but this was almost too much. To feel safe only to have that snatched away again. Shocking even himself, though, he quickly set aside that small part of him that wanted to jump back into his bed and bawl his eyes out. He pushed away the lingering ache of remembering his mom and the stuff about his dad and people going crazy. Thomas knew that someone had to take charge—they needed a plan if they were going to survive this, too.

"Have any of them gotten in yet?" he asked, a strange calm washing over him. "Do all the windows have these bars?"

Minho nodded toward one of the many lining the walls of the long rectangular room. "Yeah. It was too dark to notice them last night, especially with those stupid frilly curtains. But I'm sure glad for 'em."

Thomas looked at the Gladers around them, some running from window to window to get a look outside, others huddling in small groups. Everyone had a look of half disbelief, half terror. "Where's Newt?"

"Right here."

Thomas turned to see the older boy, not knowing how he'd missed him. "What's goin' on?"

"You think I have a bloody clue? Bunch of crazies want to eat us for breakfast, by the looks of it. We need to find another room, have a Gathering. All this noise is driving nails through my buggin' skull."

Thomas nodded absently; he agreed with the plan but hoped Newt and Minho would take care of it. He was eager to make contact with Teresa—he hoped her warning had just been part of a dream, a hallucination from the drug of deep and exhausted slumber. And that vision of his mom ...

His two friends moved away, calling out and waving their arms to collect Gladers. Thomas took a tremulous glance back at the shredded madman at the window, then looked away immediately, wishing he hadn't reminded his brain of the blood and torn flesh, the insane eyes, the hysterical screaming.

Kill me! Kill me! Kill me!

Thomas stumbled to the farthest wall, leaned heavily against it.

Teresa, he called out again with his mind. *Teresa. Can you hear me?*

He waited, closing his eyes to concentrate. Reaching out with invisible hands, trying to grasp some trace of her. Nothing. Not even a passing shadow or brush of feeling, much less a response.

Teresa, he said more urgently, clenching his teeth with the effort. *Where are you? What happened?*

Nothing. His heart seemed to slow until it almost stopped, and he felt like he'd swallowed a big hairy lump of cotton. Something had happened to her.

He opened his eyes to see the Gladers gathered around the green-painted door that led to the common area where they'd eaten pizza the night before. Minho was jerking on the round brass handle to no avail. Locked.

The only other door was to a shower and locker room, from which no other exits existed. There was that, and the windows. All with those metal bars. Thank goodness. Each one had raging lunatics screaming and yelling on the other side.

Even though worry ate at him like spilled acid in his veins, Thomas gave up momentarily on trying to contact Teresa and joined the other Gladers. Newt was having a go at the door, with the same useless result.

"It's locked," he muttered when he finally gave up, his arms falling weakly to his sides.

"Really, genius?" Minho said, his powerful arms folded and tensed, veins bulging all over the place. Thomas thought for a split second he could actually see the blood pumping through them. "No wonder you were named after Isaac Newton—such an amazing ability to think."

Newt wasn't in the mood. Or maybe he'd just learned long ago to ignore Minho's smart-aleck remarks. "Let's break this bloody handle off." He looked around as if he expected someone to give him a sledgehammer.

"I wish those shuck ... Cranks would shut up!" Minho yelled, turning to glower at the closest one, a woman who looked even more hideous than the first man Thomas had seen. A bleeding wound crossed her face, ending on the side of her head.

"Crank?" Frypan repeated. The hairy cook had been silent until then, barely noticeable. Thomas thought he looked even more frightened than when they'd been about to battle the Grievers to escape the Maze. Maybe this was worse. When they'd settled into bed last night, everything had seemed good and safe. Yeah, maybe this was worse, to have that suddenly taken away.

Minho pointed at the screaming, bloody woman. "That's what they keep calling themselves. Haven't you heard it?"

"I don't care if you call 'em pussy willows," Newt snapped. "Find me something to break through this stupid door!"

"Here," a shorter boy said, carrying a slender but solid fire extinguisher he'd taken off the wall—Thomas remembered seeing it earlier. Again, he felt guilty for not even knowing this kid's name.

Newt grabbed the red cylinder, ready to pile-drive the door handle. Thomas stood as close as he could, eager to see what was on the other side of the door, though he had a very bad feeling that whatever it was, they weren't going to like it.

Newt lifted the extinguisher, then slammed it down on the round brass handle. The loud crack was accompanied by a deeper crunch, and it took only three more whacks before the entire unit of the handle crashed to the floor with a jangle of broken metal pieces. The door inched outward, cracked open just enough to show darkness on the other side.

Newt stood quietly, staring at that long, narrow gap of blackness as if he expected

demons from the underworld to come flying through. Absently, he handed the extinguisher back to the boy who'd found it. "Let's go," he said. Thomas thought he heard the slightest quaver in his voice.

"Wait," Frypan called out. "We sure we wanna go out there? Maybe that door was locked for a reason."

Thomas couldn't help but agree; something felt wrong about this.

Minho stepped up to stand right next to Newt; he looked back at Frypan, then made eye contact with Thomas. "What else're we gonna do? Sit here and wait for those loonies to get in? Come on."

"Those freaks aren't breaking through the window bars anytime soon," Frypan retorted. "Let's just *think* for a second"

"Time for thinking's done," Minho said. He kicked out with his foot and the door swung completely open; if anything, it seemed to grow even darker on the other side. "Plus, you should've spoken up *before* we blasted the lock to bits, slinthead. Too late now."

"I hate when you're right," Frypan grumbled under his breath.

Thomas couldn't quit staring past the open door, into the pool of inky darkness. He felt a now-all-too-familiar clench of apprehension, knowing that something had to be wrong or the people who'd rescued them would've come for them a long time ago. But Minho and Newt were right—they had to go out there and find some answers.

"Shuck it," Minho said. "I'll go first."

Without waiting for a response he walked through the open door, his body vanishing in the gloom almost instantly. Newt gave Thomas a hesitant look, then followed. For some reason Thomas thought it should be up to him to go next, so he did.

Step by step, he left the dorm room and entered the darkness of the common area, hands reaching out in front of him.

The glow of light coming from behind didn't do much to illuminate things; he might as well have been walking with his eyes squeezed shut. And the place smelled. Horrible.

Minho yelped up ahead, then called back. "Whoa, be careful. Something ... weird's hanging from the ceiling."

Thomas heard a slight squeak or groan, something creaking. As if Minho had bumped into a low-hanging chandelier, sending it swaying back and forth. A grunt from Newt somewhere to the right was followed by the squeal of metal dragging across the floor.

"Table," Newt announced. "Watch out for tables."

Frypan spoke up behind Thomas. "Does anyone remember where the light switches were?"

"That's where I'm heading," Newt responded. "I swear I remember seeing a set of them somewhere over here."

Thomas continued walking blindly forward. His eyes had adjusted a little; where before, everything had been a wall of blackness, now he could see traces of shadows against shadows. Yet something was off. He was still a little disoriented, but things seemed to be in places they shouldn't be. It was almost as if—

"Bluh-huh-huh," Minho groaned, a shudder of repulsion, like he'd just stepped in a pile of klunk. Another creaking sound cut through the room.

Before Thomas could ask what had happened, he bumped into something himself. Hard.

Awkwardly shaped. The feel of cloth.

"Found it!" Newt shouted.

A few clicks were heard; then the room suddenly blazed with fluorescent lights, temporarily blinding Thomas. He stumbled away from the thing he'd bumped into, rubbing his eyes, ran into another stiff figure, sent it swaying away from him.

"Whoa!" Minho yelled.

Thomas squinted; his vision cleared. He forced himself to look at the scene of horror around him.

Throughout the large room, people hung from the ceiling—at least a dozen. They'd all been strung up by the neck, the ropes twisted and trenched into purple, bloated skin. The stiff bodies swung to and fro ever so slightly, pale pink tongues lolling out of their white-lipped mouths. All of them had eyes open, though glazed over with certain death. By the looks of it, they'd been that way for hours. Their clothes and some of their faces looked familiar.

Thomas dropped to his knees.

He knew these dead people.

They were the ones who'd rescued the Gladers. Just the day before.

CHAPTER 4

Thomas tried not to look at any of the dead bodies as he stood up. He half walked, half stumbled over to Newt, who was still by the bank of light switches, his terrified gaze darting between the corpses hanging throughout the room.

Minho joined them, swearing under his breath. Other Gladers were emerging from the dorm room, shouting as they realized what they were seeing; Thomas heard a couple of them throw up, gagging and spitting. He felt the sudden urge himself, but fought it. What had happened? How could everything be taken away from them so fast? His stomach tightened up as despair threatened to bowl him over.

Then he remembered Teresa.

Teresa! he called out with his mind. *Teresa!* Again and again, mentally screaming it with his eyes closed and jaw clenched. *Where are you!*

"Tommy," Newt said, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder. "What's bloody wrong with you?"

Thomas opened his eyes, realized he was doubled over, arms wrapped around his stomach. He slowly straightened, tried to push away the panic eating him inside. "What ... what do you think? Look around us."

"Yeah, but you looked like you were in pain or something."

"I'm fine—just trying to reach her in my mind. But I can't." He wasn't fine. He hated reminding the others that he and Teresa could speak telepathically. And if all these people were dead ... "We've gotta find where they put her," he blurted out, grasping urgently for a task to clear his mind. He scanned the room, trying his best not to focus on the corpses, looking for a door that might lead to her room. She'd said it was across the common area from where they'd all slept.

There. A yellow door with a brass handle.

"He's right," Minho said to the group. "Spread out, find her!"

"Might've already." Thomas was on the move, surprised at how quickly he'd recovered his senses. He ran toward the door, dodging tables and bodies. She had to be in there, safe like they'd been. The door was closed; that was a good sign. Probably locked. Maybe she'd fallen into a deep sleep like him. That was why she'd been quiet, unresponsive.

He had almost reached the door when he remembered that they might need something to break into the room. "Someone grab that fire extinguisher!" he yelled over his shoulder. The smell in the common area was horrendous; he gagged as he sucked in a deep breath.

"Winston, go get it," Minho ordered behind him.

Thomas reached the door first and tried the handle. It didn't budge, locked tight. Then he noticed a small, clear-plastic display hanging on the wall to the right, about five inches square. A sheet of paper had been slipped into the thin slot, several words typed on its surface.

Oddly, the thing that stood out the most to Thomas was Teresa's last name. Or at least, what appeared to be her last name. Agnes. He didn't know why, but it surprised him. Teresa Agnes. He couldn't think of anyone within the splotchy knowledge of history floating in his still-scarce memories who matched that name. He himself had been renamed after Thomas Edison, the great inventor. But Teresa Agnes? He'd never heard of her.

Of course, all their names were more of a joke than anything, probably a callous way for the Creators—WICKED or whoever had done this to them—to distance themselves from the *real* people they'd stolen from *real* mothers and fathers. Thomas couldn't wait until the day he learned what he'd been called at birth, what name lay stamped in the minds of his parents, whoever they were. Wherever they were.

The sketchy memories he'd initially regained from going through the Changing had made him think that he didn't have parents who loved him. That whoever they were, they didn't want him. That he'd been taken from horrible circumstances. But now he refused to believe it, especially after having dreamed about his mom during the night.

Minho snapped his fingers in front of Thomas's eyes. "Hello? Calling Thomas? Not a good time to daydream. Lots of dead bodies, smells like Frypan's pits. Wake up."

Thomas turned to him. "Sorry. Just thought it was weird that Teresa's last name was Agnes."

Minho clucked his tongue. "Who cares about *that*? What's this freakin' stuff about her being the Betrayer?"

"And what's 'Group A, Subject A1' mean?" This was Newt, who handed over the fire extinguisher to Thomas. "Anyway, your turn to break a buggin' door handle."

Thomas grabbed it, suddenly angry at himself for wasting even a few seconds thinking about the stupid label. Teresa was in there, and she needed their help. Trying not to be bothered by the word *betrayer*, he gripped the cylinder and slammed it against the brass knob. A jolt ran up his arms as the clang of metal against metal rang through the air. He'd felt it give a little, and two smashes later the handle fell off and the door popped open an inch or two.

Thomas threw the extinguisher to the side and grabbed the door, swung it all the way out. Itchy anticipation mixed with dread at what he might find. He was the first to step into the lighted room.

It was a smaller version of the boys' dorm, just four bunk beds, two dressers and a closed door, presumably leading to another bathroom. All the beds were made up nicely except one, its blankets tossed to the side and a pillow hanging off the edge, the sheet rumpled. But there was no sign of Teresa.

"Teresa!" Thomas called out, his throat straining with panic as he yelled.

The swirly, swooshing sound of a toilet flushing came through the closed door and a sudden relief burst through Thomas. It was so strong he almost had to sit down. She was here, she was safe. He steadied himself and started walking toward the bathroom, but Newt reached out and grabbed his arm.

"You're used to living with a bunch of boys," Newt said. "I don't think it's polite to go stomping into the bloody ladies' room. Just wait till she comes out."

"Then we need to get everybody in here and have a Gathering," Minho added. "It doesn't stink in here, and there aren't any windows for Cranks to scream at us."

Thomas hadn't noticed the lack of windows until that moment, though it should've been the most obvious thing, considering the chaos of their own dorm room. Cranks. He'd almost forgotten.

"I wish she'd hurry up," he murmured.

"I'll get everyone over here," Minho said; he turned and walked back into the common area.

Thomas stared at the bathroom door. Newt and Frypan and a few other Gladers pushed their way into the room and took seats on the beds, all of them leaning forward, elbows on knees, rubbing their hands together absently, the anxiety and worry evident in their body language.

Teresa? Thomas said in his mind. *Can you hear me? We're waiting for you out here.*

No response. And he still felt that bubble of emptiness, as if her presence itself had been permanently taken away.

There was a click. The handle on the door to the bathroom turned; then the door opened, swinging toward Thomas. He stepped forward, ready to pull Teresa into a hug—he didn't care who was there to see it. But the person who walked into the dorm room wasn't Teresa. Thomas stopped midstride and almost tripped. Everything inside him seemed to fall.

It was a boy.

He wore the same kind of clothes they'd all been given the night before—clean pajamas with a button-up shirt and flannel pants, light blue. He had olive skin, and his dark hair was cut surprisingly short. The look of innocent surprise on his face was the only thing that prevented Thomas from grabbing the shank by the collar and shaking him until some answers came out.

"Who are you?" Thomas asked, not caring that the words sounded harsh.

"Who am I?" the boy responded, somewhat sarcastically. "Who are you?"

Newt had gotten back to his feet, actually standing even closer to the new guy than Thomas was. "Don't bloody mess around. There are a lot more of us than there are of you. Tell us who you are."

The boy folded his arms, a defiance coming over his whole body. "Fine. My name's Aris. What else you wanna know?"

Thomas wanted to punch the guy. Him acting all high and mighty while Teresa was missing. "How'd you get here? Where's the girl who slept here last night?"

"Girl? What girl? I'm the only one here, and it's been that way since they put me here last night."

Thomas turned to point back in the direction of the door to the common area. "There's a sign right out there that says this is her room. Teresa ... Agnes. No mention of a shank named Aris."

Something in his tone must've made the boy realize this wasn't a joke. He held out his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Look, man, I don't know what you're talking about. They put me in here last night, I slept in *that* bed"—he pointed to the one with the rumpled sheet and blanket—"and I woke up about five minutes ago and took a pee. Never heard the name Teresa Agnes in my life. Sorry."

The brief moment of relief Thomas had felt when he'd heard the toilet flush officially shattered. He shared a look with Newt, not knowing what to ask next.

Newt shrugged slightly, then turned back to Aris. “Who put you in here last night?”

Aris threw his arms up in the air, then let them come back down and slap against his sides. “I don’t even know, man. A bunch of people with guns who rescued us, told us everything would be okay now.”

“Rescued you from what?” Thomas asked. This was getting weird. Really, really weird.

Aris looked down at the floor and his shoulders fell. It looked as if a wave of some terrible memory had washed over him. He sighed, then finally looked back up at Thomas and answered.

“From the Maze, man. From the Maze.”

CHAPTER 5

Something softened in Thomas. This kid wasn't lying—he could just tell. The look of horror that had taken hold of Aris was one he knew well. Thomas had felt it himself and had seen it on too many other faces. He knew exactly what kind of terrible memories made someone look like that. He also knew that Aris had no clue what had happened to Teresa.

"Maybe you should sit down," Thomas said. "I think we have a lot to talk about."

"What do you mean?" Aris asked. "Who are you guys? Where'd you come from?"

Thomas let out a slight laugh. "The Maze. The Grievers. WICKED. You name it." So much had happened, where could he start? Not to mention that worry over Teresa was making his head spin, making him want to run out of the room and search for her immediately, but he stayed.

"You're lying," Aris said, his voice having dropped to a whisper, his face now a full shade paler.

"No, we're not," Newt responded. "Tommy's right. We need to talk. Sounds like we've come from similar places."

"Who's that guy?"

Thomas turned around to see that Minho had returned, a pack of Gladers standing behind him on the other side of the doorway. Their faces were scrunched up in disgust at the smell out there, their eyes still full of the terror of seeing what filled the room just behind them.

"Minho, meet Aris," Thomas said, taking a step to the side and gesturing toward the other boy. "Aris, meet Minho."

Minho stuttered out a few unintelligible words, as if he couldn't quite decide where to start.

"Look," Newt said. "Let's take down these top beds and move them around the room. Then we can all sit and figure out what's bloody going on."

Thomas shook his head. "No. First, we need to go find Teresa. She must be in some other room."

"Isn't one," Minho said.

"What do you mean?"

"I just checked this whole place out. There's the big common area, this room, our dorm room, and some seriously shucked doors that lead outside—where we came in from the bus yesterday. Locked and chained from the *inside*. Doesn't make any sense, but I don't see any other doors or exits."

Thomas shook his head in confusion. It felt like a million spiders had just spun cobwebs through his brain. "But ... what about last night? Where'd the food come from? Didn't anyone notice other rooms, a kitchen, anything?" He looked around, hoping for an answer, but no one said a word.

"Maybe there's a hidden door," Newt finally said. "Look, we can only do one thing at a time. We need to—"

"No!" Thomas shouted. "We've got all day to talk to this Aris guy. The label by the door

said Teresa should be here somewhere—we need to find her!"

Without waiting for a response, he headed for the door back to the common area, pushing his way past boys until he was through. The smell hit him as if a bucket of raw sewage had been spilled over his head. The bloated and purple bodies hung like carcasses of game set out by hunters to dry. Their lifeless eyes stared back at him.

A familiar, sickening tickle of revulsion filled his stomach and triggered his gag reflex. Closing his eyes for a second, he willed his insides to settle. When they finally did, he began his search for some sign of Teresa, concentrating with all his might on *not* looking at the dead people.

But then a horrible thought struck him. What if she ...

He ran through the room, searching the faces of the bodies. None of them was her. Relief dissolved the fleeting moment of panic, and he focused on the room itself.

The walls surrounding the common area were as plain as could be; smooth plaster painted white, no decoration of any kind. And for some reason, no windows. He walked quickly around its entire circumference, running his left hand along the wall as he did so. He came to the door to the boys' dorm room, went past it, then made it to the big entrance through which they'd come the day before. There had been a torrential downpour at the time, which seemed impossible now, considering the bright sun he'd seen shining behind the crazy man earlier.

The entrance—or exit—consisted of two large steel doors, their surfaces a shiny silver. And just like Minho said, a massive chain—with links a full inch thick—had been threaded through the handles on the doors and pulled tight, two big key locks snapped shut to keep it that way. Thomas reached out and pulled on the chains to check their strength. The metal felt cool under his hands, and it didn't give at all.

He expected thumps from the other side—Crank trying to get in just as they were at the windows in the dorm room. But the room remained silent. The only sounds were muted and coming from the two dorms—distant shouts and screams from the Cranks and murmurs of conversation from the Gladers.

Frustrated, Thomas continued his trek along the walls until he made it back to the room that was *supposed* to be Teresa's. Nothing, not even a crack or seam to indicate another exit. The large room wasn't even a square—it was a big oval, round and cornerless.

He was completely perplexed. He thought back to the night before, when they'd all sat there and eaten pizza like the starved people they'd been. Surely they'd seen other doors, a kitchen, something. But the more he thought about it, the more he tried to picture what things had looked like, the fuzzier it became. An alarm went off in his head—their brains had been tinkered with before. Had it happened again? Had their memories been altered or wiped?

And what had happened to Teresa?

Desperate, he thought about crawling across the floor to look for a trapdoor or something—some clue to what had happened. But he couldn't spend another minute with all those rotting bodies. The only thing left was the new kid. He sighed and turned back to the small room where they'd found him. Aris had to know something that would help.

Just as Newt had ordered, the top beds had been unhooked from the lower ones and placed around the room against the walls, creating enough space for the nineteen other

Gladers and Aris to sit in a circle, everyone facing each other.

When Minho saw Thomas, he patted an empty spot next to him. “Told ya, dude. Have a seat and let’s talk. We waited on you. But close that shuck door as much as you can first—smells worse than Gally’s rotting feet out there.”

Without responding, Thomas pulled the door shut, then walked over and sat down. He wanted to sink his head into his hands, but he didn’t. Nothing indicated for sure that any kind of danger threatened Teresa. Something weird was going on, but there could be a million explanations, and plenty of them included her being okay.

Newt was one bed to the right, sitting so far forward that just the edge of his butt rested on the mattress. “All right, let’s get started on the bloody storytellin’ so we can get to the real problem—finding something to eat.”

Right on cue, Thomas felt a hunger pang, heard his stomach growl. That problem hadn’t even occurred to him yet. Water would be fine—they had the bathrooms—but there was no sign of food anywhere.

“Good that,” Minho said. “Talk, Aris. Tell us everything.”

The new boy was directly across the room from Thomas—the Gladers sitting to each side of the stranger had scooted to the far ends of the bed. Aris shook his head. “No way. You guys go first.”

“Yeah?” Minho responded. “How about we all just take turns beating the living klunk out of your shuck face? Then we’ll ask you to talk again.”

“Minho,” Newt said sternly. “There’s no reason—”

Minho pointed sharply at Aris. “Please, dude. For all we know this shank could be one of the Creators. Somebody from WICKED, here to spy on us. He could’ve killed those people out there—he’s the only one we don’t know and the doors and windows are locked! I’m sick of him acting all snooty when we’ve got twenty guys to his one. He should talk first.”

Thomas groaned on the inside. One thing he knew was that the kid would never open up if Minho terrified him.

Newt sighed and looked over at Aris. “He’s got a point. Just tell us what you meant about coming from the buggin’ Maze. That’s where we escaped from, and we obviously haven’t met you.”

Aris rubbed his eyes, then met Newt’s gaze. “Fine, listen. I was thrown into this gigantic maze made out of huge stone walls—but before that my memory was erased. I couldn’t remember anything about my life from before. I just knew my name. I lived there with a bunch of girls. There must’ve been fifty of them, and I was the only boy. We escaped a few days ago—the people who helped kept us in a big gym for a few days, then moved me here last night—but no one explained anything. What’s this stuff about you being in a maze, too?”

Thomas barely heard the last few words of what Aris had said over the sounds of surprise coming from the other Gladers. Confusion swirled in his brain. Aris had announced what he’d been through as simply and quickly as describing a trip to the beach. But it seemed crazy. Monumental, if true. Luckily someone voiced exactly what Thomas was trying to sort out in his mind.

“Wait a minute,” Newt said. “You lived in a big maze, on a farm, where walls closed every night? Just you and a few dozen girls? Were there creatures called Grievers? Were

you the last one to arrive? And did everything go buggin' nuts when you did? Did you come in a coma? With a note that said you were the last one ever?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Aris was saying even before Newt had finished. "How do you know all this? How ..."

"It's the same shuck experiment," Minho said, the earlier belligerence gone from his voice. "Or same ... whatever. But they had all girls and one boy, we had all boys and one girl. WICKED must've built two of those mazes, run two different tests!"

Thomas's line of thinking had already accepted that. He finally settled himself enough to speak. He looked at Aris. "Did they call you the Trigger?"

Aris nodded, obviously as perplexed as anyone else in the room.

"And could you" Thomas began, but hesitated. He felt like every time he brought this up, he was admitting to the world that he was crazy. "Could you speak to one of those girls inside your mind? Ya know, like telepathically?"

Aris's eyes widened, staring deeply at Thomas as if he'd understood a dark secret that only someone else who shared it could understand.

Can you hear me?

The phrase appeared so clearly inside Thomas's mind that at first he thought Aris had spoken aloud. But no—his lips hadn't moved.

Can you hear me? the boy repeated.

Thomas hesitated, swallowed. Yes.

They killed her, Aris said back to him. *They killed my best friend.*

"What's going on?" Newt asked, looking back and forth between Thomas and Aris. "Why're you guys looking at each other like you just fell in love?"

"He can do it, too," Thomas answered, not taking his eyes off the new kid, seeing the others only in his peripheral vision. That final statement by Aris had terrified him; if they'd killed *his* telepathy partner ...

"Do what?" Frypan asked.

"What do you think?" Minho said. "He's a freak like Thomas. They can talk in each other's heads."

Newt was glaring at Thomas now. "Serious?"

Thomas nodded and almost spoke to Aris in his mind again, but said it out loud at the last second. "Who killed her? What happened?"

"Who killed who?" Minho said. "No more of your voodoo klunk while we're around."

Thomas, eyes watering now, finally broke his gaze with Aris and looked over at Minho. "He had someone he could do this with, just like I did. I mean ... *do*. But he said they killed her. I want to know who *they* are."

Aris's head had dropped; his eyes looked closed from where Thomas sat. "I don't really know who *they* are. It's too confusing. I couldn't tell the bad guys from the good guys. But I think somehow they made this girl Beth ... stab ... my friend. Her name was Rachel. She's dead, man. She's dead." He covered his face with both hands.

Thomas felt an almost painful prick of confusion. Everything pointed to Aris's having come from another version of the Maze, set up in the same format except with the ratio of girls to boys being switched. But that would make Aris their version of Teresa. And this Beth sounded like their version of Gally, who'd killed Chuck. With a knife. Did that mean that Gally was supposed to have killed Thomas instead?

But why was Aris here now? And where was Teresa? Things that had almost started to click in his mind fell apart again.

"Well, how'd you end up with us?" Newt asked. "Where are all these girls you keep talking about? How many of them escaped with you? Did they bring all of you here or just you?"

Thomas couldn't help but feel sorry for Aris. To get grilled with all these questions after something like that had happened. If the roles were switched, if Thomas had seen Teresa get killed ... Watching it happen to Chuck had been bad enough.

Bad enough? he thought. *Or was seeing Chuck die worse?* Thomas wanted to scream. At that moment, everything in the world just sucked.

Aris looked up finally, wiped a couple of tears from his cheeks. He did it without the slightest hint of shame, and Thomas suddenly knew that he liked this kid.

"Look," the boy said. "I'm just as confused as everyone else. About thirty of us survived, they took us to that gym, fed us, cleaned us up. Then they brought me to this place last night, saying I should be separate since I'm a guy. That's it. Then you sticks show up."

"Sticks?" Minho repeated.

Aris shook his head. "Never mind. I don't even know what it means. Just a word they used when I got there."

Minho exchanged a glance with Thomas, half smiling. Looked like both groups had come up with their own vocabulary.

"Hey," one of the Gladers Thomas didn't really know called out. He was leaning against the wall behind Aris, pointing at him. "What's that on the side of your neck? Something black, right below your collar."

Aris tried to look down, but couldn't bend his neck to see that part of his body. "What?"

Thomas saw a dark splotch just above the back neckline of the boy's pajama shirt as he shifted around. It appeared to be a thick line, stretching from the hollow of his collarbone around to his back. And it was broken up, like it might be lettering.

"Here, let me look," Newt offered. He stood from the bed and walked over, his limp—from something in the past he'd never shared with Thomas—showing more than usual. He reached out and pulled Aris's shirt down more so he could see the odd marking better.

"It's a tattoo," Newt said, squinting as if he didn't believe his eyes.

"What's it say?" Minho asked, though he'd already gotten up from the bed and approached to get his own look.

When Newt didn't answer right away, curiosity forced Thomas to his feet, and soon he was right beside Minho, leaning over to see the tattoo himself. What he saw printed there in blocky letters made his heart skip a beat.

Property of WICKED. Group B, Subject B1. The Partner.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Minho asked.

"What does it say?" Aris asked, reaching around to feel the skin of his neck and shoulders, pulling his shirt collar down. "I swear it wasn't there last night!"

Newt repeated the words to him, then said, "Property of WICKED? I thought we'd escaped them. Or you'd escaped them, too. Whatever." He turned around, visibly frustrated, and went back to sit down on his bed.

"And why would it call you the *Partner*?" Minho said, still staring at the tattoo.

Aris shook his head. "I don't have a clue. I swear. And there's no way that was there before last night. I showered, looked in the mirror. I would've seen it. And someone would've noticed it back in the Maze for sure."

"You're telling me they tattooed you in the middle of the night?" Minho said. "Without you noticing? Come on, dude."

"I swear!" Aris insisted. Then he got up and went to the bathroom, probably to try to see the words for himself.

"I don't believe a shuck word he says," Minho whispered to Thomas on his way back to his seat. Then, just as he leaned forward to plop back down on the mattress, his shirt shifted enough to reveal a thick line of black on *his* neck.

"Whoa!" Thomas said. For a second, he was too stunned to move.

"What?" Minho asked, looking at Thomas as if he'd just sprouted a third ear on his forehead.

"Your—your neck," Thomas finally got out. "You have it on your neck, too!"

"What the shuck you talkin' about?" Minho said, pulling at his shirt, face scrunched up as he struggled to see something he couldn't.

Thomas ran over to Minho, slapped his hands away, then pulled the neckline of the shirt back. "Holy ... It's right there! Same thing, except ..."

Thomas read the words to himself.

Property of WICKED. Group A, Subject A7. The Leader.

"*What, dude!*" Minho yelled at him.

Most of the other Gladers had gathered in a tight group behind Thomas, squeezing in to get a look. Thomas quickly read the tattooed words out loud, surprised he did it without stumbling on them.

"You're kiddin' me, man," Minho said, standing up. He pushed his way through the crowd of boys to follow Aris to the bathroom.

And then the frenzy began. Thomas felt his own shirt tugged down as he pulled at others. Everyone started talking over everyone else.

"They all say Group A."

"Property of WICKED, just like his."

"You're Subject A-thirteen."

"Subject A-nineteen."

"A-three."

"A-ten."

Thomas was slowly turning in a circle, dazed as he watched the Gladers discover the tattoos on each other. Most of them didn't have the additional designations like Aris and Minho, just the property line. Newt was going from boy to boy, looking for himself, his face set in stone as if he were concentrating on memorizing the names and numbers. Then, quite by accident, the two of them stood facing each other.

"What does mine say?" Newt asked.

Thomas pulled the neckline of Newt's shirt to the side, then leaned over to read the words etched into his skin. "You're Subject A-five and they called you the *Glue*."

Newt gave him a startled look. "The *Glue*?"

Thomas let go of his shirt and stepped back. "Yeah. Probably because you're kind of the glue that holds us all together. I don't know. Read mine."

"I already did—"

Thomas noticed that an odd expression had come over Newt's face. One of hesitation. Or dread. Like he didn't want to tell Thomas what his tattoo said. "Well?"

"You're Subject A-two," Newt answered. Then he lowered his eyes.

"*And?*" Thomas pushed.

Newt hesitated, then answered without looking at him. "It doesn't call you anything. It just says ... 'To be killed by Group B.' "

Thomas didn't really have time to process what Newt had said. He was actually trying to decide whether he was more confused or scared when a clanging bell began ringing throughout the room. He instinctively put his hands to his ears and looked around at the others.

He noticed the perplexed recognition on their faces, and then it hit him. It was the same sound he'd heard back in the Maze right before Teresa had shown up in the Box. That was the only time he'd heard it, and trapped within the confines of a small room it was different—stronger, laced with overlapping echoes. Still, he was pretty sure it was the same. It was the alarm used in the Glade to announce that a Newbie had arrived.

And it wasn't stopping; Thomas already felt a headache forming behind his eyes.

The Gladers milled about the room, gawking at the walls and the roof as if they were trying to figure out the source of the noise. Some of them sat down on the beds, hands pressed to the sides of their heads. Thomas tried to find the source of the alarm as well, but couldn't see anything. No speakers, no heating or air-conditioning vents in the walls, nothing. Just a sound coming from everywhere at once.

Newt grabbed his arm, shouted in his ear. "It's the bloody Newbie alarm!"

"I know!"

"Why's it ringing?"

Thomas shrugged, hoping his face didn't betray how annoyed he was. How was he supposed to know what was going on?

Minho and Aris had reappeared from the bathroom, both of them absently rubbing the backs of their necks as they searched the room for answers. It didn't take long for them to realize that the others had similar tattoos. Frypan had walked over to the door leading back out to the common room and was just about to touch the palm of his hand to the spot where the broken handle used to be.

"Wait!" Thomas shouted on impulse. He ran over to join Frypan at the door, sensing Newt right behind him.

"Why?" Frypan asked, his hand still hovering just inches from the door.

"I don't know," Thomas replied, not sure if he could even be heard over the clanging sounds. "It's an *alarm*. Maybe something really bad is happening."

"Yeah!" Frypan yelled back. "And maybe we need to get out of here!"

Without waiting to see what Thomas said, he pushed the door. When it didn't move, he pushed harder. When it still didn't budge, he leaned up against it with his full weight, shoulder first.

Nothing. It was closed as tight as if it were bricked shut.

"You broke the shuck handle!" Frypan screamed, then slapped the door with the palm of his hand.

Thomas didn't want to shout anymore; he was tired and his throat hurt. He turned and leaned back against the wall, folded his arms. Most of the Gladers seemed as run-down as

Thomas—sick of looking for answers or a way out. All of them were either sitting on the beds or standing around with blank expressions on their faces.

Out of desperation more than anything, Thomas called to Teresa again. Then several times more. But she didn't respond, and with all the blaring noise, he didn't know if he could have focused enough to hear her anyway. He still felt her absence; it was like waking up one day with no teeth in your mouth. You wouldn't need to run to the mirror to know they were gone.

Then the alarm stopped.

Never before had silence seemed to have its own sound. Like a buzzing hive of bees, it settled on the room with ferocity, making Thomas reach up and wiggle a finger in each ear. Every breath, every sigh in the room was like an explosion compared to the bizarre haze of quiet.

Newt was the first one to speak. “Don’t tell me we’re still gonna get bloody Newbies thrown in our laps.”

“Where’s the Box in this shuck place?” Minho muttered sarcastically.

A slight creak made Thomas look sharply over at the door to the common area. It had swung open several inches, a slice of darkness marking where it now stood ajar. Someone had turned off the lights on the other side. Frypan backed up a step.

“Guessin’ they want us to go out there now,” Minho said.

“Then why don’t you go first,” Frypan offered.

Minho had already started moving. “No problem. Maybe we’ll have a new little shank to pick on and kick in the butt when we got nothin’ else to do.” He made it to the door, then paused and looked sideways at Thomas. His voice turned surprisingly soft. “We could use another Chuck.”

Thomas knew he shouldn’t have been upset. If anything, Minho was trying—in his own strange way—to show that he missed Chuck just as much as everyone else. But being reminded of his friend, and at such an odd moment, made Thomas angry. Instinct told him to ignore it—he was having a hard enough time dealing with the things going on around him. He needed to separate himself from his feelings for a while and just move forward. Step by step. Figure it all out.

“Yeah,” he finally said. “You going through or you need me to go first?”

“What did your tattoo say?” Minho responded quietly, ignoring Thomas’s question.

“Doesn’t matter. Let’s go out there.”

Minho nodded, still not looking directly at him. Then he smiled, and whatever had been troubling him so deeply appeared to vanish, replaced by his usual laid-back attitude. “Good that. If some zombie starts eating my leg, save me.”

“Deal.” Thomas wanted him to hurry and get on with it. He knew they were on the edge of yet another great change in their ridiculous journey, and he didn’t want to draw it out any longer.

Minho pushed open the door. The single bar of blackness became a wide swath of it, the common area now as dark as it had been when they’d first left the boys’ dorm. Minho stepped through the doorway, and Thomas followed right on his heels.

“Wait here,” Minho whispered. “No need playing bumper cars with the dead folks again. Let me find the light switches first.”

"Why would they have turned them off?" Thomas asked. "I mean, *who* turned them off?" Minho looked back at him; the light from Aris's room spilled across his face, illuminating the smirk set firmly there. "Why do you even bother asking questions, dude? Nothing has ever made sense and it probably never will. Now slim it and sit still."

Minho was quickly swallowed by the darkness. Thomas heard his soft footsteps on the carpet and the *swish* sound of his hand running along the wall as he walked.

"Here they are!" he shouted from the spot that seemed about right to Thomas.

A few clicks sounded and then lights blazed throughout the room. For the tiniest fraction of a second, Thomas didn't realize what was so starkly different about the place. But then it hit him, and as if that awakened his other senses as well, he realized that the horrible smell of rotting corpses had vanished.

And now he knew why.

The bodies were gone, with no sign that they'd ever been there in the first place.

CHAPTER 8

Several seconds passed before Thomas realized he'd stopped breathing. Sucking in a deep pull of air, he gaped at the now-empty room. No bloated, purpled-skinned bodies. No stink.

Newt nudged past him, walking forward with his slight limp until he stood in the very center of the room's carpeted floor. "This is impossible," he said, turning in a slow circle, gazing up at the ceiling where the corpses had hung from ropes only minutes earlier. "Not enough time passed for someone to get them out. And no one else even came into this buggin' room. We would've heard them!"

Thomas stepped to the side and leaned against the wall as the other Gladers and Aris came out of the small dorm room. A hushed sense of awe spread across the group as one by one, each person noticed the missing dead. As for Thomas, he once again felt a numbness, like he just might be done feeling surprised at anything.

"You're right," Minho said to Newt. "We were in there with the door closed for, what, twenty minutes? No way anyone could've moved all those bodies that quickly. Plus, this place is locked from the *inside*."

"Not to mention getting rid of the smell," Thomas added.

Minho nodded.

"Well, you shanks are right smart," Frypan said through a huff. "But take a look around. They're gone. So whatever you think, somehow they got rid of them."

Thomas didn't feel like arguing about it—or even talking about it. So the dead bodies were gone. They'd seen stranger stuff.

"Hey," Winston said. "Those crazy people quit screaming and yelling."

Thomas put his weight back on his feet, listened. Silence. "I thought we just couldn't hear them from Aris's room. But you're right—they stopped."

Soon everyone was running for the larger dorm room on the far side of the common area. Thomas followed, intensely curious to look out the windows and see the world outside. Before, with the Cranks screaming and pressing their faces against the iron bars, he'd been too horrified to get a good view.

"No way!" Minho yelled from up ahead, then, without further explanation, disappeared inside the room.

As Thomas moved in that direction, he noticed that every boy hesitated a second, wide-eyed at the threshold of the door, then went ahead and entered the dorm. He waited as each Glader and then Aris funneled their way inside, then followed.

He felt the same shock he'd sensed from the other boys. As a whole, the room looked much like it had when they'd walked out of it earlier. But there was one monumental difference: at each window, without exception, a red brick wall had been erected just outside the iron bars, completely blocking every inch of open space. The only light in the room came from the panels on the ceiling.

"Even if they were quick with those bodies," Newt said, "I'm pretty sure they didn't have time to bloody throw up some brick walls. What's going on here?"

Thomas watched as Minho walked over to one of the windows and reached through the bars, pressing his hand against the red bricks. "Solid," he said, then slapped at it.

"It doesn't even look fresh," Thomas murmured, stepping up to one himself to get a feel. Hard and cool. "The mortar's dry. Somehow they've tricked us, that's all."

"Tricked us?" Frypan asked. "How?"

Thomas shrugged, that numbness returning. Still wishing desperately that he could talk to Teresa. "I don't know. Remember the Cliff? We jumped into thin air and went through an invisible hole. Who knows what these people can do."

The next half hour passed in a haze. Thomas wandered about, as did everyone else, inspecting the brick walls, looking for signs of anything else that had changed. Several things had, each one just as strange as the next. All the beds in the Gladers' dorm room were made, and there was no sign of the grungy clothes they'd all worn before changing into the pajamas provided the night before. The dressers had been rearranged, though the difference was subtle and some people disagreed that they'd been moved at all. Either way, each one had been stocked with fresh clothes and shoes, and new digital watches for each boy.

But the biggest change of all—discovered by Minho—was the sign outside the room where they'd found Aris. Instead of saying *Teresa Agnes, Group A, Subject A1, The Betrayer*, it now said:

Aris Jones, Group B, Subject B1

The Partner

Everyone observed the new plaque, then wandered away, but Thomas found himself standing in front of it, unable to remove his eyes. To Thomas it felt like the new label made it official—Teresa had been taken from him, replaced by Aris. None of it made sense, and none of it mattered anymore. He went back to the boys' dorm, found the cot he'd slept on during the night—or at least, the one he *thought* he'd slept on—and lay down, putting the pillow over his head, as if that would make everyone else go away.

What had happened to her? What had happened to *them*? Where were they? What were they supposed to do? And the tattoos ...

Turning his head to the side, then his whole body, he squeezed his eyes shut and folded his arms tightly, pulling his legs up until he lay in the fetal position. Then, determined to keep trying until he heard back from her, he called out with his thoughts.

Teresa? A pause. *Teresa?* A longer pause. *Teresa!* He shouted it mentally, his whole body tensing with the effort. *Teresa! Where are you? Please answer me! Why aren't you trying to contact me? Ter—*

Get out of my head!

The words exploded inside his mind, so vivid and so strangely audible within his skull that he felt lances of pain behind his eyes and in his ears. He sat up in bed, then stood. It was her. It was definitely her.

Teresa? He pressed the first two fingers of both hands against his temples. *Teresa?*

Whoever you are, get out of my shuck head!

Thomas stumbled backward until he sat down once again on the bed. His eyes were closed as he concentrated. *Teresa, what are you talking about? It's me. Thomas. Where are*

you?

Shut up! It was her, he had no doubt, but her mental voice was full of fear and anger. Just shut up! I don't know who you are! Leave me alone!

But, Thomas began, completely at a loss. Teresa, what's wrong?

She paused before answering, as if collecting her thoughts, and when she finally spoke again, Thomas sensed an almost disturbing calm in her.

Leave me alone, or I'll hunt you down and cut your throat. I swear it.

And then she was gone. Despite her warning, he tried calling for her again, but the same emptiness he'd felt since that morning returned, her presence having vanished.

Thomas fell back on the bed, something horrible burning through his body. He quickly buried his head in the pillow again and cried for the first time since Chuck had been killed. But the words from the label outside her door—*The Betrayer*—kept popping up in his mind. Each time, he pushed them away.

Amazingly, no one bothered him or asked him what was wrong. His stifled sobs finally faded into an occasional hitched breath, and eventually he fell asleep. Once again, he dreamed.

He's a little older this time, probably seven or eight. A very bright light hovers above his head like magic.

People in strange green suits and funny glasses keep peeking at him, their heads momentarily blocking the brilliance that shines down. He can see their eyes but nothing else. Their mouths and noses are covered by masks. Thomas is somehow both himself at that age and yet, as before, observing as an outsider. But he feels the boy's fear.

People are talking, voices muted and dull. Some are men, some are women, but he can't tell which is which or who is who.

He can't understand much of it at all.

Only glimpses. Fragments of conversation. All of it terrifying.

"We'll have to cut deeper with him and the girl."

"Can their brains handle this?"

"This is so amazing, you know? The Flare is rooted inside him."

"He might die."

"Or worse. He might live."

He hears one last thing, finally something that doesn't make him shiver in disgust or fright.

"Or he and the others might save us. Save us all."

When he woke up, his head felt like several chunks of ice had been hammered through his ears and into his brain. Wincing, he reached up to rub his eyes and was hit by a wave of nausea that sent the room tilting around him. Then he remembered the terrible things Teresa had said, then the short dream, and misery engulfed him. Who had those people been? Was it real? What had they meant when they'd said those awful things about his brain?

"Glad to see you still know how to take a nap."

Thomas peeked through a squint and saw Newt standing next to his bed, staring down at him.

"How long's it been?" Thomas asked, forcing thoughts of Teresa and the dream—memory?—into a dark corner of his mind to agonize over later.

Newt looked at his watch. "Couple hours. When people noticed you lie down, it actually kind of relaxed everyone. Not much we can do but sit and wait for something new to happen. There's no way out of this place."

Thomas tried not to groan as he scooted himself into a sitting position, his back against the wall at the head of his bed. "Do we even have any food?"

"No. But I'm pretty sure these people wouldn't go through all this trouble to bring us here, trick us or whatever they've done, just to let us buggin' starve to death. Something will happen. Reminds me of when they sent the first group of us to the Glade. The initial group of me and Alby and Minho and some others. The original Gladers." He said that last part with a not-so-subtle burst of sarcasm.

Thomas was intrigued, surprised he'd never before dug into what that had been like. "How does this remind you of that?"

Newt's gaze was focused on the brick wall outside the closest window. "We all woke up in the middle of the day, lying on the ground around the doors to the Box. It was closed. Our memories had been wiped, just like yours when you came. You'd be surprised at how quickly we pulled ourselves together and quit panicking. There were about thirty of us. Obviously, we had no bloody clue what had happened, how we'd gotten there, what we were supposed to do. And we were terrified, disoriented. But since we were all in the same crappy situation, we organized ourselves and figured out the place. Had the full farm running within days, everybody with their own job."

Thomas was relieved that the pain in his skull had diminished. And he was intrigued to hear about the start of the Glade—the scattered pieces of the puzzle brought back by the Changing weren't nearly enough to form solid memories. "Did the Creators have everything in place already? Crops, animals, all that?"

Newt nodded, still staring at the bricked-up window. "Yeah, but it took a ton of work to get it going nice and smooth. A lot of trial and error before we accomplished anything."

"So ... how does this remind you of that?" Thomas asked again.

Finally, Newt looked at him. "I guess back then we all just had a sense that there was

obviously a *purpose* to us having been sent there. If someone had wanted to kill us, why wouldn't they have just killed us? Why would they send us to a huge place with a house and a barn and animals? And because we had no other choice, we accepted it and started working and exploring."

"But we're already done exploring here," Thomas countered. "No animals, no food, no Maze."

"Yeah, but come on. It's the same concept. We're obviously here for a buggin' purpose. We'll figure it out eventually."

"If we don't starve first."

Newt pointed at the bathroom. "We've got plenty of water, so it'll be at least a few days before we drop dead. Something will happen."

Deep down Thomas believed it, too, and was only arguing to solidify it in his own mind. "But what about all those dead people we saw? Maybe they rescued us for real, got killed, and now we're screwed. Maybe we were *supposed* to do something, but now it's all been messed up and we've been left here to die."

Newt burst out laughing. "You're one depressing piece of klunk, slinthead. Nah, with all those corpses magically disappearing and the brick walls, I'd say this is something more like the Maze. Weird and impossible to explain. The latest and greatest mystery. Maybe our next test, who knows. Whatever's going on, we'll have a chance, just like we did in the bloody Maze. I guarantee it."

"Yeah," Thomas murmured, wondering if he should share what he'd dreamed about. Deciding to save it for later, he said, "Hope you're right. As long as no Grievers suddenly show up, we'll be good."

Newt was already shaking his head by the time Thomas finished. "Please, man. Careful what you buggin' wish for. Maybe they'll send something worse."

The image of Teresa popped into Thomas's mind just then, and he lost all desire to talk. "Who's the cheerful one now?" he forced himself to say.

"You got me," Newt replied, then stood up. "Guess I'll go bug somebody else till the excitement begins, which better be bloody soon. I'm hungry."

"Careful what you wish for."

"Good that."

Newt walked away, and Thomas scooted down to lie on his back, staring at the bottom of the bunk above him. He closed his eyes after a while, but when he saw Teresa's face in the darkness of his thoughts, he opened them right up again. If he was going to get through this, he'd have to try to forget about her for now.

Hunger.

It's like an animal trapped inside you, Thomas thought. After three full days of not eating, it felt like a vicious, gnawing, dull-clawed animal was trying to burrow its way out of his stomach. He felt it every second of every minute of every hour. He drank water as often as possible from the sinks in the bathroom, but it did nothing to drive the beast away. If anything, it felt like he was making the thing stronger so it could inflict more misery within.

The others felt it, too, even if most of them kept their complaints to themselves. Thomas

watched as they walked around, heads hung low, jaws slack, as if every step burned a thousand calories. People licked their lips a lot. They grabbed at their stomachs, pushed on them, as if trying to calm that gnawing beast. Unless they were going to the bathroom to use it or to get a drink, the Gladers didn't move at all. Like Thomas, they just lay there on the bunk beds, limp. Skin pale, eyes sunken.

Thomas felt all this like a festering disease, and seeing the others only made it worse, a stark reminder that this wasn't something he could just ignore. That it was real, and death waited just around the corner.

Listless sleep. Bathroom. Water. Trudge back to bed. Listless sleep—without any more of the memory-dreams he'd experienced. It became a horrendous cycle, broken up only by thoughts of Teresa, her harsh words to him the only thing that lightened the prospect of death, even if only a little. She'd been the only thing he could grasp for hope after the Maze and Chuck's death. And now she was gone, there was no food, and three long days had passed.

Hunger. Misery.

He'd quit bothering to look at his watch—it only made time drag and reminded his body how long it'd been since he'd eaten—but he thought it was roughly midafternoon of the third day when a humming sound abruptly began from the common area.

He stared at the door leading out there, knew he should get up and go check it out. But his mind had already been slipping into another one of those hazy half-naps, the world around him foggy.

Maybe he'd imagined it. But then he heard it again.

He told himself to get up.

He fell asleep instead.

"Thomas."

It was Minho's voice. Weak, but stronger than it had been the last time he'd heard it.

"Thomas. Dude, wake up."

Thomas opened his eyes, amazed he'd survived another nap without dying. Things were blurry for a second, and at first he didn't believe that what he thought was just a few inches from his face was real. But then its image sharpened, and the red roundness of it, with flecks of green scattered across its shiny surface, made him feel like he was looking on heaven itself.

An apple.

"Where'd you ..." He didn't bother to finish, those two words alone sapping his strength.

"Just eat it," Minho said, followed by a wet crunch.

Thomas glanced up to see his friend munching on his own apple. Then, drawing the last remnants of energy from somewhere deep inside himself, he pushed himself up onto an elbow and grabbed the fruit lying on the bed. He lifted it to his mouth and took a small bite. The burst of flavor and juice was a glorious thing.

Moaning, he attacked the rest of it and had eaten down to its stumpy core before Minho had even finished his—despite the head start.

"Slim yourself nice and calm," Minho said. "Eat like that and you'll just throw it right back up. Here's another one—try slowing down this time."

He handed a second apple to Thomas, who took it without saying thank you and chomped a big bite. As he chewed, resolving to swallow before stuffing another chunk in his mouth, he realized he could actually feel the first traces of energy trickling through his body.

"This is so good," he mumbled. "This is so shuckin' good."

"You still sound like an idiot when you use Glader words," Minho responded before taking another bite of his apple.

Thomas ignored him. "Where'd these come from?"

Minho hesitated in the middle of chewing, then resumed. "Found them out in the common room. Along with ... something else. Shanks who found it all claim they'd just looked a few minutes earlier and nothing had been there, but whatever, I don't care."

Thomas swung his legs off the bed and sat up. "What else did they find?"

Minho took a bite, then nodded toward the door. "Go look for yourself."

Thomas rolled his eyes and slowly stood up. The miserable weakness was still there, like most of his insides had been sucked right out and all he had left were a few bones and tendons to hold himself erect. But he steadied, feeling even after a few seconds that he was already better than the last time he'd made the long, lifeless trek to the bathroom.

Once he thought he had his balance, he walked over to the door and entered the common area. Only three days before, the room had been filled with dead bodies—now it was crowded with Gladers picking things off a big pile of food that had seemingly been dumped there without any order. Fruit, vegetables, small packages.

But he'd barely registered this when an even more bizarre sight on the far side of the room caught his attention. He reached out to steady himself on the wall behind him.

A large wooden desk had been placed opposite the door to the other dorm room.

Behind the desk, a thin man in a white suit sat in a chair, his feet propped up and crossed at the ankles.

The man was reading a book.

CHAPTER 10

Thomas stood there for a full minute, staring at the man casually sitting at the desk, reading. It was as if he'd been reading that way and in that very spot every day for his whole life. Thin black hair combed across a pale, bald head; a long nose, twisted slightly to the right; and shifty brown eyes darting back and forth as he read—the man somehow looked relaxed and nervous at the same time.

And the white suit. Pants, shirt, tie, coat. Socks. Shoes. All white.

What in the world?

Thomas looked over at the Gladers munching on fruit and a snack from a bag that looked like a mixture of nuts and seeds. They seemed oblivious to the man at the desk.

"Who is that guy?" Thomas called out to no one in particular.

One of the boys looked up, stopped chewing for a second. Then he quickly finished off his mouthful and swallowed. "He won't tell us anything. Told us we had to wait till he's ready." The boy shrugged as if that wasn't a big deal and took another bite of a peeled orange.

Thomas returned his attention to the stranger. Still sitting there, still reading. He turned a page with a whispery scrape and continued scanning the words.

Baffled, and with a stomach rumbling for more food, Thomas still couldn't help but walk toward the man to investigate. Of all the strange things to wake up to ...

"Careful," one of the Gladers called out, but it was too late.

Just ten feet in front of the desk, Thomas slammed into an invisible wall. His nose hit first, smashing against what felt like a cold sheet of glass. The rest of his body followed suit, bumping against the unseen wall and making him stumble backward. He instinctively reached up to rub his nose as he squinted to see how he could've possibly missed a glass barrier.

But no matter how hard he looked, he couldn't see anything. Not the slightest glare or reflection, not a smudge anywhere. All he saw was air. All the while, the man hadn't bothered to move or give even the least hint he'd noticed anything.

More slowly this time, Thomas approached the spot, holding his hands out. Soon he made contact with the wall of completely invisible ... what? It felt like glass—smooth, hard and cool to the touch. But he saw absolutely nothing to indicate that something solid stood there.

Frustrated, Thomas moved to the left, then the right, feeling along the unseen yet solid wall. It spanned the entire room; there was no way to approach the stranger at the desk. Thomas finally pounded on it, making a series of dull thumps, but nothing else happened. Some of the Gladers behind him, Aris included, remarked how they'd already tried that.

The strangely dressed man, just a dozen or so feet in front of him, let out an exaggerated sigh as he pulled his crossed feet from the desk and let them drop to the floor. He placed a finger in his book to mark his place and looked up at Thomas, making no effort to hide his annoyance.

"How many times do I have to repeat this?" the man said, his nasally voice a perfect match for his pale skin, thin hair and skinny body. And that suit. That stupid white suit. Oddly, his words weren't muffled at all by the barrier. "We still have forty-seven minutes before I've been authorized to implement Phase Two of the Trials. Please show your patience and leave me alone. You've been given this time to eat and replenish yourselves, and I strongly suggest you take advantage of it, young man. Now, if you don't mind..."

Without waiting for a response, he leaned back in his chair and returned his feet to the desktop. Then, opening his book to the spot he'd marked, he resumed reading.

Thomas was truly speechless. He turned away from the man and the desk and leaned against the invisible wall, its hard surface pressing against his back. What had just happened? Surely he was still asleep, dreaming. For some reason, that thought alone seemed to amplify his hunger, and he longingly glanced over at the mound of food. Then he noticed Minho at the door to the dorm room, leaning against its frame with his arms folded.

Thomas jabbed a thumb over his shoulder and raised his eyebrows.

"You met our new friend?" Minho responded, a smirk flashing across his face. "Real piece of work, this guy. I gotta get me one of those shuck suits. Fancy stuff."

"Am I awake?" Thomas asked.

"You're awake. Now eat—you look horrible. Almost as bad as Rat Man over there, reading his book."

Thomas was surprised at how quickly he could set aside the oddness of the guy in the white suit appearing out of nowhere, and the invisible wall. Again that numbness that had become so familiar. After the initial shock, nothing was strange anymore. Anything could become normal. Pushing it all away, he dragged himself over to the food and started eating. Another apple. An orange. A bag of mixed nuts, then a chewy bar of granola and raisins. His body begged for water, but he couldn't get himself to move quite yet.

"You need to slim it," Minho said from behind him. "We've got shanks puking all over the place 'cause they ate too much. That's probably enough, dude."

Thomas stood, relishing the feel of a full stomach. Not missing at all that gnawing beast that had lived inside him for so long. He knew Minho was right—he had to slim it. He nodded at his friend before stepping around him to go get a drink, the whole time wondering what could possibly be in store for them when the man in the white suit was ready to implement "Phase Two of the Trials."

Whatever *that* meant.

A half hour later, Thomas sat on the floor with the rest of the Gladers, Minho to his right and Newt to his left, all of them facing the invisible wall and the weasel of a man sitting at the desk behind it. His feet were still propped up, his eyes still flickering down the pages of his book. Thomas felt the wonderful return of energy and strength slowly building inside him.

The new kid, Aris, had given him a strange look in the bathroom, as if he wanted to speak telepathically with him but was afraid to do it. Thomas had ignored him, and quickly walked to the sink and guzzled down as much water as he could with his now-full stomach. By the time he finished and wiped his mouth on his sleeve, Aris had left. Now the boy sat

over by the wall, staring at the floor. Thomas felt sorry for him—as bad as things were for the Gladers, Aris had it worse. Especially if he'd been as close to the murdered girl he'd mentioned as Thomas was to Teresa.

Minho was the first to break the silence. "I think we've all gone psycho like those ... what'd they call themselves again? Cranks. The Cranks at the windows. We're all sitting here waiting for a lecture from Rat Man like this is totally normal. Like we're at some kind of school. I can tell you this much—if he had anything good to say, he wouldn't need a freaking magic wall to protect him from us, now, would he?"

"Just slim it and listen," Newt said. "Maybe it's all gonna be over."

"Yeah, right," Minho said. "And Frypan's gonna start having little babies, Winston'll get rid of his monster acne, and Thomas here'll actually smile for once."

Thomas turned to Minho and exaggerated a fake smile. "There, you happy?"

"Dude," he responded. "You are one ugly shank."

"If you say so."

"Shut your bloody holes," Newt whispered. "I think it's time."

Thomas looked over to see that the stranger—Rat Man, as Minho so kindly called him—had put his feet on the floor and placed the book on the desk. He scooted his chair back to get a better view of one of the drawers, then pulled it out and rummaged through things Thomas couldn't see. Finally, he pulled out a densely packed manila folder full of messy papers, many of them bent and sticking out at odd angles.

"Ah, here it is," Rat Man said in his nasally voice; then he placed the folder on the desk, opened it up and looked at the boys in front of him. "Thank you for gathering in an orderly manner so I can tell you what I've been ... instructed to tell you. Please listen carefully."

"Why do you need that wall!" Minho shouted.

Newt reached around Thomas and punched Minho in the arm. "Shut it!"

Rat Man continued as if he hadn't heard the outburst. "You're all still here because of an uncanny will to survive despite the odds, among ... other reasons. About sixty people were sent to live in the Glade. Well, *your* Glade, anyway. Another sixty in Group B, but for now we'll forget them."

The man's eyes flickered to Aris, then went back to slowly scanning the crowd. Thomas didn't know if anyone else had noticed, but he had no doubt that there'd been a hint of familiarity in that quick look. What did it mean ...?

"Out of all those people, only a fraction survived to be here today. I'm assuming you've figured this out by now, but many of the things that happen to you are solely for the purpose of judging and analyzing your *responses*. And yet it's not really an experiment as much as it is ... constructing a blueprint. Stimulating the killzone and collecting the resultant patterns. Putting them all together to achieve the greatest breakthrough in the history of science and medicine.

"These situations inflicted upon you are called the Variables, and each one has been meticulously thought out. I'll explain more soon. And though I can't tell you everything at this time, it's vital that you know this much: these trials you're going through are for a very important cause. Continue to respond well to the Variables, continue to survive, and you'll be rewarded with the knowledge that you've played a part in saving the human race. And yourselves, of course."

Rat Man paused, apparently for effect. Thomas looked over at Minho and raised his eyebrows.

"This dude's shucked in the head," Minho whispered. "How would escaping a freaking maze save the human race?"

"I represent a group called WICKED," Rat Man continued. "I know it sounds menacing, but it stands for World In Catastrophe, Killzone Experiment Department. Nothing menacing about it, despite what you may think. We exist for one purpose and one purpose only: to save the world from catastrophe. You here in this room are a vital part of what we plan to do. We have resources never known to any group of any kind in the history of civilization. Nearly unlimited money, unlimited human capital and technology advanced beyond even the most clever man's wants and wishes."

"As you make your way through the Trials, you have seen and will continue to see evidence of this technology and the resources behind it. If I can tell you anything today, it is that you should never, ever believe your eyes. Or your mind, for that matter. This is why we did the demonstration with the hanging bodies and the bricked-up windows. All I will say is that sometimes what you see is not real, and sometimes what you do *not* see is real. We can manipulate your brains and nerve receptacles when necessary. I know this all sounds confusing and a little scary, perhaps."

Thomas thought the man couldn't have possibly made a greater understatement. And the word *killzone* kept bouncing around his head. His scarcely revived memories couldn't quite grasp what it meant, but he'd first seen it on the metal plaque back in the Maze, the one that had spelled out the words that made up WICKED's acronym.

The man slowly passed his eyes over every Glader in the room. His upper lip shone with sweat. "The Maze was a part of the Trials. Not one Variable was thrown at you that didn't serve a purpose for our collection of killzone patterns. Your escape was part of the Trials. Your battle against the Grievers. The murder of the boy Chuck. The supposed rescue and subsequent trip in the bus. All of it. Part of the Trials."

Anger swelled in Thomas's chest at the mention of Chuck. He'd half risen to his feet before he knew what had come over him; Newt pulled him back down to the floor.

As if spurred by this, Rat Man quickly stood up from his chair, sending it back against the wall behind him. Then he placed his hands on the desk and leaned toward the Gladers.

"All of it has been part of the Trials, you understand? Phase One, to be exact. And we are still dangerously short of what we need. So we've had to up the ante, and now it's time for Phase Two. It's time for things to get difficult."

CHAPTER 11

The room lapsed into silence. Thomas knew he should be upset by the absurd notion that up to this point things had been easy for them. The idea should've terrified him. Not to mention the stuff about manipulating their brains. But instead, he was so intensely curious to find out what the man was going to tell them, the words had merely washed across his mind.

Rat Man waited for an eternity, then slowly lowered himself back into the chair and scooted forward to sit behind the desk once more. "You may think, or it may seem, that we're merely testing your ability to survive. On the surface, the Maze Trial could be mistakenly classified that way. But I assure you—this is not merely about survival and the will to live. That's only part of this experiment. The bigger picture is something you won't understand until the very end."

"Sun flares have ravaged many parts of the earth. Also, a disease unlike any before known to man has been ravaging the earth's people—a disease called the Flare. For the first time, the governments of all nations—the surviving ones—are working together. They've combined forces to create WICKED—a group meant to fight the new problems of this world. You are a big part of that fight. And you'll have every incentive to work with us, because, sad to say, each one of you has already caught the virus."

He quickly held up his hands to cut off the rumblings that started. "Now, now! No need to worry—the Flare takes a while to set in and show symptoms. But at the end of these Trials, the *cure* will be your reward, and you'll never see the ... debilitating effects. Not many can afford the cure, you know."

Thomas's hand instinctively went up to his throat, as if a soreness there were the first indicator that he'd caught the Flare. He remembered all too well what the woman on the rescue bus had told him after the Maze. About how the Flare destroyed your brain, slowly driving you insane and stripping you of the capacity to feel basic human emotions like compassion or empathy. About how it turned you into less than an animal.

He thought of the Cranks he'd seen through the dorm windows, and he suddenly wanted to run to the bathroom and scrub his hands and mouth clean. The guy was right—they had all the incentive they needed to make it through this next phase.

"But enough of this history lesson and time-wasting," Rat Man continued. "We know you now. All of you. It doesn't matter what I say or what's behind the mission of WICKED. You'll all do whatever it takes. Of this we have no doubt. And by doing what we ask, you'll save yourselves by getting the very cure so many people desperately want."

Thomas heard Minho groan next to him and worried about him throwing out another one of his smart-aleck remarks. Thomas shushed him before he could do it.

Rat Man looked down at the messy stack of papers lying in the open folder, picked up a loose piece of it, then turned it over, barely glancing at its contents. He cleared his throat. "Phase Two. The Scorch Trials. It officially begins tomorrow morning at six o'clock. You'll enter this room, and in the wall behind me you will find a Flat Trans. To your eyes the Flat

Trans will appear as a shimmering wall of gray. Each of you must step through it by five minutes after the hour. So again, it opens at six o'clock and closes five minutes after that. Do you understand?"

Thomas stared at Rat Man, transfixed. It almost felt as if he were watching a recording—as if the stranger weren't really there. The other Gladers must've felt the same, because no one answered the simple question. What was a Flat Trans, anyway?

"I'm quite certain you can all *hear*," Rat Man said. "Do ... you ... under ... stand?"

Thomas nodded; a few boys around him murmured quiet yeahs and yeses.

"Good." Rat Man absently picked up another piece of paper and turned it over. "At that point, the Scorch Trials will have begun. The rules are very simple. Find your way to open air, then head due north for one hundred miles. Make it to the safe haven within two weeks' time and you'll have completed Phase Two. At that point, and only at that point, you'll be cured of the Flare. That's exactly two weeks—starting the second you step through the Trans. If you don't make it, eventually you'll end up dead."

The room should've erupted into arguments, questions, panic. But no one said a word. Thomas felt as if his tongue had dried up into an old, crusty root.

Rat Man quickly slammed the folder shut, bending its contents even more than before, then put it away in the drawer from which he'd retrieved it. He stood, stepped to the side and pushed the chair underneath the desk. Finally, he folded his hands in front of him and returned his attention to the Gladers.

"It's simple, really," he said, his tone so matter-of-fact one would think he'd just given them instructions on how to turn on the showers in the bathroom. "There are no rules. There are no guidelines. You have few supplies, and there's nothing to help you along the way. Go through the Flat Trans at the time indicated. Find open air. Go one hundred miles, directly north, to the safe haven. Make it or die."

The last word seemed to finally snap everyone out of their stupor, all of them speaking up at once. "What's a Flat Trans?"

"How'd we catch the Flare?"

"How long till we see symptoms?"

"What's at the end of the hundred miles?"

"What happened to the dead bodies?"

Question after question, a chorus of them, all melding into one roar of confusion. As for Thomas, he didn't bother. The stranger wasn't going to tell them anything. Couldn't they all see that?

Rat Man waited patiently, ignoring them, those dark eyes darting back and forth between the Gladers as they spoke. His gaze settled on Thomas, who sat there, silent, staring back at him, hating him. Hating WICKED. Hating the world.

"You shanks shut up!" Minho finally shouted. The questions stopped instantly. "This shuck-face ain't answering, so quit wastin' your time."

Rat Man nodded once toward Minho as if thanking him. Perhaps acknowledging his wisdom. "One hundred miles. North. Hope you make it. Remember—you all have the Flare now. We gave it to you to provide any incentive you may be lacking. And reaching the safe haven means receiving a cure." He turned away and moved toward the wall behind him, as if he planned to walk right through it. But then he stopped and faced them again.

"Ah, one last thing," he said. "Don't think you'll avoid the Scorch Trials if you decide *not* to enter the Flat Trans between six and six-oh-five tomorrow morning. Those who stay behind will be executed immediately in a most ... unpleasant manner. Better off taking your chances in the outside world. Good luck to all of you."

With that he turned away and once again started inexplicably walking toward the wall.

But before Thomas could see what happened, the invisible wall separating them started to fog up, whitening to an opaque blur in a matter of seconds. And then the whole thing disappeared, once again revealing the other side of the common area.

Except there was no sign of the desk and its chair. And no sign of Rat Man.

"Well, shuck me," Minho whispered next to Thomas.

Once again, the Gladers' questions and arguments filled the air, but Thomas left. He needed some space and knew the bathroom was his only escape. So instead of heading to the boys' dorm, he went to the one Teresa, then Aris, had used. He leaned back against the sink, arms folded, staring at the floor. Luckily, no one had followed him.

He didn't know how to begin processing all the information. Bodies hanging from the ceiling, reeking of death and rot, then gone completely in a matter of minutes. A stranger—and his desk!—appear out of nowhere, with an impossible shield protecting them. Then they disappear.

And these were by far the least of their worries. It was clear now that the rescue from the Maze had been a sham. But who were the pawns WICKED had used to pull the Gladers from the Creators' chamber, put them on that bus and bring them here? Had those people known they were going to be killed? Had they even really *been* killed? Rat Man had said not to trust their eyes or their minds. How could they believe anything ever again?

And worst of all, this stuff about them having the Flare disease, about the Trials earning them a cure ...

Thomas squeezed his eyes closed and rubbed his forehead. Teresa had been taken from him. None of them had families. The next morning they were supposed to start some ridiculous thing called Phase Two, which by the sound of it was going to be worse than the Maze. All those crazy people out there—the Cranks. How would they deal with them? He suddenly thought of Chuck and what he might say if he were there.

Something simple, probably. Something like, *This sucks.*

You'd be right, Chuck, Thomas thought. *The whole world sucks.*

It had only been a few days since he'd seen his friend get stabbed in the heart; poor Chuck had died as Thomas held him. And now Thomas couldn't help but think that as horrible as it was, maybe that had been the best thing for Chuck. Maybe death was better than what lay ahead. His mind veered toward the tattoo on his neck—

"Dude, how long's it take to drop a load?" It was Minho.

Thomas looked up to see him standing in the doorway to the bathroom. "I can't stand it out there. Everyone talking over everybody else like a bunch of babies. Say what they want, we all know what we're gonna do."

Minho walked over to him and leaned his shoulder against the wall. "Ain't you Mr. Happy? Look, man, those shanks out there are just as brave as you are. Every last one of us will go through that ... whatever he called it ... tomorrow morning. Who cares if they wanna crack their throats yappin' about it?"

Thomas rolled his eyes. "I never said jack about me being braver than anybody. I'm just sick of hearing people's voices. Yours included."

Minho snickered. "Slinthead, when you try to be mean, it's just freaking hilarious."

"Thanks." Thomas paused. "Flat Trans."

"Huh?"

"That's what the white-suit shank called the thing we need to go through. A Flat Trans."

"Oh yeah. Must be some kind of doorway."

Thomas looked up at him. "That's what I'm thinking. Something like the Cliff. It's flat, and it transports you somewhere. Flat Trans."

"You're a shuck genius."

Newt came in then. "What're you two hiding for?"

Minho reached over and slapped Thomas on the shoulder. "We're not hiding. Thomas is just whining about his life and wishin' he could go back to his mommy."

"Tommy," Newt said, not seeming amused, "you went through the Changing, got some of your memories back. How much of this stuff do you remember?"

Thomas had been thinking a lot about that. Much of what had come back after being stung by the Griever had turned cloudy. "I don't know. I can't really picture the actual world outside or what it was like being involved with the people I helped design the Maze. Most of it's either faded again or just gone. I've had a couple of weird dreams, but nothing that helps."

They then went off on a discussion about some of the things they'd heard from their odd visitor. About the sun flares and the disease and how different things might be now that they *knew* they were being tested or experimented on. About a lot of things, with no answers—all of it laced with an unspoken fear of the virus they'd supposedly been given. They finally lulled into silence.

"Well, we've got stuff to figure out," Newt said. "And I need help to make sure the bloody food's not gone before we leave tomorrow. Something tells me we're gonna need it."

Thomas hadn't even thought of that. "You're right. Are people still chowing down out there?"

Newt shook his head. "No, Frypan took charge. That shank's religious about food—I think he was glad to have something to be the boss about again. But I'm scared people might get panicky and try to eat it anyway."

"Oh, come on," Minho said. "Those of us who made it this far got here for a reason. All the idiots are dead by now." He looked sideways at Thomas, as if worried Thomas might think he'd included Chuck in that assessment. Maybe even Teresa.

"Maybe," Newt responded. "Hope so. Anyway, I was thinking we need to get organized, get things back together. Act like we did in the bloody Glade. Last few days have been miserable, everybody moaning and groaning, no structure, no plan. It's driving me psycho."

"What'd you expect us to do?" Minho asked. "Form up in lines and do push-ups? We're stuck in a stupid three-room prison."

Newt swatted at the air as if Minho's words were gnats. "Whatever. I'm just saying, things are obviously going to change tomorrow and we gotta be ready to face it."

Despite all the talk, Thomas felt like Newt was failing to make his point.

"What are you getting at?"

Newt paused while he looked at Thomas, then Minho. "We need to make sure we have a solid leader when tomorrow comes. There can't be any doubt who's in charge."

"That's the lamest shuck-faced thing you've ever barked," Minho said. "You're the leader, and you know it. We all know it."

Newt shook his head adamantly. "Bein' hungry make you forget the bloody tattoos? You

think they're just decorations?"

"Oh, come on," Minho retorted. "You really think it means anything? They're just playin' with our heads!"

Instead of answering, Newt stepped closer to Minho and pulled back his shirt to reveal the tattoo there. Thomas didn't have to look—he remembered. It had branded Minho as the Leader.

Minho shrugged off Newt's hand and started his usual rant of sarcastic remarks, but Thomas had already tuned out, his heart's pace having kicked in to a rapid series of almost painful thumps. All he could think about was what had been tattooed on his *own* neck.

That he was to be killed.

CHAPTER 13

Thomas felt it getting late and knew they had to get sleep that night and be ready for the morning. So he and the Gladers spent the rest of the evening making crude packs out of bedsheets for carrying the food and the extra clothes that had appeared in the dressers. Some of the food had come in plastic bags, and the now-empty bags were filled with water and tied off with material ripped from the curtains. No one expected these poor excuses for canteens to last very long without leaking, but it was the best idea anyone could come up with.

Newt had finally convinced Minho to be the leader. Thomas knew as well as anybody that they needed someone to be in charge, so he was relieved when Minho grudgingly agreed.

Around nine o'clock, Thomas found himself lying in bed, staring at the bunk above him once again. The room was strangely silent even though he knew no one had fallen asleep yet. Fear surely gripped them as much as it did him. They'd been through the Maze and its horrors. They'd seen close up what WICKED was capable of doing. If Rat Man was correct, and all that had happened was part of some master plan, then these people had forced Gally to kill Chuck, had shot a woman at close range, had hired people to rescue them only to kill them when the mission was complete ... the list went on and on.

Then, to top it all off, they gave them a hideous disease, with the cure as bait to lure them to continue. Who even knew what was true and what was a lie. And the evidence continued to suggest that they'd singled Thomas out somehow. It was a sad thought—Chuck was the one who had lost his life. Teresa was the one missing. But taking those two away from him ...

His life felt like a black hole. He had no idea how he would muster the will to go on in the morning. To face whatever WICKED had in store for them. But he'd do it—and not just to get a cure. He would never stop, especially now. Not after what they'd done to him and his friends. If the only way to get back at them was to pass all their tests and trials, to survive, then so be it.

So be it.

With thoughts of revenge actually comforting him in a sick and twisted way, he finally fell asleep.

Every Glader had set the alarm on his digital watch for five o'clock in the morning. Thomas woke up well before that and couldn't go back to sleep. When beeps finally started filling the room, he swung his legs off the bed and rubbed his eyes. Someone turned on the light and a yellow blast lit up his vision. Squinting, he got up and headed for the showers. Who knew how long it'd be before he could clean himself again.

At ten minutes till the time appointed by Rat Man, every Glader sat in anticipation, most holding a plastic bag full of water, the bedsheets packs at their sides. Thomas, like the others, had decided he'd carry the water in his hand to make sure it didn't spill or leak. The

invisible shield had reappeared overnight in the middle of the common area, impossible to pass through, and the Gladers settled just on the boys' dorm side of it, facing where the stranger in the white suit had said a Flat Trans would appear.

Aris was sitting right next to Thomas, and spoke for the first time since ... well, Thomas couldn't remember the last time he'd heard the boy's voice.

"Did you think you were crazy?" the new kid asked. "When you first heard her in your head?"

Thomas glanced at him, paused. For some reason, up until that moment he hadn't wanted to talk to this guy. But suddenly the feeling vanished completely. It wasn't Aris's fault that Teresa had disappeared. "Yeah. Then when it kept happening, I got over it—only I started worrying about *other* people thinking I was crazy. So we didn't tell anyone about it for a long time."

"It was weird for me," Aris responded. He looked deep in thought as he stared at the floor. "I was in a coma for a few days, and when I woke up, speaking out to Rachel seemed the most natural thing in the world. If she hadn't accepted it and spoken back, I'm pretty sure I would've lost it. The other girls in the group hated me—some of them wanted to kill me. Rachel was the only one who ..."

He trailed off, and Minho stood up to address everyone before Aris could finish what he was saying. Thomas was glad for it, because hearing about the trippy alternate version of what he himself had been through only made him think of Teresa, and that hurt too much. He didn't want to think about her anymore. He had to concentrate on surviving for now.

"We've got three minutes," Minho said, for once looking completely serious. "Everybody sure they still wanna go?"

Thomas nodded, noticed others doing the same.

"Anybody change their mind overnight?" Minho asked. "Speak now or never. Once we go wherever we're going, if some shank decides he's a sissy pants and tries to turn back, I'll make sure he does it with a broken nose and smashed privates."

Thomas looked over at Newt, who had his head in his hands and was groaning loudly.

"Newt, you got a problem?" Minho asked, his voice surprisingly stern. Thomas, shocked, waited for Newt's reaction.

The older boy seemed just as surprised. "Uh ... no. Just admiring your bloody leadership skills."

Minho pulled his shirt away from his neck, leaned over to show everyone the tattoo there. "What does that say, slinthead?"

Newt glanced left and right, his face blushing. "We know you're the boss, Minho. Slim it."

"No, you slim it," Minho retorted, pointing at Newt. "We don't have time for that kind of klunk. So shut your hole."

Thomas could only hope that Minho was putting on an act to solidify the decision they'd made for him to be the leader, and that Newt understood. Though if Minho *was* acting, he was sure doing a good job of it.

"It's six o'clock!" one of the Gladers shouted.

As if this proclamation had triggered it, the invisible shield turned opaque again, fogging to a splotchy white. A split second later it vanished altogether. Thomas noticed the change in the wall opposite them instantly—a large section of it had transformed into a flat,

shimmering surface of murky, shadowy gray.

“Come on!” Minho yelled as he pulled the strap of his pack onto his shoulder. He was gripping a water bag in his other hand. “Don’t mess around—we only have five minutes to get through. I’ll go first.” He pointed at Thomas. “You go last—make sure everyone follows me before you come.”

Thomas nodded, trying to fight the fire burning through his nerves; he reached up and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

Minho walked up to the wall of gray, then paused right in front of it. The Flat Trans seemed completely unstable, impossible for Thomas to focus on. Shadows and swirls of varying shades of darkness danced across its surface. The whole thing pulsed and blurred, as if it might disappear at any second.

Minho turned to look back at them. “See you shanks on the other side.”

Then he stepped through, and the wall of gray murk swallowed him whole.

No one complained as Thomas herded the rest of them behind Minho. No one even said anything, just exchanged flickering, frightened looks as they approached the Flat Trans and went through it. Without fail, every Glader hesitated a second before taking the final step into the murkiness of the gray square. Thomas watched each of them, swatting them on the back right before they disappeared.

After two minutes, only Aris and Newt were left with Thomas.

You sure about this? Aris said to him inside his mind.

Thomas choked on a cough, surprised by the flow of words across his consciousness—that not-quite-audible yet somehow audible speech. He'd thought—and hoped—that Aris had gotten the hint that he didn't want to communicate that way. That was something for Teresa, not anybody else.

"Hurry," Thomas muttered out loud, refusing to answer telepathically. "We've gotta hurry."

Aris stepped through, a hurt look on his face. Newt followed right on his heels; just like that, Thomas was alone in the big common room.

He glanced around one last time, remembered the dead, swelling bodies that had hung there just a few days earlier. Thought about the Maze and all the klunk they'd been through. Sighing as loudly as he could, hoping someone, somewhere could hear it, he gripped his water bag and his bedsheets pack full of food and stepped into the Flat Trans.

A distinct line of coldness traveled across his skin from front to back, as if the wall of gray were a standing plane of icy water. He'd closed his eyes at the last second and opened them now to see nothing but absolute darkness. But he heard voices.

"Hey!" he called out, ignoring the sudden burst of panic in his own voice. "You guys—"

Before he could finish, he stumbled on something and fell over, crashing on top of a squirming body.

"Ow!" the person yelled, pushing Thomas off. It was all he could do to hold tight to the water bag.

"Everyone be still and shut up!" This was Minho, and the relief that washed through Thomas almost made him shout for joy. "Thomas, was that you? Are you in here?"

"Yes!" Thomas regained his feet, blindly feeling around him to make sure he didn't bump into someone else. He felt nothing but air, saw nothing but black. "I was the last one to come through. Did everyone make it?"

"We were lining up and counting off nice and easy till you came stumbling through like a doped-up bull," Minho responded. "Let's do it again. One!"

When no one said anything, Thomas yelled, "Two!"

From there, the Gladers counted off until Aris went last and called out, "Twenty."

"Good that," Minho said. "We're all here, wherever here is. Can't see a shuck thing."

Thomas stood still, sensing the other boys, hearing their breaths, but scared to move. "Too bad we don't have a flashlight."

"Thanks for stating the obvious, Mr. Thomas," Minho replied. "All right, listen up. We're in some kind of hallway—I can feel the walls on both sides, and as far as I can tell, most of you are to my right. Thomas, where you're standing is where we came in. We better not take any chances of accidentally going back through the Flat Trans thingamajiggy, so everyone follow my voice and come toward me. Not much choice but to head down this way and see what we find."

He'd started moving away from Thomas as he said those last few words. The whispers of shuffling feet and rustling packs against clothes told him that the others were following. When he sensed that he was the last one remaining, and that he wouldn't step on anybody again, he moved slowly to his left, reaching his hand out until he felt a hard, cool wall. Then he walked after the rest of the group, letting his hand slide along the wall to keep his bearings.

No one spoke as they moved forward. Thomas hated that his eyes never adjusted to the darkness—there wasn't even the slightest hint of light. The air was cool, but smelled like old leather and dust. A couple of times he bumped into the person directly in front of him; he didn't even know who it was because the boy didn't say anything when they collided.

On and on they went, the tunnel stretching ahead without ever turning to the left or right. Thomas's hand against the wall and the ground below his feet were the only things that kept him tied to reality or gave him a sense of movement. Otherwise, he would've felt as if he were floating through empty space, making no progress whatsoever.

The only sounds were the scrapes of shoes on the hard concrete floor and occasional snatches of whispers between Gladers. Thomas felt every thump of his heart as they marched down the endless tunnel of darkness. He couldn't help but remember the Box, that lightless cube of stale air that had delivered him to the Glade; it had felt much like this. At least now he had a portion of solid memory, had friends and knew who they were. At least now he understood the stakes—that they needed a cure and would probably go through awful things to get it.

A sudden burst of intense whispering filled the tunnel, seemed to come from above. Thomas stopped dead in his tracks. It hadn't been from any of the Gladers, he was sure of it.

From up ahead, Minho shouted for the others to halt. Then, "Did you guys hear that?"

As several Gladers murmured yeses and started asking questions, Thomas tilted his ear toward the ceiling, straining to hear something beyond those voices. The flash of whispering had been quick, just a few short words that had sounded as if they came from a very old and very sick man. But the message had been completely indecipherable.

Minho shushed everyone again, telling them to listen.

Even though it was perfectly dark and therefore pointless, Thomas closed his eyes, concentrating on his sense of hearing. If the voice came again, he wanted to catch what it said.

Less than a minute passed before the same ancient voice whispered harshly once more, echoing through the air as if huge speakers were installed on the ceiling. Thomas heard several people gasp, like they'd gotten it this time and were shocked by what they'd heard. But he still hadn't been able to isolate even one or two of the words. He opened his eyes again, though nothing changed in front of him. Utter darkness. Black.

"Did anybody get what it said?" Newt called out.

"Couple of words," Winston replied. "Sounded like 'go back' right in the middle."

"Yeah, it did," someone agreed.

Thomas thought about what he'd heard, and in retrospect, it did seem like those two words had been in there somewhere. *Go back*.

"Everybody slim it and listen real hard this time," Minho announced. The dark hallway lapsed into silence.

The next time the voice came, Thomas understood every single syllable.

"One-chance deal. Go back now, you won't be sliced."

Judging by the reactions in front of him, everyone else got it this time, too.

"Won't be sliced?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"He said we can go back!"

"We can't trust some random shank whispering in the dark."

Thomas tried not to think about how ominous the last four words had been. *You won't be sliced*. That didn't sound good at all. And not being able to see anything made it worse. Driving him crazy.

"Just keep going!" he shouted up to Minho. "I can't take this much longer. Just go!"

"Wait a minute." Frypan's voice. "The voice said this was a one-chance deal. We have to at least think about it."

"Yeah," someone added. "Maybe we should go back."

Thomas shook his head even though he knew no one could see it. "No way. Remember what that guy at the desk told us. That we'd all die horrible deaths if we go back."

Frypan pushed. "Well, what makes him any more in charge than this whispering dude? How're we supposed to know who to listen to and who to ignore?"

Thomas knew it was a good question, but going back just didn't feel right. "The voice is just a test, I bet. We need to keep going."

"He's right." This was Minho from up in front. "Come on, let's go."

He'd barely said the last word when the whispering voice whooshed through the air again, this time laced with an almost childish hatred. *"You're all dead. You're all going to be sliced. Dead and sliced."*

Every hair on Thomas's neck stood up straight and a chill tickled his back. He expected to hear even more calls to go back, but once again the Gladers surprised him. No one said a thing, and soon they were all walking forward again. Minho had been right when he'd said all the sissies had been weeded out.

They made their way deeper into the darkness. The air warmed a bit, seemed to thicken with dust. Thomas coughed several times and was dying to take a drink, but he didn't want to risk untying his water bag without being able to see it. That was all he needed, to spill it all over the floor.

Forward.

Warmer.

Thirsty.

Darkness.

Walking. Time passed ever so slowly.

Thomas had no idea how this hallway could even be possible. They had to have journeyed at least two or three miles since last hearing the creepy whisper of warning. Where *were* they? Underground? Inside some massive building? The Rat Man had said they needed to find open air. How—

A boy screamed a few dozen feet in front of him.

It started out as an abrupt shriek, like simple surprise, but then escalated into pure terror. He didn't know who it was, but the kid was now screaming his throat raw, screeching and squealing like an animal at the old Blood House in the Glade. Thomas heard the sounds of a body thrashing on the ground.

He ran forward on instinct, pushing past several Gladers who seemed frozen by fear, moving toward the inhuman sounds. He didn't know why he thought he'd be able to help more than anyone else, but he didn't hesitate, not even taking care with his steps as he sprinted through the darkness. After the long insanity of walking blindly for so long, it was as if his body craved the action.

He made it, could hear that the boy now lay right in front of him, his arms and legs thrashing on the concrete floor as he struggled against who knew what. Thomas carefully set his water bag and shoulder pack far to the side, then timidly reached forward with his hands to find a grip on an arm or leg. He sensed the other Gladers crowding behind him, a loud and chaotic presence of shouts and questions that he forced himself to ignore.

"Hey!" Thomas yelled at the squirming boy. "What's wrong with you?" His fingers brushed the kid's jeans, then his shirt, but the boy's body convulsed all over the place, impossible to catch, and his shrieks continued to pierce the air.

Finally, Thomas went for broke. He dove forward, launching himself fully onto the body of the thrashing kid. With a jolt that knocked the breath out of him, he landed, felt the squirming torso; an elbow dug into his ribs, then a hand slapped his face. A knee came up and almost got him square in the groin.

"Stop it!" Thomas shouted. "What's wrong!"

The screams gurgled to a stop, almost like the kid had just been pulled underwater. But the convulsing didn't ease in the slightest.

Thomas put an elbow and forearm on the chest of the Glader for leverage, then reached out to grab his hair or his face. But when his hands slid over what was there, confusion consumed him.

There was no head. No hair or face. Not even a neck. None of those things that *should've* been there.

Instead, Thomas felt a large and perfectly smooth ball of cold metal.

CHAPTER 15

The next few seconds were beyond strange. As soon as Thomas's hand made contact with the odd metal ball, the boy stopped moving. His arms and legs stilled and the stiffness in his twitching torso went away in an instant. Thomas felt a thick wetness on the hard sphere, oozing up from where the kid's neck should've been. He knew it was blood, could smell the coppery scent of it.

Then the ball slipped from under Thomas's fingers and rolled away, making a hollow grating sound until it thumped into the closest wall and came to a stop. The boy lying below him didn't move or make a sound. The other Gladers continued to shout questions into the dark, but Thomas ignored them.

Horror filled his chest as he pictured the boy, what he must look like. Nothing about it made sense, but the kid was obviously dead, his head cut off somehow. Or ... turned into metal? What in the world had happened? Thomas's mind spun, and it took a moment before he realized that warm fluid was flowing over the hand he'd pressed to the floor when the ball slipped away. He freaked.

Scooting backward away from the body, wiping his hand on his pants, he shouted but wasn't able to form words. A couple of Gladers grabbed him from behind and helped him to his feet. He pushed them away, stumbled against a wall. Someone gripped his shirt at the shoulder, pulled him closer.

"Thomas!" Minho's voice. "Thomas! What happened?"

Thomas tried to calm himself, take hold of things. His stomach lurched; his chest tightened. "I ... I don't know. Who was that? Who was down there screaming?"

Winston answered, his voice shaky. "Frankie, I think. He was right next to me, just making a joke, and then it was like something yanked him away. Yeah, it was him. Definitely him."

"What happened!" Minho repeated.

Thomas realized he was still wiping his hands on his pants. "Look," he said before taking a long breath. Doing all this in the dark was maddening. "I heard him screaming, and ran up here to help. I jumped on him, tried to pin his arms down, find out what was wrong. Then I reached for his head to grab him by the cheeks—I don't even know why—and all I felt was ..."

He couldn't say it. Nothing could possibly sound more absurd than the truth.

"What?" Minho shouted.

Thomas groaned, then said it. "His head wasn't a head. It was like a ... a big ... metal ball. I don't know, man, but that's what I felt. Like his shuck head had been swallowed by ... by a big metal ball!"

"What're you talking about?" Minho asked.

Thomas didn't know how he could convince him or anyone else. "Didn't you hear it rolling away right after he stopped screaming? I know it—"

"It's right here!" someone shouted. Newt. Thomas heard a heavy scrape again, then Newt

grunting with effort. "I heard it roll over here. And it's all wet and sticky—feels like blood."

"What the *klunk*," Minho half whispered. "How big is it?" The other Gladers joined in with a chorus of questions.

"Everybody slim it!" Newt yelled. When they quieted, he said flatly, "I don't know." Thomas heard him carefully handling the ball to get a feel for it. "Bigger than a buggin' head for sure. It's perfectly round—a perfect sphere."

Thomas was baffled, disgusted, but all he could think about was getting out of that place. Out of the darkness. "We need to run," he said. "We need to go. Now."

"Maybe we *should* go back." Thomas didn't recognize the voice. "Whatever that ball thing is, it sliced off Frankie's head, just like the old shank warned us."

"No way," Minho responded angrily. "No way. Thomas is right. No more dinkin' around. Spread out a couple of feet from each other, then run. Hunch down, and if something comes near your head, hit the living crap out of it."

No one argued. Thomas quickly found his food and water; then some unspoken communication permeated the group and they set off running, far enough apart not to trip over each other. Thomas wasn't in the very back anymore, not wanting to waste time to get back in order. He ran, ran as hard as he remembered ever running in the Maze.

He smelled sweat. He breathed dust and warm air. His hands grew clammy and gooey from the blood. The darkness, complete.

He ran and didn't stop.

A death ball got one more person. It happened closer to Thomas this time—got a kid he'd never spoken one word to. Thomas heard a distinct sound of metal sliding against metal, a couple of hard clicks. Then the screams drowned out the rest.

No one stopped. A terrible thing, maybe. Probably. But no one stopped.

When the screams finally cut off with a gurgling halt, Thomas heard a loud clonk as the ball of metal crashed onto the hard ground. He heard it rolling, heard it clank against a wall and roll some more.

He kept running. He never slowed.

His heart pounded; his chest hurt from deep, ragged breaths as he desperately gulped the dusty air. He lost track of time, had no sense of how far they'd gone. But when Minho called for everyone to stop, the relief was almost overwhelming. His exhaustion had finally won out over the terror of the thing that had killed two people.

Sounds of people panting filled the small space, and it reeked of bad breath. Frypan was the first one to recover enough to speak. "Why'd we stop?"

"Cause I almost broke my shins on something up here!" Minho shouted back. "I think it's a stairway."

Thomas felt his spirits lift, but immediately squashed them back down. Getting his hopes up was something he'd sworn never to do again. Not until all this was over.

"Well, let's go up 'em!" Frypan said far too cheerfully.

"Ya think?" Minho responded. "What would we do without you, Frypan? Seriously."

Thomas heard the heavy stomps of Minho's footsteps as he ran up the stairs—it made a high-pitched ringing like they were made of thin metal. Only a few seconds passed before other footsteps joined in, and soon everyone was following Minho.

When Thomas reached the first step, he tripped and fell, banging his knee against the second one. He put his hands down to regain his balance—almost bursting his bag of water—then popped back up, skipping a step every once in a while. Who knew when another metal thing might attack, and hope or no hope, he was more than ready to move on to a place that wasn't pitch-black.

A bang sounded from above, a deeper thump than the footsteps, but it still sounded like metal.

"Ow!" Minho yelled. Then there were a few grunts and groans as Gladers bumped into each other before they could stop themselves.

"You okay?" Newt asked.

"What'd ... you hit?" Thomas called up through heavy breaths.

Minho sounded irritated. "The shuck top, that's what. We hit the roof, and there's nowhere else ..." He trailed off, and Thomas could hear him sliding his hands along the walls and ceiling, searching. "Wait! I think I found—"

A distinct click cut him off, and then the world around Thomas seemed to ignite into pure flame. He cried out as he covered his eyes with his hands—a blinding, searing light shone down from above. He'd dropped his water bag, but he couldn't help it. After so long in pitch-darkness, the sudden appearance of light overpowered him—even through the protection of his hands. Brilliant orange burst through his fingers and eyelids, and a wave of heat—like a hot wind—swept down.

Thomas heard a heavy scrape, then a *clonk*, and the darkness returned. Warily, he dropped his hands and squinted; spots danced across his vision.

"Shuck me," Minho said. "Looks like we found a way out, but I think it's on the freaking sun! Man, that was bright. And hot."

"Let's just open it a crack and let our eyes get used to it," Newt said. Then Thomas heard him walk up the stairs to join Minho. "Here's a shirt—wedge it in there. Everybody shut your eyes!"

Thomas did as he was told and covered them with his hands again. The glow of orange returned and the process began. After a minute or so, he lowered his hands and slowly opened his eyes. He had to squint, and it still seemed like a million flashlights were pointed at him, but it had become bearable. A couple of minutes more and everything was bright but fine.

He could now see that he stood about twenty steps down from where Minho and Newt crouched just beneath the door in the ceiling. Three shining lines marked the edges of the door, broken only by the shirt they'd stuffed in the right corner to keep it open. Everything around them—the walls, the stairs, the door itself—was made of a dull gray metal. Thomas turned around to look back in the direction from which they'd come, saw that the stairs disappeared into darkness far below them. They'd climbed up a lot more than he'd imagined.

"Anybody blind now?" Minho asked. "I feel like my eyeballs are roasted marshmallows."

Thomas felt that, too. His eyes burned and itched, kept tearing up. The Gladers around him were all rubbing their eyes.

"So what's out there?" someone asked.

Minho shrugged as he peeked through the slit of the open door with a hand half-

shielding his vision. “Can’t really tell. All I can see is a lot of bright light—maybe we *are* on the shuck sun. But I don’t think there’re any people out there.” He paused. “Or Cranks.”

“Let’s get out of here, then,” Winston said; he was two steps below Thomas. “I’d rather get a sunburn than get my head attacked by some ball of steel. Let’s go!”

“All right, Winston,” Minho replied. “Keep your undies on—I just wanted to let our eyes adjust first. I’ll throw the door all the way open to make sure we’re okay. Get ready.” He moved up a step so he could press his right shoulder against the slab of metal. “One. Two. Three!”

He straightened his legs with a grunt and heaved upward. Light and heat burst down the stairwell as the door opened with a terrible squeal of grinding metal. Thomas quickly looked toward the ground and squinted. The brightness seemed impossible—even if they *had* been wandering along in perfect darkness for hours.

He heard some shuffling and pushing above him and looked up to see Newt and Minho moving to get out of the square of blinding sunlight coming through the now-open door. The whole stairwell heated up like an oven.

“Aw, man!” Minho said, a wince on his face. “Something’s wrong, dude. It feels like it’s already burning my skin!”

“He’s right,” Newt said, rubbing the back of his neck. “I don’t know if we can go out there. We might have to wait until the sun goes down.”

Groans of complaint sounded from the Gladers, but then they were overcome by a sudden outburst from Winston. “Whoa! Watch out! Watch out!”

Thomas turned to look at Winston down the stairs. He was pointing at something right above him as he backed up a couple of steps. On the ceiling, just a few feet above their heads, a big glob of liquid silver was coalescing, seeping out of the metal as if melting into a large teardrop. It grew bigger and bigger as Thomas stared at it, forming in a matter of seconds into a wavering, slowly rippling ball of molten goop. Then, before anyone could react, it detached from the ceiling and fell away.

But instead of splatting on the steps at their feet, the sphere of silver defied gravity and flew horizontally, directly into Winston’s face. His horrific screams filled the air as he fell and started tumbling down the stairs.

Thomas had a sickening thought as he pushed his way down the stairs after Winston. He didn't know if he was going because he wanted to help him or because he couldn't control his curiosity about this silvery monster-ball.

Winston eventually thumped to a stop, his back coming to rest by chance on one of the steps; they were still nowhere close to the bottom. The brilliant light from the open door up top illuminated everything with perfect clarity. Both of Winston's hands were at his face, pulling at the silver liquid—the ball of molten metal had already melded with the top of his head, consuming the part above the ears. Now its edges were creeping downward like thick syrup, lipping over the ears and covering his eyebrows.

Thomas jumped over the boy's body and spun around to kneel on the step directly below him; Winston pulled and pushed at the silver goop to keep it off his eyes. Surprisingly, it seemed to be working. But the boy was screaming at the top of his lungs, thrashing, his feet kicking the wall.

"Get it off me!" he yelled, his voice so strangled that Thomas almost gave up and ran away. If the stuff hurt that bad ...

It looked like a very dense silver gel. Persistent and stubborn—like it was alive. As soon as Winston pushed a portion of it up and off his eyes, some of it would slip around his fingers from the side and try again. Thomas could see glimpses of the skin on his face when he did this, and it wasn't pretty. Red and blistering.

Winston cried out something unintelligible—his tortured screams could have been in another language altogether. Thomas knew he had to do something. Time had run out.

He threw the pack off his shoulders and dumped the contents; fruits and packages scattered and thumped down the stairs. He took the bedsheet and wrapped it around his hands for protection, then went for it. As Winston swiped at the molten silver right above his eyes again, Thomas grabbed for the sides that had just gone over the boy's ears. He felt heat through the cloth, thought it might burst into flame. He braced his feet, squeezed the stuff as hard as he could, then yanked.

With a disturbing sucking sound, the sides of the attacking metal lifted several inches before slipping out of his hands and slapping back down onto Winston's ears. Impossibly, the boy screamed even louder. A couple of other Gladers tried to move in to help, but Thomas shouted for them to back off, thinking they'd only get in the way.

"We have to do it together!" Thomas yelled at Winston, determined to get a stronger hold this time. "Listen to me, Winston! We have to do it together! Try to get a grip on it and lift it off your head!"

The other boy didn't show any sign of understanding, his whole body convulsing as he struggled. If Thomas hadn't been on the step below him, he would've tumbled down the rest of the way for sure by now.

"On the count of three!" Thomas yelled. "Winston! On the count of three!"

Still no sign he'd heard. Screaming. Thrashing. Kicking. Slapping at the silver.

Tears welled up in Thomas's eyes, or maybe it was sweat trickling down from his forehead. But it stung. And he felt like the air had heated up to a million degrees. His muscles tensed; lances of pain shot through his legs. They were cramping.

"Just do it!" he yelled, ignoring it all and leaning in to try again. "One! Two! Now!"

He gripped the sides of the stretching silver, felt its odd combination of soft toughness, then yanked once again up and away from Winston's head. Winston must've heard, or maybe it was luck, but at the same time, he pushed at the goop with the heels of his hands, like he was trying to rip off his own forehead. The entire mess of silver came off, a wobbly, thick and heavy sheet of the stuff. Thomas didn't hesitate; he flung his arms up and threw the junk over his head and down the stairwell, then spun around on his heels to see what happened.

As it flew through the air, the silver quickly formed back into a sphere, its surface rippling for a moment, then solidifying. It stopped just a few steps down from them, hovered for a second, like it was taking a long and lasting look at its victim, perhaps thinking over what had gone wrong. Then it shot away, flying down the stairway until it disappeared in the darkness far below.

It was gone. For some reason, it hadn't attacked again.

Thomas sucked in huge gasps of air; every inch of his body felt drenched with sweat. He leaned his shoulder against the wall, scared to look back at Winston, who was whimpering behind him. At least the screams had stopped.

Thomas finally turned around and faced him.

The kid was a mess. Curled up into a ball, shaking. The hair on his head had vanished, replaced with raw skin and spots of seeping blood. His ears were cut and ragged, but whole. He sobbed, surely from the pain, probably also from the trauma of what he'd just been through. The acne on his face looked clean and fresh compared to the raw wounds on the rest of his head.

"You okay, man?" Thomas asked, knowing it had to be the dumbest question he'd ever spoken aloud.

Winston shook his head with a quick jerk; his body continued to tremble.

Thomas looked up to see Minho and Newt and Aris and all the other Gladers just a couple of steps above them, all staring down in complete shock. The brilliant glare from above shadowed their faces, but Thomas could still see their eyes—wide like those of cats stunned by a spotlight.

"What was that shuck thing?" Minho murmured.

Thomas couldn't bring himself to speak, just shook his head wearily.

Newt was the one to answer. "Magic goop that eats people's heads, that's what it bloody was."

"Has to be some kind of new technology." This came from Aris, the first time Thomas had seen him participate in a discussion. The boy looked around, obviously noticing the surprised faces, then shrugged as if embarrassed and continued. "I've had a few splotchy memories come back. I know the world has some pretty advanced techno stuff—but I don't remember anything like flying molten metal that tries to cut off body parts."

Thomas thought about his own sketchy memories. Certainly nothing like that came to mind for him, either.

Minho pointed absently down the stairwell past Thomas. “That crap must keep gelling around your face, then eat into the flesh of your neck until it cuts clean through it. Nice. That’s real nice.”

“Did you see? Thing came right out of the ceiling!” Frypan said. “We better get out of here. Now.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Newt added.

Minho glanced down at Winston with a look of disgust, and Thomas followed his gaze. The kid had quit shaking, and his sobs had calmed to a stifled whimper. But he looked awful, and was surely scarred for life. Thomas couldn’t imagine hair ever growing back on the red, raw mess of his head.

“Frypan, Jack!” Minho called out. “Get Winston on his feet, help him along. Aris, you gather the klunk he dropped, have a couple of guys help you carry it. We’re leaving. I don’t care how bright or brutal that light is up there—I don’t feel like having my head turned into a bowling ball today.”

He turned around without waiting to see if people followed his orders. It was a move that, for some reason, made Thomas think the guy would end up making a good leader after all. “Come on, Thomas and Newt,” he called over his shoulder. “The three of us are going through first.”

Thomas exchanged glances with Newt, who returned a look that had a little fear in it but was mostly full of curiosity. An eagerness to move on. Thomas felt it himself, and hated to admit that anything seemed better than dealing with the aftermath of what had happened to Winston.

“Let’s go,” Newt said, his voice rising on the second word, as if they had no choice but to do what they were told. Though his face revealed the truth: he wanted to get away from poor Winston just as much as Thomas did.

Thomas nodded and carefully stepped over Winston, trying not to look at the skin on his injured head again. It was making him sick. He moved to the side to let Frypan, Jack and Aris past him to do their jobs, then started up the stairs, two at a time. Following Newt and Minho to the top, where it seemed like the sun itself waited just outside the open door.

CHAPTER 17

The other Gladers moved out of their way, seemingly more than happy to let the three of them be the ones to see what was outside. Thomas squinted and then shielded his eyes as they got closer. It was getting hard to believe they could actually step through the door into that horrible brightness and survive.

Minho stopped on the last step, just short of the direct line of the light. Then he slowly held his hand out until it entered the square of brilliance. Despite the boy's olive complexion, it looked to Thomas as if Minho's skin shone like white fire.

After only a few seconds Minho pulled his hand back and shook it at his side like he'd hit his thumb with a hammer. "That's definitely hot. Definitely hot." He turned to face Thomas and Newt. "If we're gonna do this, we better have something wrapped around us or we'll have second-degree sunburns in five minutes."

"Let's empty out our packs," Newt said, already taking his off his shoulder. "Wear these sheets like buggin' robes as we check things out. If it works well enough, we can stuff the food and water into half our sheets and use the other half for protection."

Thomas had already freed his sheet to help Winston. "We'll look like ghosts—scare away any bad guys out there."

Minho didn't take the same care as Newt; he just upended his pack and let everything drop. The Gladers closest to them scrambled on instinct to stop the stuff from tumbling down the stairs. "Funny boy, that Thomas. Let's just hope we don't have some nice Cranks to greet us," he said as he started untying the knots he'd made in the bedsheet. "I don't see how anyone could just be hanging out in that heat. Hopefully there'll be trees or some kind of shelter."

"I don't know," Newt said. "Then they might be hiding, bloody waitin' to get us or something."

Thomas was just itching to check things out. Quit making guesses and see for himself what they were up against. "We won't know till we investigate. Let's go." He whipped out his sheet, then pulled it over himself and wrapped it tightly around his face like an old woman in a shawl. "How do I look?"

"Like the ugliest shanky girl I've ever seen," Minho responded. "You better thank the gods above you were born a dude."

"Thanks."

Minho and Newt did as Thomas had done, though both of them took more care to grip the sheet with their hands under it so they were completely covered. They also held it out to make sure their faces were shaded. Thomas followed suit.

"You shanks ready?" Minho asked, looking at Newt, then Thomas.

"Kind of excited, actually," Newt responded.

Thomas didn't know if that was quite the right word, but he felt the same urge to act. "Me too. Let's go."

The remaining steps above them went all the way to the top, like an exit from an old

cellar, the last few glowing with the brilliance of the sun. Minho hesitated, but then ran up them, not stopping until he'd disappeared, seemingly absorbed into the light.

"Go!" Newt yelled, smacking Thomas on the back.

Thomas felt a rush of adrenaline. Blowing out a deep breath, he took off after Minho; he heard Newt right on his heels.

As soon as Thomas emerged into the light, he realized that they might as well have been draped in see-through plastic. The sheet did nothing to block the blinding light and searing heat beating down from above. He opened his mouth to speak and a raw plume of dry warmth shot down his throat, seeming to obliterate any air or moisture in its path. He tried desperately to pull in oxygen, but instead it felt like someone had lit a fire in his chest.

Although his memories were few and scattered, Thomas didn't think the world was supposed to be like this.

With his eyes screwed shut against the white brilliance, he bumped into Minho and almost fell down. Regaining his balance, he bent his knees and squatted, tenting the sheet entirely over his body as he continued to fight for breath. He finally caught it, sucking air in and puffing it out rapidly as he tried to compose himself. That first instant after exiting the stairway had really panicked him. The other two Gladers were also breathing heavily.

"You guys all right?" Minho finally asked.

Thomas grunted a yes, and Newt said, "Pretty sure we just arrived in bloody hell. Always thought you'd end up here, Minho, but not me."

"Good that," Minho replied. "My eyeballs hurt, but I think I'm finally starting to get kind of used to the light."

Thomas opened his own eyes into a squint and looked down at the ground just a couple of feet below his face. Dirt and dust. A few gray-brown rocks. The sheet lay draped completely around him, but it glowed so white it was like some odd piece of futuristic light technology.

"Who you hidin' from?" Minho asked. "Get up, ya shank—I don't see anybody."

Thomas was embarrassed that they thought he was cowering there—he must look like a small child whimpering under his blankets, trying not to be seen. He stood up and very slowly lifted the sheet until he could peek out at their surroundings.

It was a wasteland.

In front of him, a flat pan of dry and lifeless earth stretched as far as he could see. Not a single tree. Not a bush. No hills or valleys. Just an orange-yellow sea of dust and rocks; wavering currents of heated air boiled on the horizon like steam, floating upward, as if any life out there were melting toward the cloudless and pale blue sky.

Thomas turned in a circle, didn't see much change until he faced the opposite direction. A line of jagged and barren mountains rose far in the distance. In front of those mountains, maybe halfway between there and where they now stood, a cluster of buildings sat squatting together like a pile of abandoned boxes. It had to be a town, but it was impossible to tell how big it was from this distance. Hot air shimmered in front of it, blurring everything close to the ground.

The white-hot sun above already lay far to Thomas's left, and seemed to be sinking toward that horizon, which meant that way was west, which meant that the town ahead and the range of black and red rock behind it had to be due north. Where they were

supposed to head. His sense of direction surprised him, as if a piece of his past had risen from the ashes.

"How far away do you think those buildings are?" Newt asked. After the echoing, hollow sounds their speaking had made in the long dark tunnel and stairway, his voice was like a dull whisper.

"Could that be a hundred miles?" Thomas asked no one in particular. "That's definitely north. Is that where we have to go?"

Minho shook his head under his sheet-hood. "No way, dude. I mean, we're supposed to go that way, but it's not even close to a hundred miles. Thirty at most. And the mountains might be sixty or seventy."

"Didn't know you could measure distance so well with nothing but your bloody eyeballs," Newt said.

"I'm a Runner, shuck-face. You get a feel for stuff like that in the Maze, even if its scale was a lot smaller."

"The Rat Man wasn't kidding about those sun flares," Thomas said, trying not to let his heart sink too much. "Looks like a nuclear holocaust out here. I wonder if the whole world is like this."

"Let's hope not," Minho responded. "I'd be happy to see one tree right about now. Maybe a creek."

"I'd settle for a patch of grass," Newt said through a sigh.

The more Thomas looked, the closer that town appeared. Thirty miles might even have been too much. He broke his gaze and turned toward the others. "Could this be any more different from what they put us through in the Maze? There, we were trapped inside walls, with everything we need to survive. Now we have nothing holding us in, but no way to survive unless we go where they told us to. Isn't that called irony or something like that?"

"Something like that," Minho agreed. "You're a philosophizing wonder." He nodded back toward the exit from the stairway. "Come on. Let's get those shanks out here and start walking. No time to waste letting the sun suck all the water out of us."

"Maybe we should wait until it goes down," Newt suggested.

"And hang out with those shuck balls of metal? No way."

Thomas agreed that they should get moving. "I think we're okay. Looks like sunset's only a few hours away. We can be tough for a while, take a break, then go as far as possible during the night. I can't stand another minute down there."

Minho nodded firmly.

"Sounds like a plan," Newt said. "For now, let's just make it to that dusty old town and hope it's not full of our Crank buddies."

Thomas's chest hitched at that comment.

Minho walked back to the hole and leaned over it. "Hey, you bunch of sissy, no-good shanks! Grab all the food and get up here!"

Not one Glader complained about the plan.

Thomas watched as each one of them did the same things he'd done when he first exited the stairway. Struggling gasps for breaths, squinty eyes, looks of hopelessness. He bet that each one of them had hoped the Rat Man was lying. That the worst times had been back in

the Maze. But he was pretty sure that after the crazy head-eating silver things and then seeing this wasteland, no one would ever have such hopeful thoughts again.

They had to make some adjustments as they readied for the journey—the food and water bags were stuffed more tightly into half of the original packs; then the free bedsheets were used to cover two people as they walked. All in all, it worked surprisingly well—even for Jack and poor Winston—and soon they were marching across the hard, rock-strewn ground. Thomas shared his sheet with Aris, though he didn't know how it had ended up that way. Maybe he was just refusing to admit that he'd wanted to be with the boy, that he might be the only possible connection to figuring out what had happened to Teresa.

Thomas held one end of the sheet up with his left hand and had a pack draped around his right shoulder. Aris was to his right; they'd agreed to trade off the now-much-heavier pack every thirty minutes. Step by dusty step, they made their way toward the town, the heat seeming to suck a full day of their life away every hundred yards.

They didn't talk for a long while, but Thomas finally broke the silence. "So you've never heard the name Teresa before?"

Aris looked sharply at him, and Thomas realized he'd probably had a less-than-subtle hint of accusation in his voice. But he didn't back down. "Well? Have you?"

Aris returned his gaze forward, but there was something suspicious there. "No. Never. I don't know who she is or where she went. But at least you didn't see her die right in front of you."

That was a punch to the gut, but for some reason it made Thomas like Aris more. "I know, sorry." He thought for a second before he asked the next questions. "How close were you guys? What was her name, again?"

"Rachel." Aris paused, and for a second Thomas thought the conversation might be over already, but then he continued. "We were way more than close. Things happened. We remembered stuff. Made new memories."

Thomas knew Minho would've laughed his face off at that last comment, but to him it sounded like the saddest three words he'd ever heard. He felt he had to say something—offer something. "Yeah. I did see a really good friend die, though. Every time I think about Chuck I get ticked off all over again. If they've done the same thing to Teresa, they won't be able to stop me. Nothing will. They'll all die."

Thomas stopped—forcing Aris to as well—shocked that those words had just come out of his own mouth. It was like something else had taken over him and said those things. But he did feel it. Very strongly. "What do you think—"

But before he could finish the thought, Frypan started shouting. He was pointing at something.

It only took a second for Thomas to realize what had gotten the cook all excited.

Far ahead, from the direction of the town, two people were running toward them, their bodies like ghostly forms of darkness in the heat mirage, small plumes of dust rising from their feet.

Thomas stared at the runners. He sensed that the other Gladers around him had stopped as well, as if there'd been an unspoken command to do so. Thomas shivered, something that seemed completely impossible in the sweltering heat. He didn't know why he felt the tickle of cold fear along his back—the Gladers outnumbered the approaching strangers almost ten times over—but the feeling was undeniable.

"Everyone pack in tighter," Minho said. "And get ready to fight these shanks the first sign of trouble."

The blurry mirage of upward-melting heat obscured the two figures until they were only a hundred yards or so away. Thomas's muscles tensed when they came into focus. He remembered all too well what he'd seen through the barred window just a few mornings ago. The Cranks. But these people scared him in a different way.

They stopped just a couple of dozen feet in front of the Gladers. One was a man, the other a woman, though Thomas could only tell this from the lady's slightly curvy figure. Other than that, they had the same build—tall and scrawny. Their heads and faces were almost completely covered in wrappings of tattered beige cloth, small ragged slits cut for them to see and breathe through. Their shirts and pants were a hodgepodge of filthy clothing sewn together, tied with ratty strips of denim in some places. Nothing was exposed to the beating sun but their hands, and those were red and cracked and scabby.

The two of them stood there, panting as they caught their breath, a sound like sick dogs.

"Who are you?" Minho called out.

The strangers didn't respond, didn't move. Their chests heaved in and out. Thomas observed them from under his makeshift hood—he couldn't imagine how anyone could run so far and not die of heat exhaustion.

"Who *are* you?" Minho repeated.

Instead of answering, the two strangers split apart and started walking in a broad circle around the bunched-up Gladers. Their eyes, hidden behind the slits in those odd mummy wrappings, stayed fixed on the boys as they made their way in a wide arc, as if sizing them up for a kill. Thomas felt the tension inside him rise, hated when he could no longer see both of them at once. He turned around and watched as they met back up behind the group and once again faced them, standing still.

"There are a whole lot more of us than there are of you," Minho said, his voice betraying his frustration. To threaten them so soon seemed desperate. "Start talking. Tell us who you are."

"We're Cranks."

The two words came from the woman, a short burst of guttural annoyance. For no discernible reason she pointed across the Gladers back toward the town from which they'd run.

"Crank?" Minho said; he had pushed his way through the crowd to be closest to the strangers again. "Just like the ones that tried to break into our building a couple days ago?"

Thomas cringed—these people would have no idea what Minho was talking about. Somehow the Gladers had traveled a long way from wherever that place had been—through the Flat Trans.

“We’re Cranks.” This time from the man, his voice surprisingly lighter and less gruff than the woman’s. But there was no kindness in it. He pointed over the Gladers just like his companion had done. “Came to see if you’re Cranks. Came to see if you’ve got the Flare.”

Minho turned to look at Thomas and then a few others, his eyebrows raised. No one said anything. He turned back. “Some dude told us we had the Flare, yeah. What can you tell us about it?”

“Don’t matter,” the man responded; the strips of cloth wrapped around his face jiggled with every word. “You got it, you’ll know soon enough.”

“Well, what do you bloody want?” Newt asked, stepping up to stand next to Minho. “What’s it matter to you if we’re Cranks or not?”

The woman responded this time, acting as if she hadn’t heard the questions. “How’d you get in the Scorch? Where’d you come from? How’d you get here?”

Thomas was surprised at the ... intelligence evident in her words. The Cranks they’d seen back at the dorm had seemed absolutely insane, like animals. These people were aware enough to realize that their group had appeared out of nowhere. Nothing lay in the opposite direction from the town.

Minho leaned over to consult with Newt, then turned and stepped closer to Thomas. “What do we tell these people?”

Thomas had no clue. “I don’t know. The truth? It can’t hurt.”

“The truth?” Minho said sarcastically. “What an idea, Thomas. You’re freaking brilliant, as usual.” He faced the Cranks again. “We were sent here by WICKED. Came out of a hole just a little while that way, from a tunnel. We’re supposed to go one hundred miles to the north, cross the Scorch. Any of that mean a thing to you?”

Once again, it was as if they hadn’t heard a word he’d said.

“Not all Cranks are gone,” the man said. “Not all of them are past the Gone.” He said that last word in a way that made it sound like the name of a place. “Different ones at different levels. Best you learn who to make friends with and who to avoid. Or kill. Better learn right quick if you’re coming our way.”

“What’s your way?” Minho asked. “You came from that town, right? Is that where all these Cranks live? Is there food and water there?”

Thomas felt the same urge as Minho—to ask a million questions. He was half tempted to suggest they capture these two Cranks and *make* them answer. But for the moment the pair didn’t seem intent on helping at all, and they split again to circle back around to the side of the Gladers closest to the town.

Once they met up in the spot where they’d first spoken, the distant town almost seeming to float between them, the woman said one last thing. “If you don’t have it yet, you’ll have it soon. Same with the other group. The ones that’re supposed to kill you.”

The two strangers then turned around and ran back toward the cluster of buildings on the horizon, leaving Thomas and the other Gladers in stunned silence. Soon, any evidence of the running Cranks was lost in a blur of heat and dust.

“Other group?” someone said. Maybe Frypan. Thomas was in too much of a trance

staring at the disappearing Cranks and worrying about the Flare to notice.

"Wonder if they're talking about my group." This was definitely Aris. Thomas finally forced himself to snap out of his gaze.

"Group B?" he asked him. "You think they've already made it to the town?"

"Hello!" Minho snapped. "Who cares? You'd think the little part about them supposedly killing us would be the attention getter. Maybe this stuff about the Flare?"

Thomas thought of the tattoo on the back of his neck. Those simple words that scared him. "Maybe when she said 'you' she didn't mean all of us." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder, pointing down at his menacing mark. "Maybe she meant me specifically. Couldn't tell where her eyes were looking."

"How's she gonna know who you are?" Minho retorted. "Plus, doesn't matter. If someone tries to kill you, or me, or anyone else, they might as well try to get all of us. Right?"

"You're so sweet," Frypan said with a snort. "Go ahead and die with Thomas. I think I'll sneak away and enjoy living with the guilt." He cast his special look that meant he was only kidding, but Thomas wondered if a little truth might be hiding in there somewhere.

"Well, what do we do now?" Jack asked. He had Winston's arm around one of his shoulders, but the former Keeper of the Blood House seemed to have recovered some of his strength. Luckily the sheet covered the hideous parts of his head.

"What do you think?" Newt asked, but then he nodded at Minho.

Minho rolled his eyes. "We keep going, that's what. Look, we don't have a choice. If we don't go to that town, we're gonna die out here of sunstroke or starvation. If we do go, we'll have some shelter for a while, maybe even food. Cranks or no Cranks, that's where we're going."

"And Group B?" Thomas asked; he glanced over at Aris. "Or whoever they were talking about. What if they really do wanna kill us? All we have to fight with are our hands."

Minho flexed his right arm. "If these people are really the girls Aris was hanging out with, I'll show 'em these guns of mine and they'll go runnin'."

Thomas kept pushing. "And if these girls have weapons? Or can fight? Or if it's not them at all but a bunch of seven-foot-tall grunts who like to eat humans? Or a thousand Cranks?"

"Thomas ... no. Everybody." Minho let out an exasperated sigh. "Would everyone just shut their holes and slim it? No more questions. Unless you have an idea that doesn't involve absolute certain death, then quit your pipin' and let's take the only chance we got. Get it?"

Thomas smiled, though he didn't know where the impulse came from. Somehow in a few sentences Minho had cheered him up, or at least given him a little hope. They just had to go, to move, to do. That was it.

"That's better," Minho said with a satisfied nod. "Anybody else wanna pee their pants and cry for Mommy?"

A few snickers broke out, but no one said anything.

"Good. Newt, you lead up front this time, limp and all. Thomas, you in the back. Jack, get someone else to help with Winston to give you a break. Let's go."

And so they did. Aris held the pack this time, and Thomas felt as if he were almost floating along the ground, it felt so good. The only hard part was holding that sheet up, his arm growing weak and rubbery. But on and on they went, sometimes walking, sometimes

jogging.

Luckily, the sun seemed to gain weight and drop more quickly the closer it got to the horizon. By Thomas's wristwatch, the Cranks had only been gone an hour when the sky turned a purplish orange and the intense glare of the sun started to melt away into a more pleasant glow. Not long after that, it disappeared below the horizon altogether, pulling nighttime and stars across the sky like a curtain.

The Gladers kept moving, heading toward the faint twinkle of lights coming from the town. Thomas could almost enjoy it now that he wasn't holding the pack and they'd put the sheet away.

Finally, when every last trace of dusk had gone, full darkness settled on the land like a black fog.

Soon after dark, Thomas heard a girl screaming.

At first he didn't know what he was hearing, or if maybe it was just his imagination. With the thumps of dry footsteps, the rustling of the packs, the whispers of conversation between heavy breaths, it was hard to tell. But what had started as almost a buzz inside his head soon became unmistakable. Somewhere ahead of them, maybe all the way in the town but more likely closer, a girl's screams tore through the night.

The others had obviously noticed it, too, and soon the Gladers quit running. Once everyone caught their breath, it became easier to hear the disturbing sound.

It was almost like a cat. An injured, wailing cat. The kind of noise that made your skin crawl and made you press your hands to your ears and pray it went away. There was something unnatural about it, something that chilled Thomas inside and out. The darkness only added to the creepiness. Whoever the source, she still wasn't very close, but her shrill screeches bounced along like living echoes, trying to smash their unspeakable sounds against the dirt until they ceased to exist in this world.

"You know what that reminds me of?" Minho asked, his voice a whisper with an edge of fear.

Thomas knew. "Ben. Alby. Me, I guess? Screaming after the Griever sting?"

"You got it."

"No, no, no," Frypan moaned. "Don't tell me we're gonna have those suckers out here, too. I can't take it!"

Newt responded, just a couple of feet to the left of Thomas and Aris. "Doubt it. Remember how moist and gooey their skin was? They'd turn into a big dust ball if they rolled around in this stuff."

"Well," Thomas said, "if WICKED can create Grievers, they can create plenty of other freaks of nature that might be worse. Hate to say it, but that rat-lookin' guy said things were finally going to get tough."

"Once again, Thomas gives us a cheerful pep talk," Frypan announced; he tried to sound jovial, but it came out more like a spiteful rub.

"Just saying it how it is."

Frypan huffed. "I know. And *how it is* sucks big-time."

"What now?" Thomas asked.

"I think we should take a break," Minho said. "Fill our little tummies and drink up. Then we should book it for as long as we can stand it while the sun is still down. Maybe get a couple hours' sleep before dawn."

"And the psycho screaming lady out there?" Frypan asked.

"Sounds like she's plenty busy with her own troubles."

For some reason that statement terrified Thomas. Maybe the others, too, because no one said a word as they slipped the packs off their shoulders, sat down and began eating.

"Man, I wish she'd shut up." It was about the fifth time Aris had said that as they ran along in the darker-than-dark night. The poor girl, somewhere out there, getting closer all the while, was still crying her fretful, high-pitched wails.

Their meal had been quiet and somber, the talk drifting toward what the Rat Man had said about the Variables and how their responses to them were all that mattered. About creating a "blueprint," about finding the "killzone" patterns. No one had any answers, of course, only meaningless speculations. It was odd, Thomas thought. They now knew they were being tested somehow, put through WICKED's trials. In some ways it felt like they should behave differently because of this, and yet they just kept going, fighting, surviving until they could get the promised cure. And that was what they'd keep doing; Thomas was sure of it.

It had taken a while for his legs and joints to loosen up once Minho got everyone moving again. Above them, the moon was a sliver, barely providing any more light than the stars. But you didn't need to see much to run along flat and barren land. Plus, unless it was his imagination, they were actually starting to reach the lights from the town. He could see that they flickered now, which meant they were probably fires. Which made sense—the odds of having electricity in this wasteland hovered around zero.

He wasn't sure when it happened exactly, but suddenly the cluster of buildings they were running toward seemed a lot closer. And there were a lot more of them than he or anyone else had thought. Taller, too. Wider. Spread out and organized in rows and in an orderly fashion. For all they knew, the place might've once been a major city, devastated by whatever had happened to the area. Could sun flares really inflict that much damage? Or had other things caused it during the aftermath?

Thomas was starting to think they'd actually reach the first buildings sometime the next day.

Even though they didn't need the cover of their sheet at the moment, Aris still jogged right next to him, and Thomas felt like talking. "Tell me more about your whole Maze thing."

Aris's breaths were even; he seemed to be in just as good shape as Thomas. "My whole Maze thing? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You've never really told us the details. What was it like for you? How long were you there? How'd you get out?"

Aris answered over the soft *crunch, crunch, crunch* of their footsteps on the desert ground. "I've talked with some of your friends, and it sounds like a lot of it was exactly the same. Just ... girls instead of guys. Some of them had been there for two years, the rest had shown up one at a time, once a month. Then came Rachel, then me the next day, in a coma. I barely remember anything, just those last few crazy days after I finally woke up."

He went on to explain what had happened, and so much of it matched what Thomas and the Gladers had been through, it was just plain bizarre. Almost impossible to believe. Aris came out of his coma, said something about the Ending, the walls quit shutting at night, their Box stopped coming, they figured out the Maze had a code, on and on and on until the escape. Which went down almost the same as the Gladers' terrifying experience, except less of the girl group died—if they were tough like Teresa, this didn't surprise Thomas in the least.

In the end, once Aris and his group were in the final chamber, a girl named Beth—who'd disappeared days earlier, just like Gally had—killed Rachel, right before rescuers came in and whisked them away to the gym Aris had mentioned before. Then the rescuers took him to the place where the Gladers had finally discovered him—what had been Teresa's room.

If that was what had happened. Who knew how things worked anymore, after seeing what could happen at the Cliff and the Flat Trans that had taken them to the tunnel. Not to mention the bricked-up walls and the name change on Aris's door.

It all gave Thomas a big fat headache.

When he tried to think of Group B and imagine their roles—how he and Aris were basically switched, and how Aris was actually Teresa's counterpart—it twisted his mind. The fact that Chuck had been killed in the end instead of him ... that was the only major difference that stood out in the parallels. Were the setups meant to instigate certain conflicts or provoke reactions for WICKED's studies?

"It's all kind of freaky, huh?" Aris asked after letting Thomas digest his story for a while.

"I don't know what the word for it is. But it blows me away how the two groups went through these trippy parallel experiments. Or tests, trials, whatever they were. I mean, if they're testing our responses, I guess it makes sense that we were put through the same thing. Weird, though."

Right when Thomas stopped speaking the girl in the distance let out a shriek even louder than her now-regular cries of pain and he felt a fresh rush of horror.

"I think I know," Aris said, so quietly Thomas wasn't sure he'd heard him correctly.

"Huh?"

"I think I know. Why there were two groups. *Are* two groups."

Thomas looked over at him, could barely see the surprising look of calm on his face. "You do? What then?"

Aris still didn't seem very winded. "Well, actually I have two ideas. One is I think these people—WICKED, whoever they are—are trying to weed out the best of both groups to use us somehow. Maybe even breed us or something like that."

"What?" Thomas was so surprised he almost forgot about the screaming. He couldn't believe anyone would be so sick. "*Breed* us? Come on."

"After going through the Maze and what we just saw happen in that tunnel, you think *breeding* is far-fetched? Give me a break."

"Good that." Thomas had to admit that the kid had a point. "Okay, so what was your other theory?" As he asked it Thomas could feel the weariness brought on by the run settling in; his throat felt like someone had poured a glassful of sand down his gullet.

"Kind of the opposite," Aris responded. "That instead of wanting survivors from both groups, they only want one group to live through to the end. So they're either weeding out people from the guys *and* the girls, or an entire group altogether. Either way, it's the only explanation I can think of."

Thomas thought about what he'd said for quite some time before responding. "But what about the stuff the Rat Man said? That they're testing our responses, building some kind of blueprint? Maybe it's an experiment. Maybe they don't plan for any of us to survive. Maybe they're studying our brains and our reactions and our genes and everything else. When it's all done, we'll be dead and they'll have lots of reports to read."

"Hmm," Aris grunted, considering. "Possibly. I keep trying to figure out why they had one member of the opposite sex in each group."

"Maybe to see what kind of fights or problems it would cause. Study people's reactions—it's kind of a unique situation." Thomas almost wanted to laugh. "I love how we're talking about this—like we're deciding when we need to stop for a klunk."

Aris actually did laugh, a dry chuckle that made Thomas feel better—actually made him like the new kid even more. "Man, don't say that. I've had to go for at least an hour."

It was Thomas's turn to snicker, and right on cue, like he'd heard Aris calling for it, Minho yelled out for everyone to stop.

"Potty break," he said with his hands on his hips as he caught his breath. "Bury your klunk and don't do it too close. We'll rest for fifteen, then we'll just walk awhile. I know you shanks can't keep up with Runners like me and Thomas."

Thomas tuned out—he didn't need directions on how to use the bathroom—and turned to get a look at where they'd stopped. He took a deep, full breath, and when he relaxed his eyes caught on something. A dark shadow of a shape a few hundred yards in front of them, but not directly in the path of their journey. A square of darkness against the faint glow of the town up ahead. It stood out so distinctly he couldn't believe he hadn't noticed it until now.

"Hey!" he yelled, pointing toward it. "Looks like a little building up there, just a few minutes away, to the right some. You guys see it?"

"Yeah, I see it," Minho responded, walking up to stand next to him. "Wonder what it is."

Before Thomas could respond, two things happened almost simultaneously.

First, the haunted screams of the mystery girl stopped, instantly, cut short as if a door had closed on her. Then, stepping out from behind the dark building up ahead, the figure of a girl appeared, long hair flowing from her shadowed head like black silk.

CHAPTER 20

Thomas couldn't help it. His first instinct was to hope it was her, call out to her. To hope that against all odds she was there, just a few hundred yards away, waiting for him.

Teresa?

Nothing.

Teresa? Teresa!

Nothing. The abscess left when she disappeared was still in his head—like an empty pool. But ... it *could* be her. Might be her. Maybe something had happened to their ability to communicate.

Once the girl had stepped out from behind the building, or more likely from *inside* the building, she just stood there. Despite being obscured completely by shadow, something about her stance made it obvious she was facing them, staring at them with arms folded.

"You think that's Teresa?" Newt asked, as if he'd read Thomas's mind.

Thomas nodded before he knew what he was doing. He quickly looked around to see if anyone had noticed. Didn't seem so. "No clue," he finally said.

"You think *she* was the one screaming?" Frypan asked. "It stopped right when she walked out."

Minho grunted. "Better bet is she was the one torturing somebody. Probably killed her and put her out of her misery when she saw us coming." Then for some reason he clapped his hands once. "Okay, then, who wants to go meet this nice young lady?"

How Minho could be so lighthearted at times like this just baffled Thomas. "I'll do it," he said, way too loudly. He didn't want to make it obvious that he hoped it was Teresa.

"I was just kidding, shuck-face," Minho said. "Let's all go over there. She could have an army of psycho girl ninjas hiding in that shack of hers."

"Psycho girl ninjas?" Newt repeated, his voice showing he was surprised, if not annoyed, by Minho's attitude.

"Yeah. Let's go." Minho started walking forward.

Thomas acted on a sudden and unexpected instinct. "No!" He lowered his voice. "No. You guys stay here—I'll go talk to her. Maybe it's a trap or something. We'd be idiots to all go over there and fall right into it."

"And you're *not* an idiot for going by yourself?" Minho asked.

"Well, we can't just walk on by without checking it out. I'll go. If something happens or gets suspicious, I'll call for help."

Minho paused for a long moment. "All right. Go. Our brave little shank." He whacked Thomas on the back with his open palm and it stung.

"This is bloody stupid," Newt interrupted, stepping forward. "I'll go with him."

"No!" Thomas snapped. "Just ... let me do this. Something tells me we need to be careful. If I cry like a baby, come save me." And before anyone could argue, he took off at a fast walk toward the girl and her building.

He closed the distance quickly. His shoes crunched against the gritty dirt and rocks,

breaking the silence. He sniffed the raw smells of the desert mixed with a distant scent of something burning, and as he stared at the silhouette of the girl next to the building, he suddenly knew for sure. Maybe it was the shape of her head or body. Maybe it was her stance, the way she held her folded arms crooked to one side, her hip jutting the other direction. But he knew.

It was her.

It was Teresa.

When he reached a point just a few feet from her, right before the faint light would finally reveal her face, she turned around and went through an open door, disappearing inside the small building. It was a rectangle, a slightly tilted roof tenting in the middle, longways. As far as he could tell, it had no windows. Large black cubes were hanging from the corners—speakers, perhaps. Maybe the sound had been broadcast, been a fake. That would explain why they could hear it from so far away.

The door, a big slab of wood, stood all the way open and rested against the wall. It was even darker inside than out.

Thomas moved. He walked through the door, realizing even as he did so how reckless and stupid it might be. But it was her. No matter what had happened, no matter the explanation for her disappearance and refusal to speak with him through their thoughts, he knew she wouldn't hurt him. No way.

The air was noticeably cooler inside, almost moist. It felt wonderful. Three steps in, he stopped and listened in the complete darkness. He could hear her breathing.

"Teresa?" he asked aloud, pushing away the temptation to ask for her in his mind again. "Teresa, what's going on?"

She didn't respond, but he heard a short intake of breath, followed by a halting sniff, as if she were crying but trying to hide it from him.

"Teresa, *please*. I don't know what's happened or what they did to you, but I'm here now. This is crazy. Just talk to—"

He cut off when a light blazed to life with a quick flare that then dulled to a small flame. His eyes naturally went straight to it, to the hand holding a match. He watched as it dropped, slowly, carefully, to light a candle resting on a small table. When it caught, and the hand flicked the match until it went out, Thomas finally looked up and saw her. Saw that he'd been right after all. But the short and almost overpowering thrill of seeing Teresa alive was soon cut short, replaced by confusion and pain.

She was clean, every part of her. He'd expected her to be filthy like he must be after all this time in the dusty desert. He'd expected her clothes to be ratty and torn. He'd expected greasy hair and a smudged and sunburned face. But instead she wore fresh clothes; her clean hair cascaded to her shoulders. Nothing marred the pale skin of her face or arms. She was more beautiful than he'd ever seen her in the Maze, than any memories he could pull from the murky goop of what he'd recovered after the Changing.

But her eyes sparkled with tears; her lower lip trembled with fear; her hands shook at her sides. He saw recognition in her eyes, saw that she hadn't forgotten him again, but behind that there was pure and absolute terror.

"Teresa," he whispered, knotting up inside. "What's wrong?"

She didn't respond, but her eyes flickered to the side, then back to him. A couple of tears

trickled out, slipping down her cheeks, then falling to the floor. Her lips trembled even more, and her chest lurched with what could only be a stifled sob.

Thomas stepped forward, put his hands out to her.

"No!" she screamed. "Get away from me!"

Thomas stopped—it was like something massive had just slammed him in the gut. He held his hands up. "Okay, okay. Teresa, what ..." He didn't know what to say or ask. Didn't know what to do. But that terrible feeling of something breaking inside him intensified, threatened to choke him as it swelled in his throat.

He stilled, scared to set her off again. All he could do was lock eyes with her, try to communicate how he felt, beg her to tell him something. Anything.

A very long moment passed in silence. The way her body shook, the way she almost seemed to struggle against something unseen ... it reminded him of ...

It reminded him of how Gally had been acting, right after they'd escaped from the Glade and he'd entered the room with the woman in the white shirt. Right before everything had gone crazy. Right before he'd killed Chuck.

Thomas had to speak or he'd burst. "Teresa, I've thought about you every second since they took you away. You—"

She didn't let him finish. Rushing forward, she was in front of him in two long strides and reaching out, grabbing his shoulders and pulling herself close to him. Shocked, Thomas wrapped his arms around her and squeezed, embracing her so tightly he suddenly worried she couldn't breathe. Her hands found the back of his head, then the sides of his face, making him look at her.

And then they were kissing. Something exploded within his chest, burning away the tension and confusion and fear. Burning away the hurt of seconds earlier. For a moment it felt like nothing mattered anymore. Like nothing would matter ever again.

But then she pulled away. She stumbled backward until she hit the wall. The terror returned to her face, possessed it like a demon. And then she spoke, her voice a whisper but laced with urgency.

"Get away from me, Tom," she said. "All of you need to get ... away ... from me. Don't argue. Just leave. Run." Her neck tensed with the effort to get those last few words out.

Thomas had never hurt so badly. But he shocked himself by what he did next.

He knew her now, *remembered* her. And he knew that she was telling the truth—something wasn't right here. Something was terribly wrong—far worse than he'd first imagined. Staying, arguing with her, trying to force her to come with him would be a slap in the face to the incredible amount of willpower it must've taken her to break away and warn him. He had to do what she said.

"Teresa," he said. "I'll find you." Tears now welling in his own eyes, he turned from her and ran from the building.

CHAPTER 21

Thomas stumbled away from the now-dark building, squinting through tear-blurred eyes. He went back to the Gladers and refused to answer their questions. Told them they had to go, run, get away as fast as possible. That he'd explain later. That their lives were in danger.

He didn't wait for them. He didn't offer to take the pack from Aris. He just started toward the town, sprinting till he finally had to slow down to a manageable pace, blocking the others out, blocking the whole world out. Running away from her was the hardest thing he'd ever done, he had no doubt of it. Showing up at the Glade with his memories wiped, adapting to life there, being trapped in the Maze, fighting Grievers, watching Chuck die—none of it matched what he felt now.

She was there. She'd been in his arms. They'd been together again.

They'd kissed and he'd felt something he would've thought impossible.

And now he was running away. Leaving her behind.

Choked sobs burst from him. He groaned, heard the miserable sound of his voice crack. His heart felt a pain that almost made him stop, collapse to the ground and give up. Sorrow consumed him, and more than once he was tempted to go back. But somehow he held true to what she'd ordered him to do, and he held on to the promise he'd made to find her again.

At least she was alive. At least she was alive.

That was what he kept telling himself. That was what kept him running.

She was alive.

His body could only take so much. At some point, maybe two hours after he'd left her, maybe three, he stopped, sure his heart would explode out of his chest if he went one more step. Turning, he looked behind him and he saw shadows moving far in the distance—the other Gladers, way back. Breathing huge gulps of dry air, Thomas knelt, planted his forearms on one knee, then closed his eyes to rest until they caught up.

Minho reached him first, and their leader wasn't happy. Even in the faint light—dawn was just starting to brighten the eastern sky—he visibly fumed as he walked around Thomas three full times before he said anything.

"What ... Why ... What kind of a shuck idiot are you, Thomas?"

Thomas didn't feel like talking about it. About anything.

When he didn't answer, Minho knelt down next to him. "How could you do that? How could you just come out of there and take off like that? Without explaining anything? Since when is that how we do things? You slinthead." He let out a big sigh and fell back to sit on his butt, shaking his head.

"Sorry," Thomas finally muttered. "It was kinda traumatizing."

The other Gladers had reached them by now, half of them doubling over to catch their breaths, the other half pressing in to hear what Thomas and Minho were talking about.

Newt was right there, but he seemed content to let Minho do all the digging to find out what had happened.

"Traumatizing?" Minho asked. "Who did you see in there? What did they say?"

Thomas knew he had no choice—this wasn't something he could or should keep from the others. "It was ... it was Teresa."

He expected gasps, exclamations of surprise, accusations of being a freaking liar. But in the silence that followed, you could hear the morning winds scuttle across the dusty lands surrounding them.

"What?" Minho finally said. "You're serious?"

Thomas simply nodded, staring at a triangular-shaped rock on the ground. The air had brightened considerably in just the last few minutes.

Minho was understandably shocked. "And you *left* her there? Dude, you need to start talking and tell us what happened."

As much as it pained him, as much as the memory of it tore at his heart, Thomas told the story. Seeing her, how she trembled and cried, how she acted like Gally—almost possessed—before he killed Chuck, the warning she'd given. He told it all; the only thing he left out was the kiss.

"Wow," Minho said in a weary voice, somehow wrapping it all up with that one simple word.

Several minutes passed. The dry wind scratched across the ground, filling the air with dust as the bright orange dome of the sun crested the horizon and officially started the day. No one spoke. Thomas heard sniffs and breaths and a few coughs. The sounds of people drinking from their water bags. The town seemed to have grown during the night, its buildings stretching toward the cloudless, purple-blue sky. It would only take another day or two to reach it.

"It was some kind of trap," he finally said. "I don't know what would've happened, or how many of us would've died. Maybe all of us. But I could see that there wasn't any doubt in her eyes when she broke away from whatever restrained her. She saved us, and I bet they make her ..." He swallowed. "I bet they make her pay for it."

Minho reached out and squeezed Thomas's shoulder. "Dude, if those shuck WICKED people wanted her dead, she'd be rottin' under a big pile of rocks. She's just as tough as anybody else, maybe tougher. She'll survive."

Thomas took in a deep pull of air and let it out. He felt better. Impossibly, he felt better. Minho was right. "I know. Somehow I know."

Minho stood up. "We should've stopped a couple hours ago to get some sleep. But thanks to Mr. Desert Runner down here"—he lightly whacked Thomas in the head—"we ran ourselves ragged till the freaking sun came back up. I still think we need to rest for a while. Do it under the sheets, whatever, but let's try."

It ended up being no problem at all for Thomas. The brightening sun making the backs of his eyelids a murky black-splotched crimson, he fell asleep instantly, a sheet pulled all the way over his head to protect him from sunburn—and from his troubles.

CHAPTER 22

Minho let them sleep for almost four hours. Not that he had to wake many people up. The rising and intensifying sun raged its heat down on the land, and it became unbearable—impossible to ignore. By the time Thomas was up and had the food repacked after breakfast, sweat already drenched his clothes. The smell of body odor hung over them like a stinky mist, and he just hoped he wasn't the worst culprit. The showers back at the dorm seemed like pure luxury now.

The Gladers remained sullen and quiet as they readied for the journey. The more Thomas thought about it, the more he realized that there wasn't much to be happy about. Still, two things kept him going, and he hoped they did the same for the others. First, an overwhelming curiosity to find out what was in that stupid town—it looked more and more like a city as they got closer. And second, the hope that Teresa was alive and well. Maybe she'd gone through one of those Flat Trans things. Maybe she was ahead of them now. In the city, even. Thomas felt a swell of encouragement.

"Let's go," Minho said when everybody was ready. Then they were off.

Across the dry and dusty land they walked. No one needed to say it, but Thomas knew everyone was thinking the same thing—they no longer had the energy to run while the sun was up. And even if they did, they didn't have enough water to keep them alive at a faster pace.

So they walked, sheets held over their heads. As food and water dwindled, more of the packs became available to use for protection from the sun, and fewer Gladers had to walk in pairs. Thomas was one of the first to be alone, probably because no one wanted to talk to him after hearing the story about Teresa. He certainly wasn't going to complain—solitude was bliss for now.

Walking. Breaks for food and water. Walking. Heat, like a dry ocean through which they had to swim. That wind, blowing stronger now, bringing more dust and grit than relief from the heat. It whipped at the sheets, made it harder to keep them in place. Thomas kept coughing and rubbing chunks of accumulated grime from the corners of his eyes. He felt as if every swallow of water only made him want more, but their supplies had reached dangerously low levels. If there wasn't fresh water in the city when they reached it ...

There was no good way for him to finish that line of thought.

They kept going, each step becoming just a little more agonizing, and quiet set in. No one talked. Thomas felt like even saying a couple of words would expend too much energy. It was all he could do to put one foot in front of the other, over and over and over, staring lifelessly at their goal—the ever-nearing city.

It was as if the buildings were alive, growing right before their eyes as they got closer. Soon Thomas could see what had to be stone, windows glimmering in the sunlight. Some seemed to be broken, but far less than half. From Thomas's vantage point, the streets seemed empty. No fires burned during the day. As far as he could tell, not one tree or any other kind of plant existed in the place. How would it, in this climate? How could people

possibly live there? How would they grow food? What would they find?

Tomorrow. It had taken longer than he'd thought, but Thomas had no doubt they'd reach the city tomorrow. And though they'd probably be better off going *around* it, they had no choice. They needed to replenish their supplies.

Walking. Breaks. Heat.

When nightfall finally came, the sun disappearing below the far western horizon at a maddeningly slow pace, the wind picked up even more, and this time brought the slightest chill. Thomas enjoyed it, grateful for any relief from the heat.

By midnight, however, when Minho finally called on them to stop and get more sleep, the city and its now-burning fires ever closer, the wind had become even stronger. It blew in gales, whipping and curling with increasing power.

Soon after they stopped, as Thomas lay on his back, sheet tucked around him and pulled up tightly to his chin, he looked up at the sky. The winds were almost soothing, lulling him to sleep. Just as his mind got hazy from exhaustion, the stars seemed to fade away, and sleep brought him another dream.

He's sitting in a chair. Ten or eleven years old. Teresa—she looks so different, so much younger, yet it's still clearly her—sits across from him, a table between them. She's about his age. No one else is in the room, a dark place with only one light—a dull square of yellow in the ceiling directly overhead.

"Tom, you need to try harder," she says. Her arms are folded, and even at this younger age, it's a look he doesn't find surprising. It's very familiar. As if he has already known her a long time.

"I am trying." Again it's him speaking, but not really him. It doesn't make sense.

"They'll probably kill us if we can't do this."

"I know."

"Then try!"

"I am!"

"Fine," she says. "You know what? I'm not speaking out loud to you anymore. Never ever again until you can do it."

"But—"

Not inside your mind, either. She's talking in his head. That trick that still freaks him out and he still can't reciprocate. *Starting now.*

"Teresa, just give me a few more days. I'll get it."

She doesn't respond.

"Okay, just one more day."

She only stares at him. Then, not even that. She looks down at the table, reaches out and starts scratching a spot in the wood with her fingernail.

"There's no way you're not gonna talk to me."

No response. And he knows her, despite what he just said. Oh, he knows her.

"Fine," he says. He closes his eyes, does what the instructor told him to do. Imagines a sea of black nothingness, interrupted only by the image of Teresa's face. Then, with every last bit of willpower, he forms the words and *throws* them at her.

You smell like a bag of crap.

Teresa smiles, then replies in his mind.

So do you.

CHAPTER 23

Thomas woke up to wind beating at his face and hair and clothes. It felt like invisible hands were trying to rip them off. It was still dark. And cold, too, his whole body shivering from it. Getting up on his elbows, he looked around, hardly able to see the huddled shapes sleeping near him, their sheets pulled tightly against their bodies.

Their sheets.

He let out a frustrated yelp, then jumped to his feet—at some point in the night his own sheet had slipped loose and flown off. With the tearing wind, it could be ten miles away by now.

“Shuck it,” he whispered; the howl of the wind stole the words before he could even hear them. The dream came back to him—or was it a memory? It had to be. That brief glimpse into a time when he and Teresa had been younger, learning how to do their telepathy trick. He felt his heart sink a little, missing her, feeling guilt over yet more proof that he’d been part of WICKED before going to the Maze. He shook it off, not wanting to think about it. He could block it out if he tried hard enough.

He looked up at black sky, then sucked in a hurried breath as the memory of the sun vanishing from the Glade came rushing back. That had been the beginning of the end. The beginning of the terror.

But common sense soon calmed his heart. The winds. The cool air. A storm. It had to be a storm.

Clouds.

Embarrassed, he sat back down, then lay on his side and curled into a ball, his arms wrapped around himself. The cold wasn’t unbearable, just a vast change from the horrible heat of the last couple of days. He probed his mind and wondered about the memories he’d had lately. Could they be lingering results of the Changing? Was his memory coming back?

The thought gave him mixed feelings. He wanted his memory block finally cracked for good—wanted to know who he was, where he came from. But that desire was tempered by fear of what he might find out about himself. About his role in the very things that had brought him to this point, that had done this to his friends.

He needed sleep desperately. The wind a constant roar in his ears, he finally slipped away, this time to nothing.

The light woke him to a dull, gray dawn that finally revealed the thick layer of clouds covering the sky. It also made the endless expanse of desert around them look even more dreary. The city was so close now, only a few hours away. The buildings really *were* tall; one of them even stretched up and disappeared in a low-hanging fog. And the glass in all those broken windows was like jagged teeth in mouths open to catch food that might be flying about in the stormy wind.

The gusty air still tore at him, and a thick layer of dirt seemed forever baked onto his face. He rubbed his head and his hair felt stiff with wind-dried grime.

Most of the other Gladers were up and about, taking in the unexpected shift in the weather, deep in conversations he couldn't hear. There was only the roar in his ears.

Minho noticed him awake and came over; he leaned into the wind as he walked, his clothes flapping around him. "Bout time you woke up!" He was fully shouting.

Thomas rubbed the crust out of his eyes and got to his feet. "Where'd this all come from?" he yelled back. "I thought we were in the middle of a desert!"

Minho looked up at the roiling gray mass of clouds, then back at Thomas. He leaned closer to speak directly in his ear. "Well, guess it has to rain in the desert *sometime*. Hurry and eat—we gotta get going. Maybe we can get there and find a place to hide before we're soaked by the storm."

"What if we get there and a bunch of Cranks try to kill us?"

"Then we'll fight 'em!" Minho frowned as if disappointed that Thomas had asked such a stupid question. "What else you wanna do? We're almost out of food and water."

Thomas knew Minho was right. Plus, if they could fight dozens of Grievers, a bunch of half-mad, starved sicklings shouldn't be too much of a problem. "All right, then. Let's go. I'll eat one of those granola things while we walk."

A few minutes later, they were once again heading for the city, the gray sky above them ready to burst and bleed water at any moment.

They were only a couple of miles away from the closest buildings when they came across an old man lying in the sand on his back, wrapped in several blankets. Jack had been the one to spot him first, and soon Thomas and the others were packed in a circle around the guy, staring down at him.

Thomas's stomach turned as he studied the man more closely, but he couldn't look away. The stranger had to be a hundred years old, though it was hard to tell—the wear and tear of the sun might've made him just look that way. Wrinkled, leathery face. Scabs and sores where his hair should've been. Dark, dark skin.

He was alive, breathing deeply, but he gazed at the sky with an emptiness in his eyes. As if he was waiting for some god to come down and take him away, end his miserable life. He showed no sign he'd even noticed the Gladers approach.

"Hey! Old man!" Minho shouted, always the tactful one. "What're you doing out here?"

Thomas had a hard enough time hearing the words over the ripping wind; he couldn't imagine that the ancient guy could make anything out. But was he blind as well? Maybe.

Thomas nudged Minho out of the way and knelt down right beside the man's face. The melancholy there was heartbreaking. He held his hand out and waved it right above the old guy's eyes.

Nothing. No blink, no movement. It was only after Thomas pulled his hand back that the man's eyelids slowly drooped closed, then open again. Just once.

"Sir?" Thomas asked. "Mister?" The words sounded strange to him, conjured up from the murky memories of his past. He certainly hadn't used them since being sent to the Glade and the Maze. "Can you hear me? Can you talk?"

The man did that slow blink again, but didn't say anything.

Newt knelt next to Thomas and spoke loudly over the wind. "This guy's a bloody gold mine if we can get him to tell us stuff about the city. Looks harmless, probably knows what to expect when we go in there."

Thomas sighed. "Yeah, but he doesn't even seem to be able to hear us, much less have a long talk."

"Keep trying," Minho said from behind them. "You're officially our foreign ambassador, Thomas. Get the dude to open up and tell us about the good ol' days."

For some odd reason Thomas wanted to say something funny back, but he couldn't think of anything. If he'd been funny in his old life, every scrap of humor had certainly vanished in the memory swipe. "Okay," he said.

He scooted as close to the man's head as he could, then positioned himself so their eyes were square, just a couple of feet apart. "Sir? We really need your help!" He felt bad for shouting, worried the old man might take it the wrong way, but he had no choice. The wind was gusting stronger and stronger. "We need you to tell us if it's safe to go inside the city! We can carry you there if you need help yourself. Sir? Sir!"

The man's dark eyes had been looking past him, up at the sky, but now they shifted, slowly, until they focused on his. Awareness filled them like dark liquid poured slowly into a glass. His lips parted, but nothing came out except a small cough.

Thomas's hopes lifted. "My name is Thomas. These are my friends. We've been walking through the desert for a couple of days, and we need more water and food. What do you ...?"

He trailed off when the man's eyes flicked back and forth, a sudden hint of panic there.

"It's okay, we won't hurt you," Thomas quickly said. "We're ... we're the good guys. But we'd really appreciate it if—"

The man's left hand shot out from beneath the blankets wrapped around him and clasped Thomas's wrist, gripping it with a strength far greater than seemed possible. Thomas cried out in surprise and instinctively tried to pull his arm free, but couldn't. He was shocked by the man's strength. He could barely budge against the man's iron manacle of a fist.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Let go of me!"

The man shook his head, those dark eyes full more of fear than any kind of belligerence. His lips parted again, and a rough, indecipherable whisper rose from his mouth. He didn't loosen his grip.

Thomas gave up the struggle to free his arm; instead, he relaxed and leaned forward to put his ear close to the stranger's mouth. "What'd you say!" he shouted.

The man spoke again, a dry rasp that was unsettling, spooky. Thomas caught the words *storm* and *terror* and *bad people*. None of them sounded very inspiring.

"One more time!" Thomas yelled, his head still cocked so his ear rested only inches above the man's face.

This time Thomas understood most of it, missing only a few words. "Storm coming ... full of terror ... brings out ... stay away ... bad people."

The man shot up into a sitting position, his eyes full and white around his irises. "Storm! Storm! Storm!" He didn't stop, repeating the word over and over; a mucus-thick strand of saliva finally crested over his bottom lip and swung back and forth like a hypnotist's pendulum.

He released Thomas's arm, and Thomas scooted back on his butt to get away. Even as he did so, the wind intensified, seemed to go from strong gusts to outright hurricane-strength gales of terror, just like the man had said. The world was lost in the sound of roaring,

screaming air. Thomas felt as if his hair and clothes might rip off at any second. Almost all of the Gladers' sheets went flying, flapping over the ground and into the air like an army of ghosts. Food skittered in all directions.

Thomas got to his feet, an almost impossible task with the wind trying to knock him over. He stumbled forward several feet until he leaned back into it; invisible hands held him up.

Minho stood nearby, frantically waving his arms as he tried to get everyone's attention. Most saw and gathered around him, including Thomas, who fought off the panic creeping along his insides. It was only a storm. Far better than Grievers or Cranks with knives. Or ropes.

The old man had lost his blankets to the wind, and he huddled now in the fetal position, his skinny legs squeezed against his chest, eyes closed. Thomas had the fleeting thought that they should carry him someplace safe, save him for at least attempting to warn them about the storm. But something told him the man would fight tooth and nail if they tried to touch him or pick him up.

The Gladers were now packed together. Minho pointed at the city. The closest building was within a half hour if they ran at a good pace. The way the wind tore at them, the way the clouds above thickened and churned and bruised to a deep purple, almost black, the way dust and debris flew through the air, reaching that building seemed the only sane choice.

Minho started running. The others fell in, and Thomas waited to bring up the rear, knowing that was what Minho wanted him to do. He finally broke into a brisk jog, glad they weren't going directly into the wind. Only then did a few of the words the old man had said pop into his mind. They made him break into a sweat that quickly evaporated, leaving his skin dry and salty.

Stay away. Bad people.

As they approached the city, it became harder for Thomas to actually see it. The dust in the air had thickened into a brown fog, and he felt it in every breath. It was crusting in his eyes, making them water and turning into goop that he had to keep wiping away. The large building they were shooting for had become a looming shadow behind the cloud of dust, towering taller and taller, like a growing giant.

The wind had gained a rough edge, pelting him with sand and grit until it hurt. Every once in a while a larger object would fly by, scaring him half out of his wits. A branch. Something that looked like a small mouse. A piece of roofing tile. And countless scraps of paper. All swirling through the air like snowflakes.

Then came the lightning.

They'd halved the distance to the building—maybe more than that—when the bolts came from nowhere, and the world around him erupted in light and thunder.

They fell from the sky in jagged streaks, like bars of white light, slamming into the ground and throwing up massive amounts of scorched earth. The crushing sound was too much to bear, and Thomas's ears began to go numb, the horrific noise fading to a distant hum as he went deaf.

He kept running, almost blind now, unable to hear, barely able to see the building. People fell and got back up. Thomas stumbled but caught his balance. He helped Newt regain his feet, then Frypan. Pushed them forward as he kept on. It was only a matter of time before one of the thick daggers of lightning struck someone and fried them to a blackened char. His hair stood on end despite the ripping wind, the static in the air raging and prickly as flying needles.

Thomas wanted to scream, wanted to hear his own voice, even if it was only the dull vibrations inside his skull. But he knew the dust-riddled air would choke him; it was hard enough to take short, quick breaths through his nose. Especially with the storm of lightning crashing to the ground all around them, singeing the air, making everything smell like copper and ash.

The sky darkened further, the dust cloud thickened; Thomas realized he couldn't see everyone anymore. Just those few directly in front of him. Light from the strikes flashed against them, a short burst of brilliant white illuminating them for the briefest instant. It all added together to blind Thomas even more. They had to reach that building. They had to get there or they wouldn't last much longer.

And where was the rain? he wondered. Where was the rain? What kind of a storm was this?

A bolt of pure white zigzagged from the sky and exploded on the ground right in front of him. He screamed but couldn't hear himself, squeezing his eyes shut as something—some burst of energy or wave of air—threw him to the side. He landed flat on his back, the breath knocked from his chest, as a spray of dirt and rocks rained down on him. Spitting, wiping at his face, he gulped for air as he scrambled onto his hands and knees, then his

feet. The air finally flowed, and he pulled it deep into his lungs.

He heard a ringing now, a steady, high-pitched buzz that felt like nails in his eardrums. The wind tried to eat his clothes, dirt stung his skin, darkness swirled around him like living night, broken only by the flashes of lightning. Then he saw it, a horrific image made even spookier by the on-again-off-again source of light.

It was Jack. He lay on the ground, inside a small crater, writhing as he clutched his knee. There was nothing below that—shin, ankle, and foot obliterated by the burst of pure electricity from the sky. Blood that looked like black tar gushed from the hideous wound, making a paste of horror with the dirt. His clothes had been burned off, leaving him naked, injuries spreading across his whole body. He had no hair. And it looked like his eyeballs had ...

Thomas spun around and collapsed to the ground, coughing as he spit up everything in his stomach. There was nothing they could do for Jack. No way. Nothing. But he was still *alive*. Though the thought shamed him, Thomas was glad he couldn't hear the screams. He didn't know if he could bear to even look at him again.

Then someone was grabbing him, pulling him to his feet. Minho. He said something, and Thomas focused enough to read his lips. *We have to go. Nothing we can do.*

Jack, he thought. Oh, man, Jack.

Stumbling, his stomach muscles sore from throwing up, his ears ringing painfully, in shock from the terrible sight of Jack ripped to shreds by lightning, he ran after Minho. He saw lumps of shadow to the left and right, other Gladers, but only a few. It was too dark to see very far, and the lightning came and went too fast to reveal much. Only dust and debris and that looming shape of the building, almost on top of them now. They'd lost any hope of organization or staying together. It was each Glader for himself now—they just had to hope everyone could make it.

Wind. Explosions of light. Wind. Choking dust. Wind. Ringing in his ears, pain. Wind. He kept going, his eyes glued to Minho just a few steps ahead of him. He didn't feel anything for Jack. He didn't care if he was permanently deaf. He didn't care about the others anymore. The chaos around him seemed to siphon away his humanity, turn him into an animal. All he wanted was to survive, make it to that building, get inside. *Live.* Gain another day.

Searing white light detonated in front of him, throwing him through the air again. Even as he flew backward, he screamed, tried to regain his footing—the explosion had happened right where Minho was running. Minho! Thomas landed with a jarring thump that felt like every joint in his body came loose, then popped back into place. He ignored the pain, got up, ran forward, his vision full of darkness mixed with blurry afterimages, amoebas of purplish light. Then he saw flames.

It took a second for his brain to compute what he was seeing. Rods of fire dancing about like magic, hot tendrils whipping to the right from the wind. Then it all collapsed to the ground, a heap of thrashing flame. Thomas reached it and understood.

It was Minho. His clothes were on fire.

With a shriek that sent sharp pains through his head, he fell to the ground next to his friend. He dug into the earth—thankfully loose from the explosion of electricity that hit it—and shoveled it on top of Minho with both hands, scooping frantically. Aiming for the

brightest points of flame, he made progress as Minho helped by rolling around and beating at his upper body with both hands.

In a matter of seconds, the fire went out, leaving behind charred clothing and countless angry wounds. Thomas was glad he couldn't hear the wails of agony that appeared to be coming from Minho. He knew they didn't have time to stop, so Thomas grabbed their leader by the shoulders and dragged him to his feet.

"Come on!" Thomas shouted, though the words felt like a couple of noiseless throbs in his brain.

Minho coughed, winced again, but then nodded and wrapped one of his arms around Thomas's neck. Together they moved as fast as they could toward the building, Thomas doing most of the work.

All around them, the lightning continued to fall like arrows of white fire. Thomas could feel the silent impact of the explosions, each one rattling his skull, shaking his bones. Flashes of light all around. Past the building toward which they stumbled and struggled, even more fires had sprung up; two or three times he saw lightning make direct contact with the upper reaches of a structure, sending a rain of bricks and glass falling to the streets below.

The darkness began to take on a different tone, more gray than brown, and Thomas realized that the storm clouds must've really thickened and sunk toward the ground, pushing the dust and fog out of their way. The wind had lessened slightly, but the lightning seemed stronger than ever.

Gladers were to the left and right, all heading in the same direction. They seemed fewer in number, but Thomas still couldn't see well enough to know for sure. He did spot Newt, then Frypan. And Aris. All of them looking as terrified as he felt, running, all eyes riveted to their goal, now just a short distance away.

Minho lost his footing and fell, slipped from Thomas's grip. Thomas stopped, turned around, pulled the burnt boy back to his feet, reset Minho's arm around his shoulder. Gripping him around the torso with both arms now, he half carried, half pulled him along. A blinding arc of lightning went right over their heads, pummeled the earth behind them; Thomas didn't look, kept moving. A Glader fell to his left; he couldn't tell who it was, didn't hear the scream he knew must've come. Another boy fell to his right, got back up. A blast of lightning, just ahead and to the right. Another to the left. One straight ahead. Thomas had to pause, blinking viciously until his sight came back. He started up again, yanking Minho along with him.

And then they were there. The first building of the city.

In the gripping darkness of the storm, the structure was all gray. Massive blocks of stone, an arch of smaller bricks, half-broken windows. Aris reached the door first, didn't bother to open it. It had been made of glass that was mostly gone, so he carefully smashed out the remaining shards with his elbow. He waved a couple of Gladers past, then went in himself, swallowed by the interior.

Thomas made it just as Newt did, and gestured for help. Newt and another boy took Minho from him, carefully dragged him backward over the threshold of the open entrance, his feet hitting the sill as they pulled him through.

And then Thomas, still in shock over the sheer power of the lightning bursts, followed his

friends, stepping into the gloom.

He turned to look just in time to see the rain start falling outside, as if the storm had finally decided to weep with shame for what it had done to them.

The rain fell in torrents, like God had sucked up the ocean and spit it out over their heads in fury.

Thomas sat in the exact same place for at least two hours as he watched it. He huddled against the wall, exhausted and sore, willing his hearing to come back. It seemed to be working—what had been a complete throb of silence had decreased its pressure, and the ringing had gone away. When he coughed, he thought it was more than just a vibration he felt. He *heard* a trace of it. And in the distance, as if from the other side of a dream, came the steady drumming sound of the rain. Maybe he wouldn't be deaf after all.

The dull gray light coming from the windows did little to fight off the cold darkness inside the building. The other Gladers sat hunched up or lying on their sides around the room. Minho was curled up in a ball at Thomas's feet, barely moving; it looked as if every shift sent waves of burning pain through his nerves. Newt was there, also, close, as was Frypan. But no one tried to talk or get things organized. No one counted off the Gladers or tried to figure out who was missing. They all sat or lay as lifeless as Thomas, probably pondering the same thing he was—what kind of messed-up world could create a storm like that?

The soft thrum of the rain grew louder until Thomas had no more doubt—he could really hear it. It was a soothing sound, despite everything, and he finally fell asleep.

* * *

By the time he woke up, his body so stiff it felt like glue had dried in his veins and muscles, all the machinery in his ears and head was back to fully functional. He heard the heavy breaths of sleeping Gladers, heard the whimpering moans from Minho, heard the now-pounding deluge of water slamming into the pavement outside.

But it was dark. Completely. At some point, night had fallen.

Pushing away his discomfort, letting the exhaustion take over, he shifted until he lay flat, his head propped on someone's leg—then he was asleep again.

Two things woke him up for good: the glow of sunrise and a sudden rush of silence. The storm was over, and he'd slept through the night. But even before he felt the stiffness and soreness he expected, he felt something much more overpowering.

Hunger.

The light came through the broken windows and dappled the floor around him. He looked up to see a ruin of a building, massive holes ripped in each floor all the way to the roof dozens of stories toward the sky; it seemed that only the steel infrastructure was keeping the whole thing from coming down. He couldn't imagine what had caused it all to happen. But jags of bright blue seemed to hover above, a sight that seemed impossible last time he'd been outside. Whatever horror that storm had been, whatever quirks in the

climate of the earth could cause such a thing, it really did seem to be gone for now.

Sharp pains stabbed at his stomach, which groaned, aching for food. He glanced around to see most of the other Gladers still asleep, but Newt lay with his back against the wall, staring sadly at a blank spot in the middle of the room.

"You okay, there?" Thomas asked. Even his jaw felt stiff.

Newt slowly turned to him; his eyes were distant until he seemed to snap out of his thoughts and focus on Thomas. "Okay? Yeah, I guess I'm okay. We're alive—guess that's all that bloody matters anymore." The bitterness in his voice couldn't have been stronger.

"Sometimes I wonder," Thomas murmured.

"Wonder what?"

"If being alive matters. If being dead might be a lot easier."

"Please. I don't believe for one second you really think that."

Thomas's gaze had lowered while he'd delivered the depressing sentiment and he looked up sharply at Newt's retort. Then he smiled, and it felt good. "You're right. Just trying to sound as miserable as you." He could almost convince himself that it was true. That he *didn't* feel as if dying would be the easy way out.

Newt gestured wearily toward Minho. "What bloody happened to him?"

"Lightning strike somehow caught his clothes on fire. How it did that without frying his brain I have no idea. But we were able to beat it out before it did too much damage, I think."

"Before it did too much damage? I'd hate to see what you think *real* damage looks like."

Thomas closed his eyes for a second and rested his head against the wall. "Hey, like you said—he's alive, right? And he still has clothes on, which means it couldn't have burned his skin in *too* many places. He'll be fine."

"Yeah, good that," Newt replied with a sarcastic chuckle. "Remind me not to hire you as my buggin' doctor anytime soon."

"Ohhhh." This came from Minho, a long, drawn-out groan. His eyes fluttered open, then squinted as he caught Thomas's gaze. "Oh, man. I'm shucked. I'm shucked for good."

"How bad is it?" Newt asked him.

Instead of answering, Minho very slowly pushed himself up to a sitting position, grunting and wincing with every small move. But he finally did it, legs crossed beneath him. His clothes were blackened and ragged. In some places where skin was exposed, raw red blisters peeked out like menacing alien eyeballs. But even though Thomas wasn't a doctor and had no clue about such things, his instincts told him the burns were manageable and would heal pretty quickly. Most of Minho's face had been spared, and he still had all his hair—filthy as it was.

"Can't be too bad if you can do that," Thomas said with a sly smile.

"Shuck it," Minho responded. "I'm tougher than nails. I could still kick your pony-lovin' butt with twice this pain."

Thomas shrugged. "I do love ponies. Wish I could eat one right now." His stomach grumbled and gurgled.

"Was that a joke?" Minho said. "Did Thomas the boring slinthead actually make a joke?"

"I think he did" was Newt's response.

"I'm a funny guy," Thomas said with a shrug.

"Yeah, you are." But Minho obviously had already lost interest in the small talk. He twisted his head around to take in the rest of the Gladers, most of them asleep or lying still with blank looks on their faces. "How many?"

Thomas counted them up. Eleven. After all they'd been through, only eleven were left. And that included the new kid, Aris. Forty or fifty had lived in the Glade when Thomas first arrived, just a few weeks before. Now there were eleven.

Eleven.

He couldn't bring himself to say anything out loud after this realization, and the lighter moment only seconds earlier suddenly seemed like pure blasphemy. Like an abomination.

How could I be part of WICKED? he thought. *How could I have been any part of this?* He knew he should tell them about his memory-dreams, but he just couldn't.

"There's only eleven of us," Newt finally said. There. It was out.

"So, what, six died in the storm? Seven?" Minho sounded completely detached, as if he were counting how many apples they'd lost when the packs had blown away.

"Seven," Newt snapped, showing his disapproval of the cavalier attitude. Then, in a softer tone, "Seven. Unless people ran to a different building."

"Dude," Minho said. "How're we gonna fight our way through this city with only eleven people? There could be hundreds of Cranks in this place for all we know. Thousands. And we don't have a clue what to expect from them!"

Newt let out a big breath. "And that's all you can buggin' think about? What about the people who died, Minho? Jack's missing. So is Winston—he never had a chance. And"—he looked around—"I don't see Stan or Tim, either. What about them?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Minho held his hands up, palms facing Newt. "Slim it nice and calm, brother. I didn't ask to be the shuck leader. You wanna cry all day about what's happened, fine. But that's not what a leader does. A leader figures out where to go and what to do after that's done."

"Well, guess that's why you got the job, then," Newt said. But then a look of apology washed over his face. "Whatever. Seriously, sorry. I just ..."

"Yeah, I'm sorry, too." Minho rolled his eyes, though, and Thomas hoped against hope that Newt didn't notice because his gaze had fallen to the floor again.

Luckily Aris scooted over to join them. Thomas wanted the conversation to go in a different direction.

"Ever seen anything like that lightning storm?" the new kid asked.

Thomas shook his head because Aris was looking at him. "Didn't seem natural. Even in my klunky memories, I'm pretty sure stuff like that doesn't happen normally."

"But remember what the Rat Man said and that lady told you on the bus," Minho said. "Sun flares, and the whole world burning like hell itself. That'd screw up the climate plenty enough to make crazy storms like that pop up. I have a feeling we're lucky it wasn't worse."

"Not sure *lucky*'s the first word I'd think of," Aris said.

"Yeah, well."

Newt pointed at the broken glass of the door, where the glow of sunrise had brightened into the same white brilliance they'd grown accustomed to their first couple of days out in the Scorch. "Least it's over. We better start thinking about what we're gonna do next."

"See," Minho said. "You're just as heartless as me. And you're right."

Thomas remembered the image of the Cranks at the windows back at the dorm. Like living nightmares, missing only a death certificate to make them official zombies. "Yeah, we better figure things out before we have a bunch of those crazies show up. But I'm telling you, we gotta eat first. We gotta find food." The last word almost hurt, he wanted some so badly.

"Food?"

Thomas pulled in a gasp of surprise; the voice had come from above. He looked up just as the others did. A face looked down at them from the shredded remains of the third floor, that of a young Hispanic man. His eyes were slightly wild, and Thomas felt a belt of tension cinch inside him.

"Who're you?" Minho shouted.

Then, to Thomas's utter disbelief, the man jumped through the jagged hole in the ceilings, falling toward them. At the last second, he crumpled into a human ball and rolled three times, then sprang up and landed on his feet.

"My name is Jorge," he said, his arms outstretched as if he expected applause for his acrobatics. "And I'm the Crank who rules this place."

CHAPTER 26

For a second Thomas had a hard time believing that the guy who'd dropped in—literally—was real. He was so unexpected, and there was an odd silliness about what he'd said and the way he'd said it. But he was there, all right. And even though he didn't seem quite as gone as some of the others they'd seen, he'd already confessed to being a Crank.

"You people forget how to talk?" Jorge asked, a smile on his face that looked completely out of place in the shattered building. "Or you just scared of the Cranks? Scared we'll pull you to the ground and eat your eyeballs out? Mmm, tasty. I love a good eyeball when the grub's runnin' short. Tastes like undercooked eggs."

Minho took it on himself to answer, doing a great job of hiding his pain. "You admit you're a Crank? That you're freaking crazy?"

"He just said he likes the taste of eyeballs." This from Frypan. "I think that qualifies as crazy."

Jorge laughed, and there was a definite tone of menace in it. "Come, come, my new friends. I'd only eat your eyes if you were already dead. Course, I might help you get that way if I needed to. Understand what I'm saying?" All mirth vanished from his expression, replaced with a look of stern warning. Almost as if he was daring them to confront him.

No one spoke for a long moment. Then Newt asked, "How many of you are here?"

Jorge's gaze snapped to Newt. "How many? How many Cranks? We're all Cranks around here, *hermano*."

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Newt replied flatly.

Jorge started pacing the room, stepping over and around Gladers, taking everyone in as he spoke. "Lot of things you people need to understand about how things work in this city. About the Cranks and WICKED, about the government, about why they left us here to rot in our disease, kill each other, go completely and utterly *insane*. About how there's different levels of the Flare. About how it's too late for you—the ill is gonna catch ya if you don't already have it."

Thomas had followed the stranger with his eyes as he walked around the room making these horrible statements. The Flare. He thought he'd gotten used to the fear of having the disease, but with this Crank standing right in front of him, he was more scared than ever. And helpless to do anything about it.

Jorge stopped near him and his friends, his feet almost touching Minho. He continued to talk.

"But that's not the way it's gonna work, *comprende*? Those who are at a disadvantage are those who speak first. I want to know everything about you. Where you came from, why you're here, what in God's name your purpose could be. Now."

Minho let out a low, dangerous-sounding chuckle. "We're the ones at a disadvantage?" Minho swiveled his head around mockingly. "Unless that lightning storm fried my retinas, I'd say there are eleven of us and one of you. Maybe *you* should start talking."

Thomas really wished Minho hadn't said that. It was stupid and arrogant, and it could

very well get them killed. The guy obviously wasn't alone. There could be a hundred Cranks hiding out in the torn-up remains of the upper floors, spying on them, waiting with who-knew-what kind of horrific weapons. Or worse, the savagery of their own hands and teeth and madness.

Jorge looked at Minho for a long time, his face blank. "You didn't just say that to me, did you? Please tell me you didn't just speak to me like a dog. You have ten seconds to apologize."

Minho looked over at Thomas with a smirk.

"One," Jorge said. "Two. Three. Four."

Thomas tried to shoot a look of warning to Minho, nodded at him. *Do it.*

"Five. Six."

"Do it," Thomas finally said aloud.

"Seven. Eight."

Jorge's voice was rising with each number. Thomas thought he caught a glimpse of movement somewhere far above, just a blur of streaking shadow. Maybe Minho noticed it, too; any arrogance drained from his face.

"Nine."

"I'm sorry," Minho blurted out, with little feeling.

"I don't think you meant that," Jorge said. Then he kicked Minho in the leg.

Thomas's hands clenched into fists when his friend cried out in pain; the Crank must've gotten him right in a burnt spot.

"Say it with meaning, *hermano*."

Thomas looked up at the Crank, hated him. Irrational thoughts started swimming through his mind—he wanted to jump up and attack, beat him like he'd beaten Gally after escaping the Maze.

Jorge pulled his leg back and kicked Minho again, twice as hard in the same spot. "Say it with *meaning!*" He screamed the last word with a harshness that sounded crazed.

Minho wailed, grabbing the wound with both hands. "I'm ... sorry," he said between heavy breaths, his voice strained and full of pain. But as soon as Jorge smiled and relaxed, satisfied with the humiliation he'd inflicted, Minho swung an arm out and slammed it into the Crank's shin. The man leaped onto his other foot, then fell, crashing to the ground with his own yelp, a shriek that was half surprise, half hurt.

Then Minho was on top of him, yelling a string of obscenities Thomas had never heard come out of his friend before. Their leader squeezed his thighs to trap Jorge's body, then started punching.

"Minho!" Thomas shouted. "Stop!" He got to his feet, ignoring the stiffness in his joints, the soreness in his muscles. He took a quick glance upward as he made for Minho, ready to tackle him off Jorge's body. There was movement up there, in several places. Then he saw people looking down, people readying to jump. Ropes appeared, dangled over the sides of the jagged holes.

Thomas rammed into Minho, sent him sprawling off Jorge's body; they crashed to the ground. Thomas quickly spun to grab his friend, wrapped his arms around his chest and squeezed against his struggles to escape.

"There's more of them up there!" Thomas screamed in his ear from behind. "You have to

stop! They'll kill you! They'll kill all of us!"

Jorge had staggered to his feet, slowly wiping a thin trail of blood from the corner of his mouth. The look on his face was enough to ram a spike of fear straight through Thomas's heart. There was no telling what the guy would do.

"Wait!" Thomas shouted. "Please, wait!"

Jorge made eye contact with him just as a few more Cranks dropped to the ground from above. Some of them did the jump-and-roll like Jorge had done; others slid down ropes and landed squarely on their feet. All of them quickly gathered in a pack behind their leader, maybe fifteen of them. Men and women; a few were teenagers. All filthy and dressed in tattered clothing. Most of them skinny and frail-looking.

Minho had quit fighting, and Thomas finally loosened his grip. By the looks of it, he had only a few seconds before a dire situation turned into a slaughterhouse. He pressed one hand firmly down on Minho's back, then held the other one up toward Jorge in a conciliatory gesture.

"Please give me a minute," Thomas said, urging his heart and voice to calm down. "Won't do you people any good to ... hurt us."

"Won't do us any good?" the Crank said; he spit a wad of red goo from his mouth. "It'll do me a lot of good. That, I can guarantee, *hermano*." He balled both hands into fists at his sides.

Then he cocked his head, barely enough to be noticed. But as soon as he did, the Cranks behind him pulled all kinds of nasty things from within the hidden depths of their ragged clothes. Knives. Rusted machetes. Black spikes that had maybe once been in a railroad somewhere. Shards of glass with red-tinged smudges on their razor-thin tips. One girl, who couldn't have been more than thirteen years old, held a splintered shovel, its metal scoop ending in a jagged edge like the teeth of a saw.

Thomas had the sudden and absolute certainty that he was now pleading for their lives. The Gladers couldn't win in a fight against these people. No way. They weren't Grievers, but there also wasn't a magic code to shut them down.

"Listen," Thomas said, slowly getting to his feet, hoping Minho wouldn't be stupid enough to try anything. "There's something about us. We're not just random shanks who showed up on your doorstep. We're valuable. Alive, not dead."

The anger on Jorge's face lessened ever so slightly. Maybe a spark of curiosity. But what he said was "What's a shank?"

Thomas almost—*almost*—laughed. An irrational response that somehow would've seemed appropriate. "Me and you. Ten minutes. Alone. That's all I ask. Bring all the weapons you need."

Jorge *did* laugh at that, more of a wet snort than anything. "Sorry to burst your bubble, kid, but I don't think I'll need any."

He paused, and it felt like the next few seconds lasted a full hour.

"Ten minutes," the Crank finally said. "Rest of you stay here, watch these punks. If I give the word, let the death games begin." He held a hand out, gesturing to a dark hallway that led from the room on the side across from the broken doors.

"Ten minutes," he repeated.

Thomas nodded. When Jorge didn't move, he went first, walking toward their meeting

place and maybe the most important discussion of his life.
And maybe the last.

CHAPTER 27

Thomas felt Jorge at his heels as he entered the dark hallway. It smelled of mildew and rot; water dripped from the ceiling, sending out creepy echoes that for some awful reason made him think of blood.

"Just keep going," Jorge said from behind. "There's a room at the end with chairs. Make even the slightest move against me, everyone dies."

Thomas wanted to turn and scream at the guy but kept walking. "I'm not an idiot. You can quit the whole tough-guy routine."

The Crank only snickered in response.

After several minutes of quiet, Thomas finally approached a wooden door with a round silver knob. He reached out and opened it without hesitating, trying to show Jorge that he still had some dignity. Once inside, however, he didn't know what to do. It was pitch-black.

He sensed Jorge stepping around him; then there was the loud *flumping* sound of heavy cloth being whipped in the air. A hot, blinding light appeared, and Thomas had to shield his eyes with his forearms. He could only squint at first, then eventually dropped his arms and was able to see okay; he realized that the Crank had pulled a large sheet of canvas from a window. An unbroken window. Outside, there was only sunlight and concrete.

"Sit down," Jorge said, his voice less gruff than Thomas would've expected. He hoped it was because the Crank had finally accepted that his new visitor was going to take a rational and calm approach to their situation. That maybe there really was something to this discussion that could end up benefiting the current residents of the dilapidated building. Of course, the guy was a Crank, so Thomas had no idea how he'd react.

The room had no furniture other than two small wooden chairs and a table between them. Thomas pulled out the one closer to him and took a seat. Jorge sat down on the other side, then leaned forward and put his elbows on the table, hands clasped. His face was blank, his eyes glued on Thomas.

"Talk."

Thomas wished he could take a second to sift through all the ideas that had run through his mind back in the larger room, but he knew there wasn't any time for that.

"Okay." He hesitated. One word. So far, not so good. He pulled in a breath. "Look, I heard you mention WICKED back there. We know all about those guys. It'd be really interesting to hear what you have to say about them."

Jorge didn't budge; his expression didn't change. "I'm not the one talking right now. You are."

"Yeah, I know." Thomas scooted his chair a little closer to the table. Then he pushed it back and put a foot up on his knee. He needed to calm down and just let the words flow. "Well, this is hard because I don't know what you know. So I guess I'll just pretend like you're stupid to the whole thing."

"I'd strongly advise you never to use the word *stupid* with me again."

Thomas had to force himself to swallow, his throat tight with fear. "Just a figure of

speech."

"Get on with it."

Thomas took another deep breath. "We used to be a group of about fifty guys. And ... a girl." A prick of pain stuck him at that. "Now we're down to eleven. I don't know all the details, but WICKED is some kind of organization that's doing a whole load of nasty things to us for some reason. We started in a place called the Glade, inside a stone maze, surrounded by these creatures called Grievers."

He waited, searching Jorge's face for any reaction to his burst of strange information. But the Crank showed no signs of confusion or recognition. Nothing at all.

And so Thomas told him everything. What it had been like in the Maze, how they'd escaped, how they thought they were safe, how it ended up being just another layer of the WICKED plan. He told him about the Rat Man, and the mission he'd set them on: to survive long enough to make it one hundred miles to the north, to a place he referred to as the safe haven. He related how they'd gone down the long tunnel, been attacked by the flying silver goop, made the trek across the initial miles of their journey.

He told Jorge the whole story. And the more he talked, the crazier it seemed that he was sharing it. Yet he kept talking because he couldn't think of anything else to do. He did it with the hope that WICKED was just as much the Cranks' enemy as it was theirs.

He didn't mention Teresa, however—she was the only thing he left out.

"So there must be something special about us," Thomas said, trying to wrap things up. "They can't be doing this just to be nasty. What'd be the point?"

"Speaking of points," Jorge responded, the first he'd spoken in at least ten minutes, the allotted time already gone. "What's yours?"

Thomas waited. This was it. His only chance.

"Well?" Jorge pushed.

Thomas went for it. "If you ... help us ... I mean, if you, or maybe just a few of you, go with us and help us make it to the safe haven ..."

"Yeah?"

"Then maybe you'll be safe, too. ..." And this was what Thomas had planned all along—had been building toward—the hope strung out by the Rat Man. "They told us we have the Flare. And that if we make it to the safe haven, we'll all be cured. They said they have a cure. If you help us get there, maybe you can get it, too." Thomas stopped talking and looked at Jorge earnestly.

Something had changed—slightly—in the Crank's face at that last thing he'd said, and Thomas knew he had won. The look was brief, but it was definitely *hope*, quickly replaced with a blank indifference. Yet Thomas knew what he'd seen.

"A cure," the Crank repeated.

"A cure." Thomas was determined to say as little as possible from here on out—he'd done his best.

Jorge leaned back in his chair, the wood creaking as if about to break, and folded his arms. He lowered his eyebrows in a look of contemplation. "What's your name?"

Thomas was surprised by the question. Felt sure, in fact, that he'd already told him. Or at least it seemed like he should have told him at some point. But then again, this whole scenario wasn't exactly your typical get-acquainted affair.

“Your *name*?” Jorge repeated. “I’m assuming you have one, *hermano*.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry. It’s Thomas.”

Another flash across Jorge’s face—this time something like ... recognition. Mixed with surprise. “Thomas, huh. You go by Tommy? Tom, maybe?”

That last one hurt, made him think of his dream about Teresa. “No,” he said, probably a little too quickly. “Just ... Thomas.”

“Okay, Thomas. Let me ask you something. Do you have the slightest clue in that squishy brain of yours what the Flare does to people? Do I look like someone who has a hideous disease to you?”

That seemed an impossible question to answer without getting your face beaten in, but Thomas went with the safest bet. “No.”

“No? No to both questions?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean ... yes, the answer to both questions is no.”

Jorge smiled—nothing but an uptick of the right corner of his mouth—and Thomas thought he must be enjoying every second of this. “The Flare works in stages, *muchacho*. Every person in this city has it, and I’m not shocked to hear that you and your sissy friends do, too. Someone like me is in the beginning, a Crank in name only. I caught it just a few weeks ago, tested positive at the quarantine checkpoint—government’s trying their damnedest to keep the sick and the well separate. Ain’t working. Saw my whole world go straight in the crap hole. Was sent here. Fought to capture this building with a bunch of other newbies.”

At that word, Thomas’s breath caught in his throat like a mote of dust. It brought back too many memories of the Glade.

“My friends out there with the weapons are all in the same boat as me. But you go and take a nice stroll around the city and you’ll see what happens as time goes by. You’ll see the stages, see what it’s like to be past the Gone, though you might not live to remember it for very long. And we don’t even have any of the numbing agent here. The Bliss. None.”

“Who sent you here?” Thomas asked, saving his curiosity about this numbing agent for later.

“WICKED—same as you. Only we’re not *special* like you say you are. WICKED was set up by the surviving governments to fight the disease, and they claim that this city has something to do with it. Don’t know much else.”

Thomas felt a mixture of surprise and confusion, then a hope for answers. “Who is WICKED? What is WICKED?”

Jorge looked just about as confused as Thomas felt. “I told you all I know. Why’re you asking me that, anyway? I thought the whole point here was that you were special to them, that they were behind this whole story you told me.”

“Look, everything I told you is the honest truth. We’ve been promised things, but we still don’t know much about them. They don’t give us any details. Like they’re testing us to see if we can make it through all this klunk even though we have no idea what’s happening.”

“And what makes you think they have a cure?”

Now Thomas had to keep his voice steady, think back to what he’d heard from the Rat Man. “The guy in the white suit I told you about. He told us it’s why we have to make it to the safe haven.”

"Mmm-hmm," Jorge said, one of those noises that sounded like a yes but meant exactly the opposite. "And what in the world makes you think they'll let us just ride in on a horse with you and get the cure, too?"

Thomas had to keep playing it nice and calm. "Obviously I don't know that at all. But why not at least try? If you help us get there, you have a small chance. If you kill us, you have zero chance. Only a full-gone Crank would choose the second option."

Jorge gave that pathetic smile again, then let out a small bark of a laugh. "There's something about you, Thomas. Few minutes ago I wanted to stab your friend in the eyeballs and then do the same to the rest of ya. But I'll be licked if you haven't half convinced me."

Thomas shrugged, trying to keep his face calm. "All I care about is surviving one more day. All I want is to make it through this city, and then I'll worry about what comes next. And you know what else?" He braced himself to act tougher than he felt.

Jorge raised his eyebrows. "What's that?"

"If stabbing *you* in the eyeballs could get me to tomorrow, I'd do it right now. But I need you. We all need you." Thomas wondered if he could ever actually do such a thing even as he said it.

But it worked.

The Crank eyed Thomas for a drawn-out moment, then stuck out a hand across the table. "I believe we have ourselves a deal, *hermano*. For many reasons."

Thomas reached out and shook. And even though he was filled with relief, it took everything he had not to show it.

But then Jorge brought it all crashing down. "I just have one condition. That ratty kid who junked me on the ground? Think I heard you call him Minho?"

"Yeah?" Thomas asked in a weak voice, his heart thumping all over again.

"He dies."

“No.”

Thomas said it with every ounce of finality and firmness he could muster.

“No?” Jorge repeated with a look of surprise. “I offer you a chance to make it through a city full of vicious Cranks ready to eat you alive, and you say no? To my one little itsy-bitsy request? That does not make me happy.”

“It wouldn’t be smart,” Thomas said. He had no idea how he was able to maintain his calm expression, where this bravery was coming from. But something told him it was the only way he could survive with this Crank.

Jorge leaned forward again, placed his elbows on the table. But this time he didn’t clasp his hands; instead, he balled them into fists. His knuckles cracked. “Is it your goal in life to piss me off until I cut your arteries open one by one?”

“You saw what he did to you,” Thomas countered. “You know the guts that took. If you kill him, you lose the skills he brings. He’s our best fighter, and he’s not scared of anything. Maybe he’s crazy, but we need him.”

Thomas was trying to sound so practical. Pragmatic. But if there was a person other than Teresa on the planet he could truly call a friend, it was Minho. And he couldn’t handle losing him, too.

“But he made me *angry*,” Jorge said tightly; his fists had not relaxed in the slightest. “He made me look like a little girl in front of my people. And that’s not ... acceptable.”

Thomas shrugged like he didn’t care, like it was a small and meaningless point. “So punish him. Make *him* look like a little girl. But killing him doesn’t help us. The more bodies we have that can fight, the better our chances. I mean, you *live* here. Do I really need to tell you this?”

Finally, finally, Jorge loosened his white-knuckled grips. He also let out a breath that Thomas hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

“Okay,” the Crank said. “Okay. But it has nothing to do with your lame attempt to talk me into it. I’ll spare him because I just made up my mind about something. Because of two reasons, actually. One of which you should have thought of yourself.”

“What?” Thomas didn’t mind his relief showing anymore—the effort to hide things was exhausting him. Plus, he was now too intrigued by what Jorge had to say.

“First off, you don’t really know all the details behind this test or experiment or whatever it is that WICKED is putting you through. Maybe the more of you that make it back—to that safe haven—the better chances you have of getting the cure. Ever thought that this Group B you mentioned are probably your competitors? I think it’s in my best interests to make sure all eleven of you make it now.”

Thomas nodded, but didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to take the slightest chance of ruining the victory here: Jorge believed him about the Rat Man and the cure.

“Which leads to my second reason,” he continued. “The thing I’ve made up my mind about.”

"And what's that?" Thomas asked.

"I'm not taking all those Cranks out there with me. With *us*."

"Huh? Why? I thought the whole point was that you guys could help us fight our way through the city."

Jorge adamantly shook his head as he leaned back in his chair and assumed a much less threatening position, folding his arms across his chest. "No. If we're gonna do this, stealth will work way better than muscle. We've been sneaking around this hellhole ever since we got here, and I think our chances of making it through—and getting all the food and supplies we need—are way better if we take what we've learned and use it. Tiptoe our way past the long-gone-crazy Cranks instead of slashing through them like a bunch of wannabe warriors."

"You're hard to figure out," Thomas said. "Not to be rude, but it sure seems like warriors are exactly what you guys want to be. Ya know, based on all the ugly outfits and sharp things."

A long moment of silence passed, and Thomas was just starting to think he'd made a mistake when Jorge burst out laughing.

"Oh, *muchacho*, you're one lucky sucker I like you. Not sure why, but I do. Otherwise I would've killed you three times already."

"Can you do that?" Thomas asked.

"Huh?"

"Kill someone three times."

"I'd figure out a way."

"Then I'll try to be nicer."

Jorge slapped the table and stood up. "Okay. So here's the deal. We need to get all eleven of you punks to your safe haven. To do it, I'm only taking one other person—her name is Brenda, and she's a genius. We need her mind. And if we do make it, and it ends up that there's no cure for us, then I don't think I need to tell you what the consequences will be."

"Come on," Thomas said sarcastically. "I thought we were friends now."

"Pshh. We ain't friends, *hermano*. We're partners. I'll deliver you to WICKED. You get me a cure. That's the deal or there's gonna be a lot of death."

Thomas stood as well; his chair creaked against the floor. "We already agreed on that, didn't we?"

"Yeah. Yeah, we did. Now listen, don't you dare say a word out there. Getting away from those other Cranks is gonna be ... tricky."

"What's the plan?"

Jorge thought for a minute, his eyes glued to Thomas as he did. Then he broke his silence. "Just keep your tongue-hole shut and let me do my thing." He started to move toward the door to the hallway, but stopped short. "Oh, and I don't think your *compadre* Minho is going to like it very much."

As they walked down the hallway to join the others, Thomas realized how achingly hungry he was. The cramps in his stomach had spread to the rest of his body, as if his internal organs and muscles were starting to eat each other.

"All right, everybody listen!" Jorge announced when they reentered the large torn-up room. "Me and the bird-face here have come to a resolution."

Bird face? Thomas thought.

The Cranks still stood at attention, nasty weapons gripped tightly, glaring at the Gladers, all of whom sat around the edges of the space, backs against the walls. Light beamed through the shattered windows and holes above.

Jorge came to a stop in the middle of the room and slowly turned to address the whole group. Thomas thought he looked ridiculous—like he was trying too hard.

"First, we need to get these people food. I know it seems crazy to share our hard-earned grub with a bunch of strangers, but I think we could use their help. Give 'em the pork and beans—I'm sick of that horse crap anyway." One of the Cranks snickered, a skinny runt of a kid whose eyes darted back and forth. "Second, being the grand gentleman and saint that I am, I've decided not to kill the punk who attacked me."

Thomas heard a few disappointed groans break out and wondered just how far along some of these people were with the Flare. But one girl, a pretty, older teenager with long hair that was surprisingly clean, rolled her eyes and shook her head as if she thought the noise was idiotic. Thomas found himself hoping she was the Brenda girl Jorge had mentioned.

Jorge pointed at Minho, who, not shockingly to Thomas at all, smiled and waved at the crowd.

"Pretty happy, are you?" Jorge grunted. "That's good to know. Means you'll take the news well."

"What news?" Minho asked sharply.

Thomas glanced over at Jorge, wondering what was about to come out of the guy's mouth.

The Crank leader spoke matter-of-factly. "After we get you stragglers fed so you don't go dying of starvation on us, you get to have your punishment for attacking me."

"Oh yeah?" If Minho was scared, he didn't show any sign of it. "And what's that gonna be?"

Jorge just stared back at Minho—a blank expression spread eerily across his face. "You punched me with both of your fists. So we're gonna cut a finger off each hand."

CHAPTER 29

Thomas didn't understand at all how threatening to cut off Minho's fingers was going to set the groundwork for them escaping from the rest of the Cranks. And he certainly wasn't stupid enough to trust Jorge after just one brief meeting. He began to panic that things were about to go terribly, horribly wrong.

But then Jorge looked at him, even as his Crank friends started to hoot and holler, and there was something there, in his eyes. Something that put Thomas at ease.

Minho, on the other hand, was a different story. He'd stood up as soon as Jorge had pronounced his punishment, and would've charged if the pretty girl hadn't stepped right up to him and placed her blade under his chin. It drew a drop of blood, bright red in the daylight pouring through the busted doors. He couldn't even talk without risking serious bodily harm.

"Here's the plan," Jorge said calmly. "Brenda and I will escort these moochers to the stash, let 'em eat up. Then we'll all meet on the Tower, let's say one hour from now." He looked at his watch. "Make that noon on the dot. We'll bring up lunch for the rest of you."

"Why just you and Brenda?" someone asked. Thomas didn't see who at first, then realized a man had said it—probably the oldest person in the room. "What if they jump you? There's eleven of them to two of you."

Jorge squinted—a scoffing look. "Thanks for the math lesson, Barkley. Next time I forget how many toes I have, I'll be sure and spend some counting time with you. For now, shut your flappin' lips and lead everybody to the Tower. If these punks try anything, Brenda will slash Mr. Minho to tiny bits while I beat the living hell out of the rest of 'em. They can barely stand they're so weak. Now get!"

Relief swam through Thomas. Once separated from the others, surely Jorge meant to run. Surely he didn't mean to go through with the punishment.

The man named Barkley was old but looked tough, veined muscles stretching the sleeves of his shirt. He held a nasty dagger in one hand and a big hammer in the other. "Fine," he said after a long stare down with his leader. "But if they do jump you and slit your throat, we'll get along just fine without ya."

"Thanks for the kind words, *hermano*. Now get, or we'll have double the fun on the Tower."

Barkley laughed as if to salvage some dignity, then started off down the same hallway Thomas and Jorge had used. He waved his arm in a "follow me" gesture and soon every last Crank was shuffling after him except Jorge and the pretty girl with the long brown hair. She still had her knife at Minho's neck, but the good part was that she had to be Brenda.

Once the main group of Flare-infected people left the room, Jorge shared an almost relieved look with Thomas; then he subtly shook his head, as if the others might still be able to hear them.

Movement from Brenda grabbed Thomas's attention. He looked to see her drop the knife

away from Minho and step back, absently wiping the small trace of blood there on her pants. "I really would've killed you, ya know," she said in a slightly scratchy voice. Almost husky. "Charge Jorge again and I'll sever an artery."

Minho wiped at his small wound with a thumb, then looked at the bright red smear. "That's one sharp knife. Makes me like you more."

Newt and Frypan groaned simultaneously.

"Looks like I'm not the only Crank standing here," Brenda responded. "You're even more gone than me."

"None of us are crazy yet," Jorge added, walking over to stand next to her. "But it won't be long. Come on. We need to get over to the stash and put some food in you people. You all look like a bunch of starved zombies."

Minho didn't seem to like the idea. "You think I'm just gonna waltz over to have a sit-down with you psychos, then let you cut my freaking fingers off?"

"Just shut up for once," Thomas snapped, trying to communicate something different with his eyes. "Let's go eat. I don't care what happens to your beautiful hands after that."

Minho squinted in confusion, but seemed to pick up that something was off. "Whatever. Let's go."

Brenda stepped in front of Thomas unexpectedly, her face only a few inches from his. She had eyes so dark it made the whites seem to glow brightly. "You the leader?"

Thomas shook his head. "No—it's the guy you just nipped with your knife."

Brenda looked over at Minho, then back at Thomas. She grinned. "Well, then that's stupid. I know I'm on the verge of crazy, but I would've picked you. You seem like the leader type."

"Um, thanks." Thomas felt a rush of embarrassment, then remembered Minho's tattoo. Remembered his own, how he was supposed to be killed. He scrambled to say something to hide his sudden mood shift. "I, uh, would've picked you, too, instead of Jorge over there."

The girl leaned forward and kissed Thomas on the cheek. "You're sweet. I really hope we don't end up killing you, at least."

"All right." Jorge was already motioning everyone toward the broken doors that led outside. "Enough of this lovefest. Brenda, we have a lot to talk about once we get to the stash. Come on, let's go."

Brenda didn't take her eyes off Thomas. As for him, he still felt the tingle that had shot through his entire body when she'd touched him with her lips.

"I like you," she said.

Thomas swallowed, his mind empty of a comeback. Brenda's tongue touched the corner of her mouth and she grinned, then finally turned away from him and walked to the doors, slipping her knife into a pants pocket. "Let's go!" she yelled without looking back.

Thomas knew every single Glader was staring at him, but he refused to make eye contact with any of them. Instead, he hitched up his shirt and walked forward, not caring about the slight smile on his face. Soon the others fell into step behind him, and the group exited the building and emerged into the white heat of the sun beating down on the broken pavement outside.

Brenda led while Jorge took up the rear. Thomas had a hard time adjusting to the

brightness, shielding his eyes and squinting as they walked close to the wall to stay in the scant shade. The other buildings and streets around him seemed to shine with unearthly luminescence, as if they were made of some sort of magic stone.

Brenda moved along the walls of the structure they'd just exited until they reached what Thomas thought must be the back. There, a set of steps disappeared into the pavement, reminding him of something in his past life. An entrance to some kind of underground train system, perhaps.

She didn't hesitate. Without waiting to make sure the others were behind her, she bounced down the stairs. But Thomas noticed that the knife had reappeared in her right hand, gripped tightly and held a few inches from the side of her body—a stealthy attempt at being ready to attack—or defend—on a moment's notice.

He followed her, eager to get out of the sun and, more importantly, make it to food. His insides ached more strongly for sustenance with every step he took. In fact, he was surprised he could still move; the weakness was like a poisonous growth inside him, replacing his vital parts with a painful cancer.

Darkness swallowed them eventually, welcome and cool. Thomas followed the sound of Brenda's footsteps until they reached a small doorway, through which shone a glow of orange. She went inside, and Thomas hesitated at the threshold. It was a small, damp room full of boxes and cans, with a single lightbulb hanging from the center of the ceiling. It looked far too cramped for all of them to enter.

Brenda must've sensed his thoughts. "You and the others can stay out there in the hallway, find a wall and sit. I'll start bringing out some tasty delights for you in a sec."

Thomas nodded even though she wasn't looking and stumbled back out into the hallway. He collapsed next to a wall down a ways from the rest of the Gladers, deeper into the darkness of the tunnel. And he knew for certain he'd never get back up unless he ate something.

The "tasty delights" ended up being canned beans and some type of sausage—according to Brenda, the words on the label were in Spanish. They ate it cold, but it tasted like the grandest meal ever to Thomas, and he devoured every bite. They'd already learned it wasn't smart to eat quickly after such a long period of fasting, but he didn't care. If he threw it all up, he'd just enjoy eating all over again. Hopefully a fresh batch.

After Brenda passed out the food to the starving Gladers, she walked over to sit by Thomas, the soft glow from the room illuminating the thin strands on the fringes of her dark hair. She set down a couple of backpacks—filled with more of the cans—at her side.

"One of these is for you," she said.

"Thanks." Thomas had already reached the bottom half of his can, scooping out one bite after another. No one spoke down the hall from them; the only sounds were slurping and swallowing.

"Taste good?" she asked as she dug into her own food.

"Please. I'd push my own mom down the stairs to eat this stuff. If I still *have* a mom." He couldn't help thinking of his dream and the brief glimpse he'd seen of her, but did his best to forget it—it was too depressing.

"You get sick of it fast," Brenda said, pulling Thomas out of his head. He noticed the way

she sat, her right knee pressed against his shin, and his thoughts jumped to the ridiculous idea that she'd moved her leg like that on purpose. "We only have about four or five options."

Thomas concentrated on clearing his mind, bringing his thoughts back to the present. "Where'd you get the food? And how much is left?"

"Before this area got scorched by the flares, this city had several food manufacturing plants, plus a lot of warehouses to hold the food. Sometimes I think that's why WICKED sends Cranks here. They can at least tell themselves that we won't starve while we slowly go crazy and kill each other."

Thomas scooped out the last bit of sauce from the bottom of his can and licked his spoon clean. "If there's plenty, why do you only have a few options?" He had the thought that maybe they'd trusted her too quickly, that they could be eating poison. But she was eating the same food, so his worries were probably far-fetched.

Brenda pointed toward the ceiling with her thumb. "We've only scoured the closest ones. Some company that specialized, not much variety. *I'd* kill your mother for something fresh out of a garden. A nice salad."

"Guess my mom doesn't have much of a chance if she's ever standing between us and a grocery store."

"Guess not."

She smiled then, though a shadow mostly hid her face. The grin still shone through, and Thomas found himself liking this girl. She'd just drawn blood from his best friend, but he liked her. Maybe, in small part, because of that.

"Does the world still have grocery stores?" he asked. "I mean, what's it like out there after all this Flare business? Really hot, with a bunch of crazy people running around?"

"No. Well, I don't know. The sun flares killed a lot of people before they could escape to the north or south. My family lived in northern Canada. My parents were some of the first ones to make it to the camps set up by the coalition between governments. The people who ended up forming WICKED later."

Thomas stared for a second, his mouth wide open. She'd just revealed more to him about the state of the world in those few sentences than anything he'd heard since having his memory wiped.

"Wait ... wait a second," he said. "I need to hear all this. Can you start from the beginning?"

Brenda shrugged. "Not much to tell—happened a long time ago. The sun flares were completely unexpected and unpredictable, and by the time the scientists tried to warn anyone, it was way too late. They wiped out half the planet, killed everything around the equatorial regions. Changed climates everywhere else. The survivors gathered, some governments combined. Wasn't too long before they discovered that a nasty virus had been unleashed from some disease-control place. Called it the Flare right from the beginning."

"Man," Thomas muttered. He looked down the hall at the other Gladers, wondering if they'd heard any of this, but none of them seemed to be listening, all absorbed in their food. They were probably too far away anyway. "When did—"

She shushed him, holding a hand up. "Wait," she said. "Something's wrong. I think we have visitors."

Thomas hadn't heard anything, and the other Gladers didn't seem to notice, either. But Jorge was already at Brenda's side, whispering something in her ear. She was just moving to stand up when a crash exploded down the hall—from the stairs they'd used to reach the stash. It was a horribly loud sound, the crumple and cracking of a structure falling apart, cement breaking, metal ripping. A cloud of dust fogged its way toward them, choking off the scant light from the food room.

Thomas sat and stared, paralyzed by fear. He could just see Minho and Newt and all the others running back toward the destroyed stairs, then turning down a branching hallway he hadn't noticed before. Brenda grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him to his feet.

"Run!" she screamed, and started dragging him away from the destruction and deeper into the underground.

Thomas snapped out of his stupor and swatted at her hand, though she didn't let go. "No! We have to follow my fr—"

Before he could finish, an entire section of the roof came crashing down onto the floor in front of him, blocks of cement falling on top of each other with thunderous cracks. It cut him off from the direction his friends had taken. He heard more fracturing of rock above him and realized that he no longer had any choice—or any time.

Reluctantly he turned and ran with Brenda, her hand still clutching his shirt as they sprinted into the darkness.

CHAPTER 30

Thomas didn't notice his heart pounding, or have time to contemplate what could possibly have caused the explosion. All he could think about were the other Gladers, now separated from him. Blind, he ran with Brenda—forced to entrust his life to her completely.

"Here!" she yelled. They made a sharp turn to the right; he almost stumbled and fell but she helped him stay on his feet. Once he had a good pace, she finally let go of his shirt. "Stick close to me."

The sounds of destruction behind them faded as they ran down this new path, and panic lit up inside Thomas. "What about my friends? What if—"

"Just keep going! Better for everyone to split up anyway."

The air cooled as they moved farther down the long hallway. The darkness deepened. Thomas felt his strength slowly returning and he caught his breath quickly. Behind them, the noises had almost stopped. He worried about the Gladers, but instinct told him it was okay to stay with Brenda—that his friends would be able to fend for themselves if they'd gotten out. But what if some of them had been captured by whoever had set off the explosion? Or killed? And who had attacked them? Concern seemed to bleed his heart dry as they ran along.

Brenda took three more turns; Thomas had no idea how she could know where she was going. He was just about to ask when she stopped, putting a hand to his chest to hold him back.

"You hear anything?" she said through huffs.

Thomas listened, but all he heard was their own breathing. Everything else was silence and darkness. "No," he told her. "Where are we?"

"A bunch of tunnels and secret passages connect the buildings on this side of town, maybe across the whole city—we haven't explored that far yet. They call it the Underneath."

Thomas couldn't see her face, but she was close enough that he felt and smelled her breath. It didn't reek, which surprised him, considering her living conditions. It kind of had a nonscent, somehow pleasant.

"The Underneath?" he repeated. "Sounds stupid."

"Well, I didn't name it."

"How much of it *have* you explored?" He didn't like the idea of running around down there without knowing what was ahead.

"Not much. We usually run into Cranks. The really bad ones. Way past Gone."

This made Thomas turn in a circle, searching the darkness for he didn't know what. His whole body tensed with fear as if he'd just jumped into ice water. "Well ... are we safe? What happened with that explosion, anyway? We need to go back and find my friends."

"What about Jorge?"

"Huh?"

"Shouldn't we go find Jorge, too?"

Thomas hadn't meant to offend her. "Yeah, Jorge, my friends, all those shanks. We can't leave them behind."

"What's a shank?"

"Never mind. Just ... what do you think happened back there?"

She sighed and stepped even closer to him, pressing her chest against his. He felt her lips brushing his ear as she spoke. "I want you to promise me something." She said it softly, in barely more than a whisper.

Chills broke out all over Thomas's body. "Um ... what?"

She didn't pull back, just kept speaking into his ear. "No matter what happens, even if we have to go alone, you'll take me all the way back. All the way to WICKED, to that cure you promised Jorge—he told me about it in the storage room. I can't stay here and slowly go insane. I can't do it. I'd rather die."

She grabbed both of his hands in hers, squeezed. Then she rested her head on his shoulder, her nose nestled against his neck—she had to be standing on the tips of her toes. Each breath from her sent a new wave of chills across his skin.

Thomas was enjoying her being so close, but it seemed so bizarre and out of the blue. Then he had a surge of guilt, thinking of Teresa. All this was stupid. He was in the middle of a brutal and ruthless attempt to make it across a wasteland, his life on the line, his friends maybe dead. Teresa could even be dead. To sit here and cuddle with some strange girl in the dark was about the most absurd thing he could think of.

"Hey," he said. He wiggled his hands from her grip and grabbed her upper arms, pushed her away. He still couldn't see anything, but he imagined her there, looking at him. "Don't you think we need to figure things out?"

"You still haven't promised me," she replied.

Thomas wanted to scream, couldn't believe how strange she was acting. "Fine, I promise. Did Jorge tell you everything?"

"Mostly, I think. Though I'd already guessed it the second he told our group to go on without us and meet at the Tower."

"Guessed what?"

"That we were going to help you get through the city in exchange for you taking us back to civilization."

This made Thomas worry. "If you came up with that so quickly, don't you think some of your friends did, too?"

"Exactly."

"What do you mean *exactly*? Sounds like you figured something out."

She reached out and placed her hands on his chest. "I think that's what happened. At first I worried it was a group of longer-gone Cranks, but since no one chased us, I think Barkley and a couple of his buddies rigged an explosion at the Underneath entrance, tried to kill us. They know they can get plenty of food somewhere else, and there're other ways to get down here."

Thomas still didn't understand why she was being so touchy with him. "That doesn't make sense. I mean, kill us? Wouldn't they want to use us, too? Come with us?"

"No, no, no. Barkley and the others are happy here. I think they're a little more gone than we are, starting to lose their rational sides. I doubt the idea even occurred to them. I

bet they just thought we were all gonna gang up and ... eliminate them. That we were making plans down here."

Thomas let go of her, leaned his head back against the wall. She pressed in again and wrapped her arms around his middle.

"Uh ... Brenda?" he asked. Something wasn't right with this girl.

"Yeah?" she mumbled against his chest.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you think it's a little weird how you're acting?"

She laughed, such an unexpected sound that Thomas thought for a second she'd succumbed to the Flare—become a full-blown Crank or something. She pulled away from him, still chuckling.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said through a schoolgirl snicker. "Guess we came from different places, that's all. Sorry."

"What do you mean?" He suddenly found himself wishing she'd hug him again.

"Don't worry about it," she said, her merriment at his expense finally subsiding. "Sorry for being so forward. It's just ... pretty normal where I come from."

"No ... it's okay. I ... I mean, good that. I'm good." He was glad she couldn't see his face, because it must've burned so red she'd start laughing all over again.

He thought of Teresa then. He thought of Minho and the others. He had to take control. Now.

"Look, you said it yourself," he said, trying to pump confidence into his voice. "No one chased us. We need to go back."

"Are you sure?" She had a suspicious tone.

"What do you mean?"

"I could get you through the city. Find enough food to take with us. Why don't we leave all of them? Make it to this safe haven place on our own?"

Thomas wasn't going to have this conversation. "If you won't come back with me, fine. But I'm going." He put his hand against the wall to guide himself and started walking in the direction from which they'd fled.

"Wait!" she called out, then caught up to him. She grabbed his hand and intertwined their fingers, now walking alongside him, hand in hand like old lovers. "I'm sorry. Really. I just ... I think it would be easier to make it through with fewer people. I'm not really great friends with any of those Cranks. Not like you and your ... Gladers."

Had he said that word around her? He didn't remember, but anybody could've at some point without his noticing. "I really think as many of us as possible need to make it to the safe haven. Even if we do get past the city, who knows what'll be next. Maybe then we'll really want numbers."

He thought about what he'd just said. Did he really only care about having numbers in the end so they'd have a better chance to be safe? Was he really that detached?

"Okay" was all she said in response. Something had changed in her. She seemed less confident. Less in charge.

Thomas took his hand from her grip, coughing into it as an excuse. He didn't reach out

for her again when he finished.

They didn't talk for the next few minutes. He followed her, sensing her even though he still couldn't see. After several turns, a light appeared up ahead, brightening quickly as they approached.

It turned out to be sunlight, pouring down from jagged holes in the roof—the aftermath of the explosion. Massive chunks of rock and twisted pieces of steel and broken pipes blocked the way to where the stairs had been—and it looked like climbing over the wreckage would be dangerous. A haze of dust clouded everything, making the rays of sunshine appear thick and alive, motes dancing like gnats. The air smelled of plaster and something burnt.

They were also blocked from the stash room with all that food, but Brenda found the two backpacks she'd brought out earlier.

"Doesn't look like anybody's here," she said. "They didn't come back. Jorge and your friends might've even gotten back up and outside somehow."

Thomas didn't really know what he'd been hoping to find, but at least one piece of good news was obvious. "No bodies, though, right? No one died in the explosion?"

Brenda shrugged. "Crankers could've dragged their bodies off. But I doubt it. No point."

Thomas nodded, as if solidifying her statement, holding on to it. But he had no idea what to do next. Did they go through the tunnels—the Underneath—searching for the other Gladers? Did they go out into the streets? Back to the building where they'd ditched Barkley and the others? Every idea sounded horrible. He looked around, as if the answer would magically present itself.

"We have to go through the Underneath," Brenda announced after a long moment; she'd probably been contemplating their options just like Thomas. "If the others went up top, then they'll be long gone by now. Plus, they'll pull any attention toward themselves and away from us."

"And if they're down here we'll find them, right?" Thomas asked. "These tunnels all come back together eventually, right?"

"Right. Either way, I know Jorge will have them moving toward the other side of the city, toward the mountains. We just have to make it so we can meet up and keep going."

Thomas looked at Brenda, thinking. Maybe only pretending to think, because he really had no option than to stick with her. She was probably his best—maybe only—bet of accomplishing anything other than a quick and horrible death at the hands of long-gone Crankers. What else *could* he do?

"Okay," he said. "Let's go."

She smiled, a sweet smile that shone through the grime on her face, and Thomas unexpectedly longed for that moment they'd had in the darkness together. Almost as quickly as his thought formed, though, it was gone. Brenda handed him one of the backpacks, then reached into hers and pulled out a flashlight, clicked it on. The beam shot through the dust as she shone it this way and that, finally aiming it down the long tunnel they'd already been down twice.

"Shall we?" she asked.

"We shall," Thomas muttered. He still felt sick about his friends, and he wondered if he was doing the right thing sticking with Brenda.

But when she started walking, he followed.

CHAPTER 31

The Underneath was a dank, miserable place. Thomas almost preferred the utter darkness to being able to see what was around him. The walls and floors were dull gray, nothing more than painted concrete, streaks of water trickling down the sides here and there. They passed a door every few dozen feet, but most of them were locked when he tried them. Dust coated the long-dark light fixtures on the ceiling, at least half of them busted, jagged glass screwed into rusty holes.

All in all, the place had the feel of a haunted tomb. The Underneath was as good a name as any. He wondered what the underground structure had been built for in the first place. Walkways and offices for who knew what kinds of jobs? Paths between buildings on rainy days? Emergency routes? *Escape* routes for things like massive sun flares and attacks from crazy people?

They didn't talk much as he followed Brenda through tunnel after tunnel, sometimes turning left at intersections or forks, sometimes turning right. His body quickly consumed any energy provided by his recent binge, and after walking for what felt like several hours he finally convinced her to stop and eat another meal.

"I'm assuming you know where we're going," he said to her when they set off again. Everything they passed looked exactly the same to him. Drab and dark. Dusty, where it wasn't wet. The tunnels were silent but for the distant drops of water and the swishing of their clothes as they walked. Their footsteps, dull thumps on the concrete.

She suddenly stopped and whirled on him, shining the light on her face from below. "Boo," she whispered.

Thomas jumped, then pushed her away. "Cut that crap," he yelled. He felt like an idiot—his heart had just about exploded from fright. "Makes you look like a..."

She let the flashlight fall to her side, but her eyes remained locked on his. "Look like a what?"

"Nothing."

"A Crank?"

The word cut to Thomas's heart. He didn't want to think of her that way. "Well ... yeah," he murmured. "Sorry."

She turned from him and started walking again, her light shining forward. "I am a Crank, Thomas. Got the Flare, I'm a Crank. You are, too."

He had to run a few steps to catch up with her. "Yeah, but you're not full gone yet. And ... me neither, right? We'll get the cure before we go nuts." The Rat Man had better have been telling the truth.

"Can't wait. And yeah, by the way. I do know where we're going. Thanks for checking."

They kept going, turn after turn, long tunnel after long tunnel. The slow but steady exercise took Thomas's thoughts off Brenda and made him feel better than he had in days. His mind drifted into a half-daze, thinking about the Maze and his splotchy memories and Teresa. Mostly about Teresa.

Eventually they entered a large room with quite a few exits branching off to the left and right, more than he'd seen previously. It almost seemed like it could be a gathering place joined by tunnels from all the buildings.

"Is this the center of the city or something?" he asked.

Brenda stopped to rest, sitting down on the ground with her back to the wall; Thomas joined her.

"More or less" she answered. "See? Already made it halfway to the other side of the city."

Thomas liked the sound of that, but he hated to think of the others. Minho, Newt, all the Gladers. Where were they? He felt like such a shuck-face for not looking for them, seeing if they were in trouble. Could they have already made it safely outside of town?

A loud pop startled Thomas, like a glass bulb breaking.

Brenda immediately shone her light back in the direction from which they'd come, but the hallway disappeared in shadow, empty except for a few ugly streaks of water on the walls, black on gray.

"What was that?" Thomas whispered.

"An old light busting, I guess." Her voice held no concern. She put her flashlight on the ground so it shone on the wall opposite them.

"Why would an old light just spontaneously break?"

"I don't know. A rat?"

"I haven't seen any rats. Plus, how would a rat walk on the ceiling?"

She gazed at him, a look of total mocking on her face. "You're right. It must be a *flying* rat. We should get the hell out of here."

A small, nervous laugh escaped before Thomas could stop it. "Hilarious."

Another pop, this time followed by the tinkle of glass sprinkling on the floor. It had definitely come from behind them—Thomas was sure of it this time. Someone had to be following them. And it couldn't be the Gladers—it sounded more like people trying to freak them out. Scare them.

Even Brenda couldn't hide her reaction. Her eyes met his, and they were full of worry.

"Get up," she whispered.

They both did it together, then quietly secured their packs. Brenda shone the light once again back the way they'd come. Nothing was there.

"Should we check it out?" she asked in a low voice. She was whispering, but in the silence of the tunnel it sounded way too loud—if anyone was close, they could hear every word she and Thomas were saying.

"Check it out?" Thomas thought that was the worst idea he'd heard in a long time. "No, we should get out of here, just like you said."

"What, you wanna just let whoever it is keep following us? Maybe gather some of his or her buddies to ambush us? Better to take care of it now."

Thomas grabbed her hand holding the flashlight and made it point to the ground. Then he leaned closer to her so he could whisper in her ear. "It could totally be a trap. There wasn't any glass on the ground back there—they had to have reached up and broken one of the old lights. Why would someone do that? It has to be someone trying to get us to go back there."

She countered. "If they have enough people to attack, why would they bait us? That's

stupid. Why not just come in here and get it over with?"

Thomas thought about that. She had a point. "Well, it's even more stupid to sit here and talk about it all day. What do we do?"

"Let's just—" She had started to raise the flashlight as she spoke, but cut short her words, her eyes widening in terror.

Thomas whipped his head around to see the cause.

A man stood there, just on the edge of her flashlight's range.

He was like an apparition—there was something unreal about him. He leaned to the right, his left foot and leg jiggling slightly, like he had a nervous tic. His left arm also twitched, the hand clenching and unclenching. He wore a dark suit that had probably once been nice, though now it was filthy and tattered. Water or something more foul soaked both knees of the pants.

But Thomas took all that in quickly. Most of his attention was drawn to the man's head. Thomas couldn't help but stare, mesmerized. It looked like hair had been ripped from his scalp, leaving bloody scabs in its place. His face was pallid and wet, with scars and sores everywhere. One eye was gone, a gummy red mass where it should have been. He also had no nose, and Thomas could actually see traces of the nasal passages in his skull underneath the terribly mangled skin.

And his mouth. Lips drawn back in a snarl, gleaming white teeth exposed, clenched tightly together. His good eye glared, somehow vicious in the way it darted between Brenda and Thomas.

Then the man said something in a wet and gurgly voice that made Thomas shiver. He spoke only a few words, but they were so absurd and out of place that it just made the whole thing that much more horrifying.

"Rose took my nose, I suppose."

A small cry escaped from deep within Thomas's chest, and he didn't know if it was audible or something he just felt inside, imagined. Brenda stood next to him, silent—transfixed, maybe—her light still fixed on the hideous stranger.

The man took a lumbering step toward them, having to wave his one good arm to keep his balance on the one good leg.

"Rose took my nose, I suppose," he repeated; the bubble of phlegm in his throat made a disgusting crackle. "And it really blows."

Thomas held his breath, waiting for Brenda to make the first move.

"Get it?" the man said, his snarl trying to morph into a grin. He looked like an animal about to pounce on its prey. "It really blows. My nose. Taken by Rose. I suppose." He laughed then, a wet chortle that made Thomas worry he might never sleep in peace again.

"Yeah, I get it," Brenda said. "That's some funny stuff."

Thomas sensed movement and looked over at her. She had pulled a can from her bag, slyly, and now gripped it in her right hand. Before he could wonder whether it was a good idea and whether he should try to stop her, she pulled her arm back and tossed the can at the Crank. Thomas watched it fly, watched it crash into the man's face.

He let out a shriek that iced Thomas to the core.

And then others appeared. A group of two. Then three. Then four more. Men and women. All dragging themselves out of the darkness to stand behind the first Crank. All just as gone. Just as hideous, consumed fully by the Flare, raging mad and injured head to toe. And, Thomas noticed, all missing their nose.

"That didn't hurt so bad," the leading Crank said. "You have a pretty nose. I really want a nose again." He stopped snarling long enough to lick his lips, then went right back to it. His tongue was a gruesomely scarred purple thing, as if he chewed it when bored. "And so do my friends."

Fear pushed up and through Thomas's chest, like toxic gas rejected by his stomach. He now knew better than ever what the Flare did to people. He'd seen it back at the windows of the dormitory—but now he faced it on a more personal level. Right in front of him, with no bars to keep them away. The faces of the Cranks were primitive and animalistic. The lead man took another lurching step, then another.

It was time to go.

Brenda didn't say anything. She didn't need to. After she pulled out another can and flung it toward the Cranks, Thomas turned around with her and they ran. The psychotic shrill of their pursuers' cries rose behind them like the battle call of a demon army.

Brenda's flashlight beam shakily crisscrossed left and right, bouncing as they sprinted straight past the slew of right and left turns. Thomas knew they had an advantage—the Cranks looked half broken, riddled with injury. Surely they wouldn't be able to keep up. But the thought that even more Cranks might be down here, maybe even waiting for them up ahead ...

Brenda pulled up and turned right, grabbing Thomas's arm to drag him along. He stumbled the first few steps, got his feet under him, pushed himself back to full speed. The angry shouts and catcalls of the Cranks faded a bit.

Then Brenda turned left. Then right again. After this second turn she flicked off the flashlight but didn't slow.

"What're you doing?" Thomas asked. He held a hand out in front of him, sure he was going to smack into a wall at any second.

A shush was the only response he got. He wondered about how much he was trusting Brenda. He'd put his life in her hands. But he didn't see what other options he had, especially now.

She pulled up again a few seconds later, stopping completely. They stood in darkness, catching their breath. The Cranks were distant but still loud enough, coming closer.

"Okay," she whispered. "Right about ... here."

"What?" he asked.

"Just follow me into this room. There's a perfect hiding spot in here—I found it while exploring once. There's no way they'll stumble on it. Come on."

Her hand tightened around his, pulled him to the right. He sensed that they were passing through a narrow door; then Brenda pulled him down to the floor.

"There's an old table here," she said. "Can you feel it?"

She pushed his hand out until he felt hard, smooth wood.

"Yeah," he answered.

"Just watch your head. We're gonna crawl under it and then through a small notch in the wall that leads to a hidden compartment. Who knows what it's for, but no way those Cranks'll find it. Even if they have a light, which I doubt."

Thomas had to wonder how they got around without one, but he saved the question for later—Brenda was already on the move, and he didn't want to lose her. Staying close, his fingers brushing her foot, he followed her as she scooted on her hands and knees under the table and toward the wall. Then they crawled through a small square opening into the long, narrow compartment. Thomas felt around, patting the surfaces to get a sense of where he was. The ceiling was only about two feet off the ground, so he continued to drag himself farther into the crevice.

Brenda lay with her back against the far wall of the hideout by the time Thomas awkwardly got himself in position. They had no choice but to lie stretched out, on their sides. It was a squeeze, but he fit, facing the same direction she did, his back pressed against her front. He felt her breath on his neck.

"This is real comfy," he whispered.

"Just be quiet."

Thomas scooted up a little so his head could rest against the wall; then he relaxed. He settled in, taking deep, slow breaths and listening for any sign of the Cranks.

At first the silence was so deep it had a buzz to it, a ringing in his ears. But then came the first traces of Crank noises. Coughing, random shouts, lunatic giggles. They came closer by the second, and Thomas felt a moment of panic, worried that they'd been stupid to trap themselves like this. But then he thought about it. The odds of the Cranks finding the hidden cubbyhole were slim, especially in the darkness. They'd move on, hopefully going

far away. Maybe even forgetting about him and Brenda altogether. That was better than a prolonged chase.

And if worse came to worst, he and Brenda could easily defend themselves through the tiny opening into the compartment. Maybe.

The Cranks were close now; Thomas had to fight the urge to hold his breath. All they needed was for an unexpected gasp for oxygen to give them away. Despite the darkness, he closed his eyes to concentrate on listening.

The swishes of shuffling feet. Grunts and heavy breathing. Someone banged on a wall, a series of deadened thumps against the concrete. Arguments broke out, frantic exchanges of gibberish. He heard a "This way!" and a "That way!" More coughing. One of them gagged and spit violently, like he was trying to rid himself of an organ or two. A woman laughed, so full of madness the sound made Thomas shudder.

Brenda found his hand, squeezed it. Once again, Thomas felt a ridiculous surge of guilt, like he was cheating on Teresa. He couldn't help that this girl was so touchy-feely. And what a stupid thing to think when you have—

A Crank entered the room right outside their compartment. Then another. Thomas heard their wheezy intakes of breath, the scrapes of their feet against the floor. Another entered, those footsteps a long slide and thump, long slide and thump. Thomas thought it might be the first man they'd seen, the only one who'd spoken to them—the one with the arm and leg shaking and useless.

"Little booooooy," the man said, a taunting and creepy call. Definitely him—Thomas couldn't forget that voice. "Little girrrrrrrrl. Come out come out make a sound make a sound. I want your noses."

"Nothin' in here," a woman spat. "Nothin' but an old table."

The creak of wood scraping against the floor sliced through the air, then ended abruptly.

"Maybe they're hiding their noses under it," the man responded. "Maybe they're still attached to their sweet little pretty faces."

Thomas shrank back against Brenda when he heard a hand or shoe scruff along the floor just outside the entrance to their little hiding place. Just a foot or two away.

"Nothin' down there!" the woman said again.

Thomas heard her move away. He realized that his whole body had tensed into a pack of taut wires; he forced himself to relax, still careful to control his breathing.

More shuffling of feet. Then a haunting set of whispers, as if the trio had met in the middle of the room to strategize. Were their minds still sound enough to do such a thing? Thomas wondered. He strained to hear, to catch any words, but the harsh puffs of speech remained indecipherable.

"No!" one of them shouted. A man, but Thomas couldn't tell if it was *the* man. "No! No no no no no no." The words quieted into a murmured stutter.

The woman cut him off with her own chant. "Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes."

"Shut up!" the leader said. Definitely the leader. "Shut up shut up shut up!"

Thomas felt cold inside, though sweat was beading on his skin. He didn't know if this exchange had any meaning whatsoever or was just more evidence of madness.

"I'm leaving," the woman said, her words broken by a sob. She sounded like a child left out of a game.

"Me too, me too." This from the other man.

"Shut up shut up shut up shut up!" the leader yelled, this time much louder. "Go away go away go away!"

The sudden repetition of words crept Thomas out. Like some control over language had snapped in their brains.

Brenda was squeezing his hand so hard it hurt. Her breath was cool against the sweat on his neck.

Shuffles of feet and swishing of clothes outside. Were they leaving?

The sounds decreased sharply in volume when they entered the hallway, tunnel, whatever. The other Cranks in their party seemed to have left already. Soon it became silent all over again. Thomas only heard the faint sounds of his and Brenda's breath.

They waited in the darkness, lying flat on the hard ground, facing the small doorway, pressed together, sweating. The silence stretched out, turned back into the buzz of absent sound. Thomas kept listening, knowing they had to be absolutely sure. As much as he wanted to leave that little compartment, as uncomfortable as it was, they had to wait.

Several minutes passed. Several more. Nothing but silence and darkness.

"I think they're gone," Brenda finally whispered. She flicked on her flashlight.

"Hello, noses!" a hideous voice yelled from the room.

Then a bloody hand reached through the doorway and grabbed Thomas by the shirt.

CHAPTER 33

Thomas shrieked, started swatting at the scarred and bruised hand. His eyes were still adjusting to the brightness of Brenda's flashlight; he squinted to see the firm grip the man had on his shirt. The Crank pulled, slamming Thomas's body against the wall. His face smashed into the hard concrete and a burst of pain exploded around his nose. He felt blood trickling down.

The man pushed him back a few inches, then pulled him forward again. Pushed and pulled again. And again, slamming Thomas's face into the wall each time. Thomas couldn't believe the strength of the Crank—it seemed impossible based on how he looked. Weak and horribly injured.

Brenda had her knife out, was trying to crawl over him, get in position to slash at the hand.

"Careful!" Thomas yelled. That knife was awfully close. He grabbed the man's wrist and wriggled it back and forth, trying to loosen that iron grip. Nothing worked, and the man kept pulling and pushing, battering Thomas's body as he hit the wall.

Brenda screamed and went for it. She swept across Thomas and her blade flashed as she drove it right into the Crank's forearm. The man let out a demonic wail and let go of Thomas's shirt. His hand disappeared through the doorway, leaving a trail of blood on the floor. His shrieks of pain continued, loud with trailing echoes.

"We can't let him get away!" Brenda yelled. "Hurry, get out there!"

Thomas, hurting all over, knew she was right and was already squirming to get his body in position. If the man reached the other Cranks, they'd all come back. They might have heard the commotion and already be turning around.

Thomas finally got his arms and head through the opening; then it became easier. He used the wall for leverage and pushed himself the rest of the way out, his eyes glued to the Crank, waiting for another attack. The man was only a few feet away, cradling his wounded arm against his chest. Their eyes met, and the Crank snarled like a wounded animal, bit at the air.

Thomas started to stand up but his head banged into the bottom of the table. "Shuck!" he yelled, then scrambled out from under the old slab of wood. Brenda was right on his heels, and soon they were both standing over the Crank, who lay on the ground in a fetal position, whimpering. Blood dripped from his wound onto the floor, already forming a small puddle.

Brenda held her flashlight in one hand, the knife in the other, its point aimed at the Crank. "Should've gone with your psycho friends, old man. Should've known better than to mess with us."

Instead of responding, the man suddenly spun on his shoulder, kicking his good leg out with shocking speed and strength. He hit Brenda first, sent her crashing into Thomas, and they both crumpled to the floor. Thomas heard the knife and flashlight clatter across the cement. Shadows danced on the walls.

The Crank staggered to his feet, ran for the knife, which had come to rest by the door to the hallway. Thomas pushed himself up and dove forward, crashing into the backs of the man's knees and tackling him to the ground. The man spun, swinging an elbow as he did so. It connected with Thomas's jaw; he felt another explosion of pain as he fell, his hand naturally flying up to his face.

Then Brenda was there. She jumped on the Crank, hit him in the face twice, stunning him, by the looks of it. She took advantage of the brief moment and somehow yanked the man around again so that he lay on his stomach, flat on the floor. She grabbed his arms and pinned them behind him, pushing up in a way that looked incredibly painful. The Crank wrenched and thrashed, but Brenda had him pinned with her legs as well. He started screaming, a horrific, piercing wail of pure terror.

"We have to kill him!" she yelled over it.

Thomas had gotten to his knees and was looking on in a stupor of inaction. "What?" he asked, drugged with exhaustion, too stunned to process her words.

"Get the knife! We have to kill him!"

The Crank kept screaming, a sound that made Thomas want to run as far away as possible. It was unnatural. Inhuman.

"Thomas!" Brenda yelled.

Thomas crawled over to the knife, picked it up, looked at the crimson goo on its sharp blade. He turned back to Brenda.

"Hurry!" she said, her eyes lit with anger. Something told him that her anger was no longer just for the Crank—she was mad at him for taking so long.

But could he do this? Could he kill a man? Even a crazed lunatic of a man who wanted him dead? Who wanted his shuck nose, for crying out loud?

He shambled back to her, holding the knife as if it were tipped with poison. As if just holding it might make him catch a hundred diseases and die a slow and agonizing death.

The Crank, arms yanked behind him, pinned to the floor, continued to scream.

Brenda caught Thomas's gaze, spoke with determination. "I'm gonna flip him—you need to stab him in the heart!"

Thomas started to shake his head, then stopped. He had no choice. He had to do this. So he nodded.

Brenda let out a cry of effort and fell to the right side of the Crank, using her body and her grip on his arms to make the man twist onto his side. Impossibly, his shrieks grew even louder. His chest was now there for the taking, arched and sticking up right in front of Thomas, just inches away.

"Now!" Brenda yelled.

Thomas tightened his grip on the knife. Then he put his other hand on it for more support, all ten fingers clasped tightly around the handle, blade pointing toward the floor. He had to do this. He had to do it.

"Now!" Brenda yelled again.

The Crank, screaming.

Sweat pouring down Thomas's face.

His heart, pumping, thumping, rattling.

Sweat in his eyes. His whole body aching. The terrible, inhuman screams.

"Now!"

Thomas used all his strength and plunged the knife into the Crank's chest.

CHAPTER 34

The next thirty seconds were a horrible, horrible thing for Thomas.

The Crank struggled. Spasmed. Choked and spat. Brenda held him while Thomas twisted the knife. Pushed it deeper. Life took its time as it drained from the man, as the light in his maddened eyes faded, as the grunts and the physical strain to hold on slowly quieted and stilled.

But finally, the Flare-infected man died, and Thomas fell backward, his whole body a tense coil of rusty wire. He gasped for breath, fought the sickening swell in his breast.

He'd just killed a man. He'd taken the life of another person. His insides felt full of poison.

"We need to go," Brenda said, jumping to her feet. "There's no way they didn't hear all that racket. Come on."

Thomas couldn't believe how unaffected she was, how quickly she'd moved on from what they'd done. But then again, they didn't have much choice. The first sign of the other Cranks came echoing down the hall, like the sounds of hyenas bouncing through a canyon.

Thomas forced himself to stand, pushed down the guilt that threatened to consume him. "Fine, but no more of this." First the head-eating silver balls. Now fighting Cranks in the darkness.

"What do you mean?"

He'd had enough of long black tunnels. Enough to last a lifetime. "I want daylight. I don't care what it takes. I want daylight. Now."

* * *

Brenda didn't argue. She guided him through several twists and turns and soon they found a long iron ladder leading toward the sky, out of the Underneath. The disturbing noises of Cranks lingered in the distance. Laughs and shouts and giggles. An occasional scream.

Moving the round manhole cover took some serious pushing, but it gave way and they climbed out. They found themselves standing in gray twilight, surrounded by enormously tall buildings in every direction. Broken windows. Garbage strewn over the streets. Several dead bodies lying about. A smell of rot and dust. Heat.

But no people. None living, anyway. Thomas felt a moment of alarm that some of the dead might be his friends, but that wasn't the case. The scattered bodies were older men and women, and decay had already set in.

Brenda slowly turned in a circle, getting her bearings. "Okay, the mountains should be down that street." She pointed, but it was impossible to tell because they didn't have a clear view and the buildings hid the setting sun.

"You sure?" Thomas asked.

"Yeah, come on."

As they set off down the long and lonely street, Thomas kept his eyes peeled, scanning every broken window, every alley, every crumbled doorway. Hoping to see some sign of

Minho and the Gladers. And hoping *not* to see any Cranks.

They traveled until dark, avoiding contact with anyone. They did hear the occasional scream in the distance, or the sounds of things crashing inside a building now and then. Once, Thomas saw a group of people scurry across a street several blocks away, but they seemed not to notice him or Brenda.

Just before the sun disappeared completely for the day, they turned a corner and came into full view of the city's edge, maybe another mile farther. The buildings ended abruptly, and behind them the mountains rose in all their majesty. They were several times bigger than Thomas would've guessed upon first glimpsing them a few days earlier, and were dry and rocky. No snowcapped beauties—a hazy memory from his past—in this part of the world.

"Should we go the rest of the way?" Thomas asked.

Brenda was busy looking for a place to hide. "Tempting, but no. First off, it's too dangerous running around here at night. Second, even if we made it, there'd be no place for cover out there unless we made it all the way to the mountains. Which I don't think we could do."

As much as Thomas dreaded spending another night in this wretched city, he agreed. But the frustration and worry over the other Gladers were eating away at his insides. He weakly replied, "Okay. Where should we go, then?"

"Follow me."

They wound up in an alley that ended in a large brick wall. At first Thomas thought it was a terrible idea to sleep in a place that had only one way out, but Brenda convinced him otherwise—Crank would have no reason to enter the alley since it didn't lead anywhere. Plus, she pointed out, there were several large, rusted trucks in which to hide.

They ended up inside one that looked like it had been torn apart for anything usable. The seats were tattered but they were soft, and the cab was big. Thomas sat behind the wheel, pushing the seat as far back as it would go. Surprisingly, he felt somewhat comfortable once settled. Brenda was just a couple of feet to his right, settling in herself. Outside, the darkness grew complete, and the distant sounds of active Cranks came through the broken windows.

Thomas was exhausted. Sore. In pain. Had dried blood all over his clothes. Earlier, he'd cleaned his hands, scrubbing them until Brenda yelled at him to quit wasting their water. But having the blood of that Crank on his fingers, on his palms ... he couldn't take it. His heart sank every time he thought of it, but he could no longer deny a terrible truth: if he hadn't had the Flare before—a slim hope that Rat Man had lied—he'd surely caught it by now.

And now, sitting in the darkness, his head propped against the truck's door, thoughts of what he'd done earlier came storming into his mind.

"I killed that guy," he whispered.

"Yeah, you did," Brenda responded, her voice soft. "Otherwise he would've killed you. Pretty sure that's doing the right thing."

He wanted to believe it. The guy had been fully gone, consumed by the Flare. He

probably would've died soon anyway. Not to mention he'd been doing everything possible to hurt them. To kill them. Thomas *had* done the right thing. But guilt still gnawed at him, crept through his bones. Killing another human. It wasn't easy to accept.

"I know," he finally responded. "But it was so ... vicious. So brutal. I wish I could've just shot him from a distance with a gun or something."

"Yeah. Sorry it had to go down that way."

"What if I see his nasty face every night when I go to sleep? What if he's in my dreams?" He felt a surge of irritation at Brenda for making *him* stab the Crank—maybe unwarranted when he really considered how desperate they'd been.

Brenda shifted in her seat to face him. Moonlight illuminated her just enough that he could see her dark eyes, her dirty but pretty face. Maybe it was bad, maybe he was a jerk. But looking at her made him want Teresa back.

Brenda reached out, took his hand and squeezed it. He let her, but he didn't squeeze back.

"Thomas?" She said his name even though he was looking right at her.

"Yeah?"

"You didn't just save your own skin, ya know. You saved mine, too. I don't think I could've beaten that Crank by myself."

Thomas nodded but didn't say anything. He hurt inside for so many reasons. All his friends were gone. Dead, for all he knew. Chuck was definitely dead. Teresa was lost to him. He was only halfway to the safe haven, sleeping in a truck with a girl who would eventually go crazy, and they were surrounded by a city full of bloodthirsty Cranks.

"You asleep with your eyes open?" she asked him.

Thomas tried to smile. "No. Just thinking about how much my life sucks."

"Mine does, too. Sucks big-time. But I'm glad I'm with you."

The statement was so simple and so sweet it made Thomas close his eyes, squeeze them shut. All the pain inside him transformed into something for Brenda, almost like what he'd felt for Chuck. He hated the people who'd done this to her, hated the disease that had made all this happen, and he wanted to make it right.

He finally looked at her again. "I'm glad, too. Being alone would suck even worse."

"They killed my dad."

Thomas lifted his head, surprised by the sudden shift in conversation. "What?"

Brenda nodded slowly. "WICKED. He tried to stop them from taking me, screamed like a lunatic as he attacked them with ... I think it was a wooden rolling pin." She let out a small laugh. "Then they shot him in the head." Tears glistened in her eyes, sparkling in the faint light.

"You're serious?"

"Yeah. I saw it happen. Saw the life go out of him before he even hit the floor."

"Oh, man." Thomas searched for words. "I'm really ... sorry. I saw maybe my best friend in the world get stabbed. He died right in my arms." He paused again. "What about your mom?"

"She hadn't been around for a long time." She didn't elaborate, and Thomas didn't push. Didn't really want to know.

"I'm so scared of going crazy," she said after a long minute of silence. "I can already feel it happening. Things look weird, sound weird. Out of the blue I'll start thinking about stuff

that doesn't make any sense. Sometimes the air around me feels ... hard. I don't even know what that means, but it's scary. I'm definitely starting. The Flare's taking my brain to hell."

Thomas couldn't handle the look in her eyes; he let his gaze drop to the floor. "Don't give up yet. We'll make it to the safe haven, get the cure."

"False hope," she said. "Guess that's better than no hope at all."

She squeezed his hand. This time, Thomas squeezed back.

And then, impossibly, they slept.

CHAPTER 35

A nightmare woke Thomas—something about Minho and Newt being cornered by a bunch of Cranks past the Gone. Cranks with knives. Angry Cranks. The first spill of blood finally jerked Thomas awake.

He looked around, scared that he'd yelled or said something. The cab of the truck still lay in the darkness of night—he could barely see Brenda, couldn't even tell if her eyes were open. But then she spoke.

"Bad dream?"

Thomas settled himself, closed his eyes. "Yeah. I can't quit worrying about my other friends. I just hate it so bad that we were separated."

"I'm sorry that happened. I really am." She shifted in her seat. "But I seriously don't think you need to worry. Your Glader buddies seemed capable enough, but even if they weren't—Jorge is one tough monkey. He'll get them through the city just fine. Don't waste the stress on your heart. *We're* the ones you should be worried about."

"You're doing a terrible job of making me feel better."

Brenda laughed. "Sorry—I was smiling when I said that last part, but you couldn't see me, I guess."

Thomas looked at his backlit watch, then said, "We still have a few hours before the sun comes up."

After a short silence, Thomas spoke again. "Tell me a little bit more about what life's like now. They took most of our memories—some of mine came back, but they're sketchy and I don't know if I can trust them. There isn't much there about the outside world, either."

Brenda sighed deeply. "The outside world, huh? Well, it sucks. The temperatures are finally starting to go down, but it'll be forever before the sea levels do the same. It's been a long time since the flares, but so many people died, Thomas. So many. It's actually kind of amazing how everyone who survived stabilized and civilized so quickly. If it weren't for the stupid Flare, I think the world would pull through in the long run. But if wishes were fishes ... oh, I can't remember. Something my dad used to say."

Thomas could hardly contain the curiosity that now raced inside him. "What *did* happen? Are there new countries, or just one big government? And how does WICKED fit into it all? Are they the government?"

"There are still countries, but they're more ... unified. Once the Flare started spreading like crazy, they combined all their forces, technology, resources, whatever to start up WICKED. They set up this crazy elaborate testing system and have tried really hard to have quarantined areas. They slowed the Flare down, but they can't stop it. I think the only hope is to find a cure. Hope you're right that they've done it—but if they have, they sure haven't shared it with the public yet."

"So where are we?" Thomas asked. "Where are we right now?"

"In a truck." When Thomas didn't laugh, she continued. "Sorry, bad time for jokes. Judging by the labels on the food, we think we're in Mexico. Or what used to be Mexico. It

makes the most sense. Now it's called the Scorch. Basically any area between the two Tropics—Cancer and Capricorn—is a complete wasteland now. Central and South Americas, most of Africa, the Middle East and southern Asia. Lots of dead lands, lots of dead people. So, welcome to the Scorch. Isn't it nice of them to send us sweet Cranks down here?"

"Man." Thoughts raced through Thomas's mind, mostly related to how he knew he was a part of WICKED—a huge part—and how the Maze and Groups A and B and all the junk they were going through were parts of it too. But he couldn't remember enough for it to make any sense.

"*Man?*" Brenda asked. "That's the best you can come up with?"

"I have too many questions—I can't seem to latch on to just one to ask."

"Do you know about the numbing agent?"

Thomas looked over at her, wished he could make out more of her face. "I think Jorge said something about that. What is it?"

"You know how the world is. New disease, new drugs. Even if it doesn't do jack to the illness itself, they still come up with stuff."

"What does it do? Do you have any?"

"Ha!" Brenda shouted it with contempt. "You think they'd give us any? Only the important people, the rich people can get their hands on that junk. They call it the Bliss. Numbs your emotions, numbs your brain processes, slows you down to a drunken stupor so you don't feel much. Keeps the Flare at bay because the virus thrives in your brain. Eats at it, destroys it. If there's not a lot of activity, the virus weakens."

Thomas folded his arms. There was something very important here, but he couldn't put his finger on it. "So ... it's not a cure? Even though it slows the virus down?"

"Not even close. Just delays the inevitable. The Flare always wins in the end. You lose any chance of being rational, having common sense, having compassion. You lose your humanity."

Thomas was quiet. Maybe more strongly than ever before, he felt that a memory—an important one—was trying to squeeze its way through the cracks in the wall blocking him from his past. The Flare. The brain. Going mad. The numbing agent, the Bliss. WICKED. The trials. What Rat Man had said, that their responses to the Variables were what this was all about.

"Did you fall asleep?" Brenda asked him after several minutes of silence.

"No. Just too much information." He felt dimly alarmed at what she had said, but he still couldn't put anything together. "It's hard to process it all."

"Well, I'll shut up, then." She turned away, rested her head against the door. "Push it out of your mind. Won't do you any good. You need rest."

"Uh-huh," Thomas mumbled, frustrated at having so many clues but no real answers. But Brenda was right—he could definitely use a good night's sleep. He got comfortable and did his best, but it took a long time before he finally dozed off. And dreamed.

He's older again, probably fourteen now. He and Teresa are kneeling on the ground, their ears pressed to the crack of a door, listening. Eavesdropping. A man and a woman are talking inside, and Thomas can hear them well enough.

The man first. "Did you get the additions to the Variables list?"

"Last night," the woman responds. "I like what Trent added for the end of the Maze Trials. Brutal, but we need it to happen. Should create some interesting patterns."

"Absolutely. Same with the betrayal scenario, if that ever has to play out."

The woman makes a noise that must be a laugh but that sounds strained and humorless. "Yeah, I had the same thought. I mean, good Lord, how much can these kids take before they'll go crazy on their own?"

"Not just that, it's risky. What if he dies? We all agree that by then he'll surely be one of the top Candidates."

"He won't. We won't let him."

"Still. We're not God. He *could* die."

There's a long pause. Then the man says, "Maybe it won't come to that. But I doubt it. The Psychs say it will stimulate a lot of the patterns we need."

"Well, there's a lot of emotion involved with something like that," the woman answers. "And according to Trent, some of the hardest patterns to create. I think the plan for those Variables is just about the only thing that will work."

"You really think the Trials are *going* to work?" the man asks. "Seriously, the scale and logistics of this thing are unbelievable. Think of how much could go wrong!"

"*Could*, you're right. But what's the alternative? Try it, and if it fails, we'll just be in the same spot as if we'd tried nothing."

"I guess."

Teresa tugs on Thomas's shirt; he looks to see her pointing back down the hall. Time to go. He nods, but leans back in to see if he can catch one last phrase or two. He does. It's the woman.

"Too bad we'll never see the end of the Trials."

"I know," the man answers. "But the future will thank us."

The first purple traces of dawn were what woke up Thomas the second time. He couldn't remember stirring once in his sleep since his middle-of-the-night talk with Brenda—not even after the dream.

The dream. It had been the strangest one yet, lots of things said that were already fading, too difficult to grasp and fit into the pieces of his past that were slowly, very slowly, beginning to come together again. He allowed himself to feel a little hope that maybe he wasn't in on as much to do with the Trials as he'd begun to think. Though he hadn't understood much in the dream, the fact that he and Teresa had been spying meant they weren't involved in every aspect of the Trials.

But what could the purpose of all this be? Why would the future thank those people?

He rubbed his eyes and stretched, then looked over at Brenda—her eyes still closed, her chest moving with slow and even breaths, her mouth slightly open. Though his body felt even stiffer than the day before, the restful slumber had done wonders for his spirit. He felt refreshed. Invigorated. Somewhat perplexed and brain-dead over his memory-dream and all the things Brenda had told him about, but invigorated all the same.

He stretched again and was just letting out a long yawn when he saw something on the wall of the alley. A large metal plaque, riveted to the wall. A sign that looked very familiar.

He pushed the door open and stumbled out onto the street and over to it. It was nearly identical to the sign in the Maze that had said WORLD IN CATASTROPHE—KILLZONE EXPERIMENT DEPARTMENT. Same dull metal, same lettering. Except this one said something very different. And he stared at it for at least five straight minutes before he moved an inch.

It said:

THOMAS, YOU'RE THE REAL LEADER

CHAPTER 36

Thomas might've gone on looking at the plaque all day if Brenda hadn't come out of the truck.

"I was waiting for the right time to tell you," she finally said, completely snapping him out of his daze.

He jerked his head to look at her. "What? What're you talking about?"

She didn't return his gaze, just kept staring at the sign. "Ever since I found out what your name was. Same with Jorge. It's probably why he decided to take his chances and go with you through the city and to this safe haven of yours."

"Brenda, what are you *talking* about?" Thomas repeated.

She finally met his eyes. "These signs are all over the city. All of them say the same thing. Exactly the same thing."

Thomas felt a weakening in his knees. He turned around and sank to the ground, resting his back against the wall. "How ... how is this even possible? I mean, it looks like it's been there for a while. ..." He didn't really know what else to say.

"Don't know," Brenda answered, joining him on the ground. "None of us knew what it meant. But when you guys showed up and you told us your name ... well, we figured it wasn't a coincidence."

Thomas gave her a hard stare, anger fighting its way up inside him. "Why didn't you tell me about this? You'll hold my hand, tell me about your dad being killed, but not this?"

"I didn't tell you because I was worried about how you'd react. I figured you'd probably run off looking for the signs, forget all about me."

Thomas sighed. He was sick of all of it. He let the anger go and blew out a long breath. "I guess it's just another part of this whole nightmare that makes no sense."

Brenda twisted to look up at the sign. "How could you not know what it means? Could it be any simpler? You're supposed to be the leader, take over. I'll help you, earn my way in. Earn a spot at the safe haven."

Thomas laughed. "Here I am in a city full of whacked-in-the-brain Cranks, there's a group of girls who want to kill me, and I'm supposed to worry about who the real leader of my group is? It's ridiculous."

Brenda's face wrinkled in confusion. "Girls who want to kill you? What're you talking about?"

Thomas didn't respond, wondering if he really should tell her the whole story from beginning to end. Wondering if he had the heart to go over it all again.

"Well?" she pressed.

Deciding that it would be nice to get it off his chest, and feeling like she'd gained his trust, he caved and told her everything. He'd given her hints and small parts, but now he took the time for details. About the Maze, about being rescued, about waking up and finding that it had all gone back to crappy. About Aris and Group B. He didn't linger on Teresa, but he could tell she noticed something when he mentioned her. Maybe in his eyes.

"So do you and this Teresa girl got a little somethin' going?" she asked when he was done.

Thomas didn't know how to answer. *Did* they have a little something? They were close, they were friends, he knew that much. Though he'd only gotten back some of his memories, he sensed that he and she had maybe even been more than friends before the Maze. During that awful time when they'd actually helped design the stupid thing.

And then there'd been that kiss ...

"Tom?" Brenda asked.

He looked at her sharply. "Don't call me that."

"Huh?" she asked, obviously startled, maybe even hurt. "Why?"

"Just ... don't." He felt terrible for saying it, but couldn't take it back. That was what Teresa called him.

"Fine. Shall I call you Mr. Thomas? Or maybe King Thomas? Or better yet, just Your Majesty?"

Thomas sighed. "I'm sorry. Call me whatever."

Brenda let out a sarcastic laugh and then they both grew silent.

Thomas and Brenda sat, backs against the wall, and the minutes stretched on. It was almost a peaceful quiet until Thomas heard an odd thumping sound that alarmed him.

"Do you hear that?" he asked, now fully at attention.

Brenda had stilled, head cocked to the side as she listened intently. "Yeah. Sounds like someone bangin' on a drum."

"I guess the fun and games are over." He stood up, then helped Brenda do the same. "What do you think it is?"

"Chances are it's not good."

"But what if it's our friends?"

The low *bump-bump-bump* suddenly seemed to come from everywhere at once, the echoes bouncing back and forth between the alley walls. But after a long few seconds, Thomas grew certain the sound was coming from a corner of the dead end. Despite the risk, he ran in that direction to get a look.

"What're you doing!" Brenda snapped at him, but when he ignored her, she followed.

At the very end of the alley, Thomas reached a wall of cracked and faded bricks, where four stairs led down to a scratched and worn wooden door. Just above the door, there was a tiny rectangle of a window, its glass missing. One broken shard still hung at the top, like a jagged tooth.

Thomas could hear music playing, much louder now. It was intense and fast, the bass powerful, drums banging and guitars screaming. Mixed in were the sounds of people laughing and shouting and singing along. And none of it sounded very ... sane. There was something creepy and disturbing about it.

It looked like the Cranks didn't just look for peoples' noses to bite off, and it gave Thomas a very bad feeling—this noise had nothing to do with his friends.

"We better get out of here," Thomas said.

"Ya think?" Brenda responded, standing right at his shoulder.

"Come on." Thomas turned to go just as she did, but they both froze. Three people had

appeared in the alley while they'd been distracted. Two men and one woman, now standing only a few feet away.

Thomas's stomach dropped as he quickly observed the new arrivals. Their clothes were tattered, their hair messy, their faces dirty. But when he looked closer he saw that they didn't have any noticeable injuries, and their eyes showed glints of intelligence. Cranks, but not full-gone Cranks.

"Hi there," the woman said. She had long red hair pulled into a ponytail. Her shirt was cut so low that Thomas had to force himself to keep his eyes focused on hers. "Come to join our party? Lots of dancing. Lots of lovin'. Lots of booze."

There was an edge to her voice that made Thomas nervous. He didn't know what it meant, but this lady wasn't being nice. She was mocking them.

"Um, no thanks," Thomas said. "We, uh, we were just—"

Brenda cut in. "Just trying to find our friends. We're new here, just getting settled."

"Welcome to WICKED's very own Crankland." This was one of the men, a tall, ugly guy with greasy hair. "Don't worry, most of 'em down there"—he nodded toward the stairs—"are half gone at worst. You might get an elbow in the face, maybe kicked in the 'nads. But no one's gonna try to eat you."

"'Nads?" Brenda repeated. "Excuse me?"

The man pointed at Thomas. "I was talkin' to the boy. Things might get a little worse for you if you don't stick close to us. You being female and all."

This whole conversation was making Thomas ill. "Sounds like fun. But we gotta go. Find our friends. Maybe we'll come back."

The other man stepped forward. This one was short but handsome, with blond hair in a crew cut. "You two are nothin' but kids. Time you got some lessons on life. Time you had some fun. We're officially inviting you to the party." He pronounced each word of the last sentence carefully, and with no kindness whatsoever.

"Thanks, but no thanks," Brenda said.

Blondie pulled a gun from a pocket of his long jacket. It was a pistol, silver but grimy and dull. Still, it looked as menacing and deadly as anything Thomas had ever seen.

"I don't think you understood me," the man said. "You're invited to our party. That's not something you turn down."

Tall and Ugly pulled out a knife. Ponytail pulled out a screwdriver, its tip black with what had to be old blood.

"What do you say?" Blondie asked. "Would you like to come to our party?"

Thomas looked at Brenda, but she didn't look back. Her eyes were glued to the blond man, and her face said she was about to do something really stupid.

"Okay," Thomas said quickly. "We'll go. Let's do it."

Brenda snapped her head around. "What?"

"He has a gun. He has a knife. *She's* got a shuck screwdriver! I'm not in the mood to have an eyeball smashed into my skull."

"Looks like your boyfriend's not stupid," Blondie said. "Now let's go have some fun." He pointed his pistol at the stairs and smiled. "Feel free to lead the way."

Brenda was clearly angry, but her eyes also revealed that she knew they had no other choice. "Fine."

Blondie smiled again; the expression would've looked natural on a snake. "That's the spirit. Fine and dandy, nothing to worry about."

"No one's gonna hurt you," Tall and Ugly added. "Unless you get difficult. Unless you act like brats. By the end of the party, you'll wanna join our group. Trust me on that."

Thomas had to fight to keep the panic from pounding through him. "Let's just go," he said to Blondie.

"Waiting on you." The man pointed at the stairs with his gun again.

Thomas reached out and grabbed Brenda's hand, pulled her close to him. "Let's go to the party, sweetheart." He put as much sarcasm into it as he could. "This'll be so much fun!"

"That's very nice," Ponytail said. "I get weepy when I see two people in love." She feigned wiping tears from her cheeks.

With Brenda by his side, Thomas turned toward the stairs, aware the whole time of the gun pointed at his back. They made their way down the steps to the old slab of a door, the space just wide enough for them to go side by side. When they reached the bottom, Thomas didn't see a handle. Raising his eyebrows, he looked back at Blondie, who stood two steps behind them.

"Gotta do the special knock," the man said. "Three slow fist thumps, three fast ones, then two knuckle taps."

Thomas hated these people. He hated the way they spoke so calmly and said mostly nice words, all of them full of mockery. In a way these Cranks were worse than the nose-missing guy he'd stabbed the day before—at least with him they'd known exactly what they were dealing with.

"Do it," Brenda whispered.

Thomas balled his hand into a fist and did the slow fist thumps, then the fast ones. Then he rapped the wood twice with his knuckles. The door opened immediately, the pounding music escaping like a blasting wind.

The guy who greeted them was huge, ears and face pierced several times, tattoos all over. His hair was long and white, reaching well past his shoulders. But Thomas barely had time to register this before the man spoke.

"Hey, Thomas. We've been waiting for you."

The next minute or so was a stunned blur of the five senses.

The welcome statement had shocked Thomas, but before he could respond, the long-haired man practically pulled him and Brenda inside, then started ushering them through a tightly packed crowd of dancing bodies, gyrating and jumping and hugging and spinning. The music was deafening, each beat of the drums like a hammer to Thomas's skull. Several flashlights had been strung from the ceiling; they swayed back and forth as people swatted them, sending beams of light slashing this way and that.

Long Hair leaned over and spoke to Thomas as they slowly made their way through the dancers; Thomas could barely hear him even though he was yelling.

"Thank God for batteries! Life's gonna suck when those run out!"

"How did you know my name?" Thomas yelled back. "Why were you waiting for me?"

The man laughed. "We watched you all night! Then this morning we saw your reaction to the sign through a window—figured you had to be the famous Thomas!"

Brenda had both arms wrapped around Thomas's waist, clinging to him, probably just so they wouldn't get separated. Probably. But when she heard this, she squeezed even tighter.

Thomas looked back, saw Blondie and his two friends following on their heels. The gun had been put away, but Thomas knew it could be brought right back out again.

The music blared. The bass thumped and rattled the room. People dancing and jumping all around them, the swords of light crisscrossing the dark air. The Cranks were slick and shiny with sweat, all that body heat making the room uncomfortably warm.

Somewhere right in the middle, Long Hair stopped and turned to face them, his odd white mane flopping.

"We really want you to join us!" he shouted. "There's gotta be something about you! We'll protect you from the bad Cranks!"

Thomas was glad they didn't know more. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. Play along, pretend to be a special Crank, and maybe he and Brenda would get through this long enough to slip away unnoticed at the right time.

"I'll go and get you a drink!" Long Hair called out. "Enjoy yourselves!" Then he scuttled off, vanishing into the thick, writhing crowd.

Thomas turned to see Blondie and his two friends still there, not dancing at all—just watching. Ponytail caught his attention with a wave of her hand.

"Might as well dance!" she yelled. But she didn't follow her own advice.

Thomas twisted around until he was fully facing Brenda. They needed to talk.

As though she could read his mind, she brought her arms up and wrapped them around his neck, pulling him close until her mouth was right next to his ear, her breath hot and tingling against his sweat.

"How did we get into this piece-of-crap situation?" she asked.

Thomas didn't know what to do but wrap his arms around her back and waist. He felt her heat through her damp clothes. Something stirred inside him, mixed with guilt and longing

for Teresa.

"I never could have imagined this an hour ago," he finally said, speaking through her hair. It was the only thing he could think of to say.

The song changed, something dark and haunting. The beat had slowed a bit, the drum somehow deeper. Thomas couldn't make out any words—it was as if the singer were lamenting some horrible tragedy, the voice wailing, high-pitched and sorrowful.

"Maybe we should just stay with these people for a while," Brenda said.

Thomas noticed then that the two of them *were* dancing, without meaning to or thinking about it. Moving with the music, slowly turning, their bodies pressed tightly together, clasping each other.

"What're you talking about?" he asked, surprised. "You're giving up already?"

"No. Just tired. Maybe we'd be safer here."

He wanted to trust her, felt like he could. But something about all this worried him—had she brought him here on purpose? It seemed a stretch. "Brenda, don't quit on me yet. The only option we have is to get to the safe haven. There's a cure for this."

Brenda shook her head slightly. "It's just so hard to believe it's really true. Hard to hope for it."

"Don't say that." He didn't want to think it, and he didn't want to hear it.

"Why would they have sent all these Cranks here if there was a cure? It just doesn't make any sense."

Thomas pulled back to look at her, worried about the sudden change in attitude. Her eyes were wet with tears.

"You're talking crazy," he said, then paused. He had his own doubts, of course, but he didn't want to discourage her. "The cure is real. We have to ..." He trailed off, looked over at Blondie, who was still staring at him. The guy probably couldn't hear, but better safe than sorry. Thomas leaned back in to speak directly in Brenda's ear. "We have to get out of here. You wanna stay with people who pull guns and screwdrivers on you?"

Before she could respond, Long Hair was back, a cup in each hand, the brownish liquid inside sloshing as he got bumped from all directions by the dancers. "Drink up!" he called out.

Something inside Thomas seemed to wake up then. Taking a drink from these strangers suddenly felt like a very, very bad idea. Impossibly, everything about this place and this situation had become even more uncomfortable.

Brenda had already started reaching for a drink, though.

"No!" Thomas yelled before he could stop himself, then raced to cover his mistake. "I mean, no, I really don't think we should be drinking that stuff. We've gone a long time without water—we need that first. We, um, just wanna dance for a while." He tried to act casual, but was cringing on the inside, knowing he sounded like an idiot—especially when Brenda gave him a strange look.

Something small and hard pressed against his side. He didn't have to turn to see what it was: Blondie's pistol.

"I offered you a drink," Long Hair said again, this time any sign of kindness gone from his tattooed face. "It would be very rude to turn such an offer down." He held the cups out again.

Panic swelled in Thomas. Any small doubt had gone—something was wrong with the drinks.

Blondie pressed the gun into him even harder. “I’m gonna count to one,” the man said into his ear. “Just one.”

Thomas didn’t have to think. He reached out and took the cup, poured the liquid in his mouth, swallowed all of it at once. It burned like fire, searing his throat and chest as it went down; he broke into a lurching, wracking cough.

“Now you,” Long Hair said, handing the other cup to Brenda.

She looked at Thomas, then took it and drank. It didn’t seem to faze her in the least; there was just a slight tightening of her eyes as it went down.

Long Hair took the empty cups back, a huge grin now spread across his face. “That’s just fine! Back to dancing ya go!”

Thomas already felt something funny in his gut. A soothing warmth, a calmness, growing and spreading through his body. He took Brenda back into his arms, held her tightly as they swayed to the music. Her mouth was against his neck. Every time her lips bumped against his skin, a wave of pleasure shot through him.

“What was it?” he asked. He felt more than heard the slur in his voice.

“Something not good,” she said; he could barely hear her. “Something drugged. It’s doing funny things to me.”

Yeah. Thomas thought. *Something funny.* The room had begun to spin around him, far faster than their slow turn should have caused it to. People’s faces seemed to stretch when they laughed, their mouths gaping black holes. The music slowed and thickened, the singing voice deepened, grew drawn-out.

Brenda pulled her head away from him, clasped the sides of his face with her hands. She stared at him, though her eyes seemed to jiggle. She looked beautiful. More beautiful than anything he’d ever seen before. Everything around them faded to darkness. His mind was shutting down, he knew it.

“Maybe it’s better this way,” she said. Her words didn’t match her lips. Her face was moving in circles, seemingly detached from her neck. “Maybe we can be with them. Maybe we can be happy until we’re past the Gone.” She smiled then, a sickening, disturbing smile. “Then you can kill me.”

“No, Brenda,” he said, but his voice seemed a million miles away, as if it were coming from an endless tunnel. “Don’t ...”

“Kiss me,” she said. “Tom, kiss me.” Her hands tightened on his face. She started to pull him down toward her.

“No,” he said, resisting.

She stopped, a hurt look washing over her face. Her moving, blurring face.

“Why?” she asked.

The darkness almost had him fully now. “You’re not ... her.” His voice, distant. A mere echo. “You could never be her.”

And then she fell away, and his mind did the same.

Thomas awoke to darkness, and it felt as if he had been put into some type of ancient torture device, nails slowly driving into his skull from all directions.

He groaned, a halting, terrible sound that only intensified the pain in his head. He forced himself silent, tried to reach up to rub—

His hands wouldn't move. Something held them down, something sticky pressing against his wrists. Tape. He tried to kick out with his legs, but they were bound, too. The effort sent another wave of pain crashing through his head and body; he went limp, moaning softly. He wondered how long he'd been out.

"Brenda?" he whispered. No response.

A light came on.

Bright and stabbing. He squeezed both eyes shut, then opened one just enough to squint through. Three people stood in front of him, but their faces were in shadow, the light source coming from behind.

"Wakey wakey," a husky voice said. Someone snickered.

"Want some more of that fire juice?" This came from a woman. The same person snickered again.

Thomas finally grew accustomed to the light and opened his eyes fully. He was in a wooden chair, wide gray tape tightly securing his wrists to the armrests and his ankles to the chair legs. Two men and one woman stood in front of him. Blondie. Tall and Ugly. Ponytail.

"Why didn't you just whack me out in the alley?" Thomas asked.

"Whack you?" Blondie responded. His voice hadn't seemed husky before; it sounded like he'd spent the last few hours yelling out on the dance floor. "What do you think we are, some kind of twentieth-century mafia clan? If we wanted to *whack* you, you'd already be dead, bleeding in the streets."

"We don't want you dead," Ponytail interrupted. "That would spoil the meat. We like to eat our victims while they're still breathing. Eat as much as we can before they bleed to death. You wouldn't believe how juicy and ... sweet that tastes."

Tall and Ugly laughed, but Thomas couldn't tell whether Ponytail was serious. Either way, it freaked him out.

"She's kidding," Blondie said. "We've only eaten other humans when it's gotten completely desperate. Man meat tastes like pig crap."

Another burst of giggles from Tall and Ugly. Not snickering, not laughing. Giggling. Thomas didn't believe they were serious—he was much more worried about how their minds seemed ... off.

Blondie smiled for the first time since Thomas had met him. "Joking again. We're not quite that Cranked-out yet. But I do bet people don't taste very good."

Tall and Ugly and Ponytail nodded.

Man, these guys are really starting to lose it. Thomas thought. He heard a muffled groan to

his left and looked over. Brenda was in a corner of the room, bound just as he was. But her mouth had been taped shut as well, making him wonder if she'd put up more of a fight before she passed out. It looked like she was only now waking up, and when she noticed the three Cranks, she shifted and wiggled in her chair, moaning through the gag. Her eyes lit with fire.

Blondie pointed at her. His pistol had magically appeared. "Shut up! Shut up or I'll splat your brain on the wall!"

Brenda stopped. Thomas expected her to start whimpering or crying or something. But she didn't, and he immediately felt stupid for thinking it. She'd already shown how tough she was.

Blondie dropped the gun to his side. "Better. Good God, we should've killed her when she first started screaming up there. And biting." He looked at his forearm, where the long arc of a welt shone red.

"She's with him," Ponytail said. "We can't kill her yet."

Blondie pulled a chair from the far wall and took a seat just a few feet in front of Thomas. The others followed suit, looking relieved, as if they'd been waiting hours for permission. Blondie rested the gun on his thigh, its business end pointed straight at Thomas.

"Okay," the man said. "We've got us quite a lot to talk about. I'm not going through the normal bullcrap with you, either. If you mess around or refuse to answer or whatever, I'm gonna shoot you in the leg. Then the other one. Third time, a bullet goes into your girlfriend's face. I'm thinking somewhere right between the eyes. And I bet you can guess what happens the fourth time you piss me off."

Thomas nodded. He wanted to think he was tough, think he could stand up to these Cranks. But common sense won out. He was taped to a chair, no weapons, no allies, nothing. Though honestly, he didn't have anything to hide. He'd answer whatever the guy asked him. Whatever ended up happening, he didn't want any bullets in his leg. And he doubted the guy was bluffing.

"First question," Blondie said. "Who are you and why is your name on signs all over this piece of crap city?"

"My name is Thomas." As soon as it came out, Blondie scrunched up his face in anger. Thomas realized his stupid mistake and hurried along. "You already knew that. Well, how I got here is a really weird story and I doubt you'll believe it. But I swear I'm telling the truth."

"Didn't you come on a Berg like the rest of us?" Ponytail asked.

"Berg?" Thomas didn't know what that meant, but he just shook his head and went on. "No. We came out of some underground tunnel about thirty miles or so to the south. Before that we went through something called a Flat Trans. Before that—"

"Hold it hold it hold it," Blondie said, holding up a hand. "A Flat Trans? I'd shoot you right now, but there's no way you just made that up."

Thomas wrinkled his brow in confusion "Why?"

"You'd be stupid to try getting away with an obvious lie like that. You came through a Flat Trans?" The man's surprise was obvious.

Thomas glanced at the other Cranks, both of whom had similar looks of shock on their

faces. "Yeah. Why's that so hard to believe?"

"Do you have any idea how expensive Flat Transportation is? Before the flares, it had just been revealed to the public. Only governments and billionaires can afford to use it."

Thomas shrugged. "Well, I know they have a lot of money, and that's what the guy called it. A Flat Trans. Kind of a gray wall that tingles like ice when you walk through it."

"What guy?" Ponytail asked.

Thomas had barely started and already his mind was jumbled. How could you tell a story like this? "I think he was from WICKED. They're running us through some kind of experiment or test. I don't really know everything. We ... had our memories wiped out. Some of mine came back, but not a whole lot."

Blondie didn't react for a second, just sat there staring at him. Almost *through* him, at the wall behind. Finally, he said, "I was a lawyer. Back before the flares and this disease ruined everything. I know when someone's lying. I was very, very good at my job."

Oddly, Thomas relaxed. "Then you know I'm not—"

"Yeah, I know. I wanna hear the whole thing. Start talking."

Thomas did. He couldn't say why, but it seemed okay. His instincts told him these Cranks were just like everybody else—sent here to live out their last horrible years succumbing to the Flare. They were just trying to find an advantage, find a way out, like anybody would. And meeting a guy who had special signs about him all over the city was an excellent first step. If Thomas had been in their shoes, he'd probably have been doing the same thing. Without the gun and bindings, hopefully.

He'd told most of the story to Brenda just the day before, and related it much the same way now. The Maze, the escape, the dorms. Being given the mission to cross the Scorch. He took special care to make it sound very important, stressing the part about the cure waiting at the end. Since they'd lost the chance to have Jorge's help getting through the city, maybe he could start over with these people. He also expressed his concern over the other Gladers, but when he asked if they'd seen them—or a big group of girls—the answer was no.

Once again, he didn't talk much about Teresa. He just didn't want to take any chances of endangering her somehow, though he had no idea how talking about her might do that. He also lied a bit about Brenda. Well, he never really lied directly. He just kind of made it sound like she'd been with him from the beginning.

When he finished, ending at the part where they'd met the three people in front of him in the alley, he took a deep breath and adjusted himself in the chair. "Can you *please* take this tape off me now?"

A flick of Tall and Ugly's hand caught his attention and he looked to see that a very sharp, shiny knife had appeared there. "What do you think?" he asked Blondie.

"Sure, why not." He'd held a stoic face throughout the tale, giving no hint yet as to whether he believed the story.

Tall and Ugly shrugged and got to his feet, walked over to Thomas. He was just leaning over, knife outstretched, when a commotion broke out above. Hard thumps on the ceiling, followed by a couple of screams. Then it sounded like a hundred people running. Frantic footsteps, jumping, more thumps. More screams.

"Another group must've found us," Blondie said, his face suddenly pale. He stood,

motioned for the other two to follow him. A few seconds later they were gone, vanishing up a set of stairs into the shadows. A door opened and closed. The chaos above continued.

All of this combined to scare Thomas nearly out of his wits. He looked over at Brenda, who sat perfectly still, listening. Her eyes finally met his gaze. Still gagged, she could only raise her eyebrows.

He didn't like their odds being left like this, taped to chairs. There was no way any of the Cranks he'd met that night had a chance against ones like Mr. Nose. "What if a bunch of full-gone Cranks are up there?" he asked.

Brenda mumbled something through the tape.

Thomas strained every muscle and started jumping his chair in tiny steps toward where she sat. He'd made it about three feet when the sounds of fighting and rumbling suddenly stopped. He froze, looked up at the ceiling.

Nothing for several seconds. Then a set of footsteps, maybe two, shuffling across the floor above. A loud thump. Another loud thump. Then another. Thomas imagined bodies being thrown on the ground.

The door at the top of the stairs opened.

Then footsteps, hard and heavy, running down. It was all in shadow, and a cold panic flooded Thomas's body as he waited to see who came down.

Finally, someone stepped into the light.

Minho. Dirty and bloody, burn marks on his face. Knives in both hands. *Minho*.

"You guys look comfy," he said.

CHAPTER 39

Despite everything he'd been through, Thomas couldn't remember the last time he'd been at such a loss for words. "What ... how ..." He stammered, trying to get something out.

Minho smiled, a very welcome sight. Especially considering how horrible the guy looked. "We'd just found you. Did you think we were gonna let these bunch of shuck-faces do anything to you? You owe me. Big-time." He walked over and started cutting the tape.

"What do you mean you'd just found us?" Thomas was so happy he wanted to giggle like an idiot. Not only were they rescued, his friends were alive. They were alive!

Minho kept cutting. "Jorge's been leading us through the city—avoiding Cranks, finding food." He finished up with Thomas and went to free Brenda, still talking over his shoulder. "Yesterday morning, we kind of spread out, spying here and there. Frypan was peeking around the corner into that alley up there just as those three shanks pulled a gun on you. He came back, we got mad, started planning our ambush. Most of those shucks were wasted or asleep."

Brenda pushed her way out of the chair and past Minho as soon as her tape was cut. She started toward Thomas, but hesitated—he couldn't tell if she was mad or just worried. Then she came the rest of the way, ripping the tape off her mouth as she reached his side.

Thomas stood up, and immediately his head pounded again, the room swaying, making him sick. He plopped back into the chair. "Oh, man. Anybody got some aspirin?"

Minho only laughed. Brenda had made her way to the bottom of the stairs, where she stood with arms folded. Something about her body language *did* make her look angry. Then he remembered what he had said to her right before passing out from the drug.

Oh, crap, he thought. He'd told her she could never be Teresa.

"Brenda?" he asked sheepishly. "You okay?" No way he was gonna bring up their odd dance and that conversation in front of Minho.

She nodded, but didn't look back at him. "I'm fine. Let's go. I wanna see Jorge." Short clips for words. No emotion in them.

Thomas groaned, glad to have the pain in his head as an excuse. Yeah, she was mad at him. Actually, *mad* might've been the wrong word. She looked more hurt.

Or maybe he assumed too much and she didn't care at all.

Minho came up to him, offered a hand. "Come on, dude. Headache or no headache, we need to go. No telling how long we can keep the shuck prisoners up there quiet and still."

"Prisoners?" Thomas repeated.

"Whatever you wanna call them—we can't risk letting them go until we get out. We've got a dozen guys holding more than twenty. And they aren't too happy. They might start thinking they can take us pretty soon. Once they get rid of their hangovers."

Thomas stood up again, this time much more slowly. The pain in his head rocked and throbbed like a steady drum, seeming to push on his eyeballs from behind with every thud. He closed his eyes until things quit spinning around him. He sucked in a deep breath, looked at Minho. "I'll be fine."

Minho flashed him a smile. "Such a man. Come on."

Thomas followed his friend to the stairs. He paused beside Brenda but didn't say anything. Minho peered back at Thomas with an expression that said, *What's up with her?* Thomas just shook his head slightly.

Minho shrugged, then stomped his way up and out of the room, but Thomas stayed back with Brenda for a second. She didn't seem to want to move just yet. And she refused to meet his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said, regretting his harsh words right before passing out. "I think I said something kinda mean—"

Her eyes snapped up to meet his. "You think I give a crap about you and your girlfriend? I was just dancing, trying to have some fun before everything went bad. What, you think I'm in love with you or something? Just dying till the day you ask me to be your Crank bride? Get over yourself."

Her words were so full of rage that Thomas took a step back, as hurt as if she'd slapped him. Before he could respond, she disappeared upstairs, all heavy footsteps and sighs. He'd never missed Teresa so badly as at that moment. On a whim, he called out to her with his mind. But she still wasn't there.

The smell hit him before he even entered the room where they'd danced.

Like sweat and vomit.

Bodies littered the floor, some sleeping, some huddled together and shivering; some even looked dead. Jorge, Newt and Aris were there, standing guard, slowly turning in circles with knives drawn and pointing.

Thomas saw Frypan and the other Gladers, too. Though his head still throbbed, he felt a rush of relief and excitement. "What happened to you guys! Where have you been?"

"Hey, it's Thomas!" Frypan roared. "As ugly and alive as ever!"

Newt came up to him, gave a sincere smile. "Glad you're not bloody dead, Tommy. I'm really, really glad."

"You too." Thomas realized with a weird numbness that this was what his life had become. This was how you greeted people after a day or two apart. "Has everyone made it so far? Where'd you guys go? How'd you get here?"

Newt nodded. "Still eleven of us. Plus Jorge."

Thomas's questions came faster than anyone could answer. "Any sign of Barkley and the rest of them? Were they the ones who set off the explosion?"

Jorge answered—Thomas saw that he stood closest to the door, holding a very nasty-looking sword that was currently resting on the shoulder of Tall and Ugly himself. Ponytail was next to him, and they were both curled up on the ground. "Haven't seen 'em since. We got away pretty quickly, and they're too scared to come deeper into the city."

The sight of Tall and Ugly had set off a small alarm inside Thomas. Blondie. Where was Blondie? How would Minho and the others have dealt with his gun? He looked around but couldn't find him anywhere in the room.

"Minho," Thomas whispered, then motioned for him to come closer. Once he and Newt were both right next to him, he leaned in. "The guy with really short blond hair. Seemed like the leader. What happened to him?"

Minho shrugged and looked at Newt to answer.

"Must've got out," Newt replied. "A handful did—we couldn't stop all of them."

"Why?" Minho asked. "You worried about him?"

Thomas looked around, lowered his voice even further. "He had a *gun*. He's the only one I've seen with something worse than a knife. And he wasn't very nice."

"Who gives a *klunk*?" Minho said. "We'll be out of this stupid city in an hour. And we should go. Now."

That sounded like the best idea Thomas had heard in days. "Okay, I want to get out of here before he comes back."

"Listen up!" Minho called out as he stepped away, walking through the crowd. "We're leaving now. Don't follow us, you'll be fine. Follow us, you'll be dead. Pretty easy choice, don't ya think?"

Thomas wondered when and how Minho had taken back the leadership role from Jorge. He looked over at the older man and noticed Brenda standing silently next to a wall, staring at the floor. He felt so bad about what had happened the night before. He really *had* wanted to kiss her. But for some reason he'd felt disgusted at the same time. Maybe it was the drug. Maybe it was Teresa. Maybe it was—

"Hey, Thomas!" Minho was yelling at him. "Dude, wake up! We're leaving!"

Several Gladers had already walked through the door and into the sunlight. How long had he been out from the drug? A full day? Or just a few hours, since morning? He moved to follow, stopping by Brenda and giving her a little push. He worried for a second that she wouldn't come with them, but she only hesitated a moment before heading for the door.

Minho, Newt and Jorge waited, keeping guard with their weapons, until everyone but Thomas and Brenda were out. Thomas watched at the doorway as the three Gladers backed away, slowly sweeping the tips of their knives and swords back and forth as they did so. But it didn't look like anyone was going to put up a fuss. They were all probably ready to move on, just glad to be alive.

Everyone gathered in the alley away from the stairs. Thomas stayed close to the top step, but Brenda made her way to the other side of the group. He swore he'd get her alone as soon as they were away and safe, have a long talk. He liked her, wanted to be her friend if nothing else. More importantly, he now felt about her much the way he'd felt about Chuck. For some reason a feeling of responsibility for her had overcome him.

"—make a run for it."

Thomas shook his head, realizing that Minho had been talking. Daggers of pain shot through his skull, but he focused.

"There's only about a mile left," Minho continued. "These Cranks aren't so hard to fight after all. So let's—"

"Hey!"

The shout came from behind Thomas, loud and screechy, filled with more than a hint of lunacy. Thomas spun around to see Blondie standing down on the bottom step, by the open door, his arm extended. His white-knuckled fingers held the gun, surprisingly steady and calm. It was pointed directly at Thomas.

Before anyone could move he fired, an explosion that rocked the narrow alley with a thunderous boom.

Pure pain ripped through Thomas's left shoulder.

CHAPTER 40

The impact knocked Thomas back, spinning him around so that he fell flat on his face, smacking his nose on the ground. Somehow, through the pain and muffled buzz in his ears, he heard the gun fire again, then the sound of grunts and punches, followed by metal clacking across the cement.

He rolled onto his back, hand clasped tight to where he'd been shot; he searched for the courage to look at the wound. The ringing in his ears grew louder, and he barely noticed out of the corner of his eye that Blondie had been tackled to the ground. Someone was punching the living crap out of him.

Minho.

Thomas finally gazed down at the damage. What he saw there made his heart double its pace.

A small hole in his shirt revealed a gooey red blob right in the meaty part above his armpit, blood pouring from the wound. It hurt. It hurt *bad*. If he'd thought his headache downstairs had been tough, this was like three or four of those, all smashed into a coil of pain right there in his shoulder. And spreading through the rest of his body.

Newt was at his side, looking down with worried eyes.

"He shot me." It just came out, a new number one on the list of the dumbest things he'd ever said. The pain, like living metal staples running through his insides, pricking and scratching with their little sharp points. He felt his mind going dark for the second time that day.

Someone handed a shirt to Newt, who pressed it tightly against Thomas's wound. This sent another wave of agony through him; he cried out, not caring how wimpy he sounded. It hurt like nothing he'd ever felt before. The world around him faded another few degrees.

Pass out, he urged himself. Please pass out, make it go away.

Voces came from a distance again, just like his own had on the dance floor after being drugged.

"I can get that sucker out of him." This was Jorge, of all people. "But I'll need a fire."

"We can't do this here." Was that Newt?

"Let's get out of this shuck city." Definitely Minho.

"All right. Help me carry him." No idea.

Hands gripping him from underneath, grasping his legs. The pain. Someone saying something about the count of three. The pain. It really, really hurt. One. The pain. Two. *Ouch.* Three!

He rose toward the sky, and the pain exploded anew, fresh and raw.

Then his wish to pass out came true and darkness washed his troubles away.

He awoke, his mind a haze.

Light blinded him; he couldn't open his eyes all the way. His whole body jostled and bumped, hands still holding him tight. He heard the sounds of breathing, heavy and fast.

Feet pounding on pavement. Someone shouting, though he couldn't understand the words. In the distance, the mad screams of Cranks. Close enough that they might be pursuing.

Heat. The air was burning hot.

His shoulder, on fire. Pain tore through him like a series of toxic explosions, and he fled to the darkness once again.

* * *

He cracked his eyes.

This time the light was much less intense. The golden gleam of twilight. He lay on his back, the ground beneath him hard. A rock dug into his lower back, but it felt heavenly compared to the rot in his shoulder. People lumbered about him, talking in short and tight whispers.

The cackle of Cranks had grown more distant. He saw nothing but sky above him, no buildings. Pain in his shoulder. Oh, the pain.

A fire licked and spit somewhere close. He felt the heat wafting across his body, hot wind through hot air.

Someone said, "You better hold him down. Legs and arms."

Though his mind still floated in fog, those words didn't sound good.

A flash of light on silver in his vision, the fading sun's reflection on ... a knife? Was it glowing red?

"This is gonna hurt somethin' awful." No idea who said it.

He heard the hiss right before a billion pounds of dynamite exploded in his shoulder.

His mind said goodbye for the third time.

He sensed that a long spell of time had passed this go-around. When he opened his eyes again, stars like pinpricks of daylight shone down from the dark sky. Someone held his hand. He tried to turn his head to look over, but it sent a fresh wave of agony shooting down his spine.

He didn't need to see. It was Brenda.

Who else would it be? Plus, the hand was soft and small. Brenda for sure.

The intense pain of before had been replaced. In some ways, he now felt worse. Something like an illness crept through the inner workings of his body. A gnawing, itching filthiness. Something foul, like maggots squirming through his veins and the hollows of his bones and between his muscles. Eating away at him.

It hurt, but now it was more of an ache. Deep and raw. His stomach, gurgly and unstable, fire in his veins.

He didn't know how he knew, but he was sure of it. Something was wrong.

The word *infection* popped up in his mind, then stayed there.

He drifted off.

The sunrise woke Thomas in the morning. The first thing he realized was that Brenda no longer held his hand. Then he noticed the cool air of early morning on his skin, which gave him the briefest moment of pleasure.

Then he became fully aware of the throbbing pain that consumed his body, dwelling in every last molecule. It no longer had anything to do with his shoulder and the bullet wound. Something terrible had gone wrong with his entire system.

Infection. That word again.

He didn't know how he'd make it through the next five minutes. Or the next hour. How could he possibly go through an entire day? Then sleep and start the whole thing all over again? Despair sucked at him, an empty, yawning void that threatened to pull him down into an awful abyss. A panic-laced craziness struck him. Suffusing it all, the pain.

That was when things got bizarre.

The others heard it before he did. Minho and everyone else were suddenly scrambling, searching for something, many of them scanning the sky. The sky? Why would they be doing that?

Someone—Jorge, he thought—yelled the word *Berg*.

Then Thomas heard it. A deep thrumming, full of heavy thumps. It grew louder before he even realized what was going on, and soon it felt as though the noise were inside his skull, rattling his jaw and eardrums and sluicing down his spine. A constant, steady pounding, like the world's largest drums; behind it all, the massive hum of heavy machinery. A wind picked up, and at first Thomas worried that a storm was starting again, but the sky was perfectly blue. Not a cloud to be seen.

The noise worsened his pain, made him begin to shut down again. But he fought it, desperate to know the source of the sounds. Minho shouted something, pointed to the north. Thomas hurt too much to turn and look. The wind grew stronger, gusting across him, ripping at his clothes. Dust flew and clouded the air. Suddenly Brenda was beside him again, squeezing his hand.

She leaned over until her face was only inches above his. Her hair whipped all around.

"I'm sorry," she said, though he barely heard her. "I didn't mean to—I mean, I know that you ..." She fumbled for words, looked away.

What was she talking about? Why didn't she tell him what was making that horrible noise! He hurt so bad. ...

A look of curious horror spread across her face, eyes widening, mouth dropping open. And then she was being pushed away by two ...

Panic seized Thomas now. Two people, dressed in the strangest outfits he'd ever seen. One-piece, baggy and dark green—letters he couldn't read scrawled across the chest. Goggles covering their faces. No, not goggles. Some kind of gas mask. They looked hideous and alien. They looked evil, like giant, demented, human-eating insects wrapped in plastic.

One of them grabbed his legs by the ankles. The other put his hands under him, gripped him by the armpits, and Thomas screamed. They lifted, and pain went coursing through his body. He'd almost grown used to the agony by now, but this felt even worse. It hurt too much to struggle, so he went limp.

Then they were moving, carrying him, and for the first time, Thomas's eyes focused enough to read the letters on the chest of the person at his feet.

WICKED.

Darkness threatened to take him again. He let it, but the pain went with him.

CHAPTER 41

Once again, he woke to a blinding white light—this one shining directly into his eyes from above. He knew immediately it wasn't the sun—it was different. Plus, it shone from only a short distance away. Even as he clenched his eyes shut again, the afterimage of a bulb floated across the darkness.

He heard voices—more like whispers. He couldn't understand a word. Too soft, just out-of-reach enough that they were impossible to decipher.

He heard the click and clack of metal against metal. Small sounds, and the first thing he thought of was medical instruments. Scalpels and those little rods with mirrors on the end. These images swam up from the murkiness of his memory bank, and combining them with the light, he knew.

He'd been taken to a hospital. A hospital. The last thing he could ever imagine existing anywhere in the Scorch. Or had he been taken away? Far away? Through a Flat Trans, maybe?

A shadow crossed the light, and Thomas opened his eyes. Someone was looking down at him, dressed in the same ridiculous outfit as those who'd brought him here. The gas mask, or whatever it was. Big goggles. Behind the protective glass, he saw dark eyes focused on him. A woman's eyes, though he didn't know how he could tell.

"Can you hear me?" she asked. Yes, a woman, even though the mask muffled her voice.

Thomas tried to nod, didn't know if he actually did or not.

"This wasn't supposed to happen." She'd pulled her head back a bit and looked away, which made Thomas think she hadn't meant that comment for him. "How'd a working gun get in the city? You have any idea the amount of rust and gunk must've been on that bullet? Not to mention the germs."

She sounded very angry.

A man replied. "Just get on with it. We have to send him back. Quickly."

Thomas barely had time to process what they were saying. A new pain blossomed in his shoulder, unbearable.

He passed out for the umpteenth time.

Awake again.

Something was off. He couldn't tell what. The same light shone from the same spot above; he looked to the side this time instead of closing his eyes. He could see better, focus more. Silver squares of ceiling tile, a steel contraption with all kinds of dials and switches and monitors. None of it made sense.

Then it hit him. Hit him with such shock and wonder that he scarcely believed it could be true.

He felt no pain. None. Nothing at all.

No people stood around him. No crazy green alien suits, no goggles, no one sticking scalpels in his shoulder. He seemed to be alone, and the absence of pain was pure ecstasy.

He didn't know it was possible to feel this good.

It wasn't. Had to be a drug.

He dozed off.

* * *

He stirred at the sound of soft voices, though it came through the haze of his drugged stupor.

Somehow he knew enough to keep his eyes shut, see if he could learn anything about the people who'd taken him. The people who'd evidently fixed him up and rid his body of the infection.

A man was talking. "Are we sure this doesn't screw anything up?"

"I'm positive." This from a woman. "Well, as positive as I can be. If anything, it may stimulate a pattern in the killzone that we hadn't expected. A bonus, possibly? I can't imagine it leading him or anyone else in a direction that would prevent the other patterns we're looking for."

"Dear God above, I hope you're right," the man responded.

Another woman spoke, her voice high, almost crystalline. "How many of the ones left do you think are still viable Candidates?" Thomas sensed the capital letter in that word —*Candidates*. Confused, he tried to remain still, listen.

"We're down to four or five," the first woman answered. "Thomas here is by far our greatest hope. He responds really sharply to the Variables. Wait, I think I just saw his eyes move."

Thomas froze, tried to stare straight ahead into the darkness of his eyelids. It was hard, but he forced himself to breathe evenly, as if asleep. He didn't know exactly what these people were talking about, but he desperately wanted to hear more. *Knew* he needed to hear more.

"Who cares if he's listening?" the man asked. "He couldn't possibly understand enough to affect his responses one way or the other. It'll do him good to know we made a huge exception to get that infection out of him. That WICKED will do what it has to when necessary."

The high-pitched-voice lady laughed, one of the most pleasant sounds Thomas had ever heard. "If you're listening, Thomas, don't get too excited. We're about to dump you right back where we took you from."

The drugs coursing through Thomas's veins seemed to surge, and he felt himself fading into bliss. He tried to open his eyes, but couldn't. Before he drifted off he did hear one last thing, from the first woman. Something very odd.

"It's what you would've wanted us to do."

CHAPTER 42

The mysterious people were true to their word.

The next time Thomas woke up, he was hanging in the air, strung tightly to a canvas litter with handles, swaying back and forth. A large rope attached to a ring of blue metal held him as he was lowered from something huge, the whole time accompanied by the same explosion of hums and heavy thumps that he'd heard when they'd come to get him. He gripped the sides of the litter, terrified.

Finally, he felt a soft bump, and then a million faces appeared around him. Minho, Newt, Jorge, Brenda, Frypan, Aris, the other Gladers. The rope holding him detached and sprang up into the air. Then, almost instantaneously, the vessel from which he'd been lowered vaulted away, disappearing into the brilliance of the sun directly overhead. The sounds of its engines faded, and soon it was gone.

Then everyone spoke at once.

"What was that all about?"

"Are you okay?"

"What'd they do to you?"

"Who was that?"

"Have fun in the Berg?"

"How's your shoulder?"

Thomas ignored it all and tried to get up, but realized that the ropes holding him to the litter still bound him tightly to it. He found Minho with his eyes. "A little help here?"

As Minho and a couple of others worked on untying him, Thomas had a disturbing thought. The people from WICKED had shown up to save him pretty quickly. From what they'd said, it was something they hadn't planned on, but they'd done it anyway. Which meant they were watching and could swoop in to save them whenever they wanted to.

But they hadn't until now. How many people had died in the last few days while WICKED stood by and watched? And why did that change for Thomas, just because he'd been shot by a rusty bullet?

It was too much to think about.

Once freed, he got to his feet and stretched out his muscles, refusing to acknowledge the second volley of questions flung his way. The day was hot, brutally hot, and as he stretched, he realized that he felt no pain other than the slightest of aches in his shoulder. He looked down to see that he was wearing fresh clothes, and that there was the bulge of a bandage under the left sleeve of his shirt. But his thoughts immediately went to something else.

"What are you guys doing out in the open? Your skin is gonna bake!"

Minho didn't answer, just pointed at something behind him, and Thomas looked to see a very shabby hut. It was made out of dry wood that seemed like it might crumble to pure dust at any second, but it was big enough to provide shelter for everyone there.

"We better get back under that thing," Minho said. Thomas realized that they must've run

out just to see him delivered from the huge flying ... Berg? Jorge had called it a Berg.

The group trekked over to the shelter; Thomas told them a dozen times that he'd explain everything from beginning to end once they were settled. Brenda found him, walked right next to him. But she didn't offer her hand, and Thomas felt an uneasy relief. She also didn't say anything, and neither did he.

The miserable city of the Cranks lay a few miles distant, huddling in all its decay and madness to the south. No sign of the infected people anywhere. To the north, the mountains loomed now, only a day or so away. Craggy and lifeless, they sloped up higher and higher until they ended in jagged brown peaks. Harsh cuts in the rock made the whole range appear as though a giant had hacked at it with a massive axe for days and days, letting out all its giant frustration.

They reached the shelter, the wood dry as rotted bone. It looked as if it had stood there for a hundred years—maybe built by a farmer in the days before the world was ravaged. How it had withstood everything was a complete mystery. But one flick of a match and the thing would probably burn down in three seconds.

"All right," Minho said, pointing to a spot in the far end of the shade. "You sit there, get yourself all nice and comfy and start talking."

Thomas couldn't believe how good he felt—just a dull ache in his shoulder. And he didn't think he had any trace of drugs in him anymore. Whatever doctors WICKED had unleashed on him had been brilliant at what they did. He took a seat and waited for everyone to get situated in front of him, sitting cross-legged on the hot and dusty ground. He was like a schoolteacher readying to give a lesson—a blurry flash from his past.

Minho was the last to take a seat, right next to Brenda. "Okay, tell us about your adventures with the aliens in their big bad spaceship."

"You sure about this?" Thomas asked. "How many days left to get over those mountains, to the safe haven?"

"Five days, dude. But you know we can't go tramping around in this sun with nothing to protect us. You're gonna talk, then we're gonna sleep, then we're all gonna bust our humps walking all night. Get on it."

"Good that," Thomas said, wondering what they'd been doing while he was away, but realizing it didn't matter all that much. "Save all your questions till the end, children." When not a single person laughed, or even smiled, he coughed and hurried on. "It was WICKED that came and got me. I kept passing out, but they took me to some doctors who totally fixed me up. I heard them saying something about how it wasn't supposed to happen, how the gun had been a factor they hadn't expected. The bullet set off a nasty infection in me, and I guess they felt pretty strongly that it wasn't time for me to die."

Blank faces stared back at him.

Thomas knew it would be hard for them to accept—even after he'd told the whole story. "Just telling you what I heard."

He went on to explain more. Every detail of what he could remember, and about the odd bedside conversation he'd listened in on. Things about killzone patterns and Candidates. More about the Variables. None of it had made much sense the first time around, and it made even less now as he tried to recall it word for word. The Gladers—plus Jorge and Brenda—looked as frustrated as he felt.

"Well, that really cleared things up," Minho finally said. "Must have something to do with all those signs about you in the city."

Thomas shrugged. "Glad to know you're so happy to see me alive."

"Hey, if you wanna be the leader, no skin off my back. I *am* happy to see you alive."

"No thanks. You keep it."

Minho didn't respond. Thomas couldn't deny that the signs weighed heavily on him—what did it really mean that WICKED wanted him to be the leader? And what should he do about it?

Newt got to his feet, his face in a deep scowl of concentration. "So we're all potential candidates for *something*. And maybe the purpose of all the buggin' klunk we've been through is to weed out those who don't qualify. But for some reason the whole gun-and-rusty-bullet thing wasn't part of the ... normal tests. Or Variables, whatever. If Thomas is gonna croak and die, it wasn't supposed to come from a bloody infection."

Thomas pursed his lips and nodded. Sounded like a great summary to him.

"What this means is that they're watching us," Minho said. "Just like they did in the Maze. Has anyone seen a beetle blade running around anywhere?"

Several Gladers shook their heads.

"What the hell's a beetle blade?" Jorge asked.

Thomas answered. "Little mechanical lizard things that spied on us with cameras in the Maze."

Jorge rolled his eyes. "Of course. Sorry I asked."

"The Maze was definitely some kind of indoor facility," Aris said. "But there's just no way we're inside something anymore. Though they could be using satellites or long-range cameras, I guess."

Jorge cleared his throat. "What is it about Thomas that makes him so special? Those signs in the city about him being the real leader, them swooping in here and saving his butt when he got all sicky-sicky." He looked at Thomas. "I'm not trying to be mean, *muchacho*—I'm just curious. What makes you better than the rest of your buddies?"

"I'm not special," Thomas said, even though he knew he was hiding something. He just didn't know *what*. "You heard what they said. We have lots of ways to die out here, but that gun shouldn't be one of them. I think they would've saved anybody who'd gotten shot. It wasn't about me—it was the bullet that messed things up."

"Still," Jorge replied with a smirk. "I think I'll stay close to you from here on."

A few more discussions broke out, but Minho didn't let them last long. He insisted that they all needed sleep if they were planning on marching through the night. Thomas didn't complain—he'd grown more tired with every passing second of sitting in that hot air on that hot ground. Maybe it was his body healing, maybe just the heat. Either way, sleep called to him.

They didn't have blankets or pillows, so Thomas curled up on the ground in the very spot where he'd been sitting, resting his head on his folded arms. Brenda somehow ended up right next to him, though she didn't say anything, and she certainly didn't touch him. Thomas didn't know if he'd ever figure her out.

He sucked in a long, slow breath, closed his eyes, then welcomed the rest, welcomed that heavy feeling of slumber as it started pulling him into its depths. The sounds around him

seemed to fade away, the air to thicken. A calm came over him, then sleep.

The sun was still blazing in the sky when a voice sounded in his mind, waking him up.

A girl's voice.

Teresa.

After days and days of utter silence, Teresa started talking to him telepathically, all at once, a rush of words.

Tom, don't even try to talk back, just listen. Something terrible is going to happen to you tomorrow. An awful, awful thing. You're gonna be hurt and you're gonna be scared. But you have to trust me. No matter what happens, no matter what you see, no matter what you hear, no matter what you think. You have to trust me. I won't be able to talk to you.

She paused, but Thomas was so stunned and trying so hard to understand what she'd said—make sure he remembered it—that he couldn't get a word in before she started up again.

I have to go. You won't hear from me for a while.

Another pause.

Not until we're back together.

He fumbled for something to say, but her voice and her presence slipped away, leaving him empty once more.

It took a long time for Thomas to find sleep again.

He had no doubt it had been Teresa. None at all. Just like before when they'd spoken to each other, he'd felt her presence, sensed her emotions. She'd been with him, even if it had been for such a short time. And when she left, it was like opening up that vast void within all over again. As if during the days since her disappearance a thick liquid had slowly seeped in and filled that chamber, only to have it all sucked out again when she came and went.

What had she meant, anyway? Something awful was going to happen to him, but he needed to trust her? He couldn't wrap his mind around that enough for it to make any sense. And as awful as her warning sounded, his thoughts kept drifting to the last part, about them being together again. Was that some string of false hope? Or did it mean she thought he'd make it through the bad thing and end up okay? Reunited with her? Possibilities raced through his mind, but they all seemed to hit a depressing dead end.

The day only got hotter and hotter as he tossed and turned, haunted by his thoughts. He'd almost grown used to Teresa's being gone, which made him sick to his stomach. To make it worse, he felt like he'd betrayed her by letting Brenda become his friend, by growing so close to her.

Ironically, his first instinct was to reach out and wake Brenda, talk to *her* about it. Was that wrong? He felt so frustrated and stupid he wanted to scream.

All great for someone trying to fall back asleep in the miserable heat.

The sun had trudged halfway to the horizon before he finally did.

He felt a little better in the late evening when Newt shook him awake. Teresa's brief visit to his mind seemed like a dream now. He could almost believe it had never happened.

"Sleep well, Tommy?" Newt asked. "How's that shoulder?"

Thomas sat up, rubbed his eyes. Though he couldn't have slept for more than three or four hours, his sleep had been deep and undisturbed. He rubbed his shoulder to test it and was surprised all over again. "Feels really good, actually—aches a little, but not much. Hard to believe I was hurtin' so bad before."

Newt looked around at the Gladers preparing to leave, then back at Thomas. "Feels like we haven't talked much since leaving the bloody dorm. Not much time to sit around and sip tea, I guess."

"Yeah." For some reason this made Thomas think of Chuck, and all the pain of his death came rushing back. Which just made him hate the people behind all this all over again. The line from Teresa came back to him. "I don't see how WICKED can be good."

"Huh?"

"Remember what Teresa had written on her arm when she first woke up? Or did you even know about that? It said *WICKED is good*. I'm just finding that hard to believe." The sarcasm in his voice wasn't subtle.

Newt had a strange smile on his face. "Well, they just saved your buggin' life."

"Yeah, they're real saints." Thomas couldn't deny he was confused. They *had* saved his life. He also knew he'd worked for them. But what it all meant, he had no idea.

Brenda, who had been stirring in her sleep, now finally sat up, letting out a big yawn. "Morning. Or evening. Whatever."

"Another day alive," Thomas answered, then realized Newt might have no idea who Brenda was. He really had no idea what had happened in the group since he'd been shot. "I'm assuming you guys had time to get to know each other? If not, Brenda, this is Newt. Newt, Brenda."

"Yeah, we know already." Newt reached out and shook her hand mockingly. "But thanks again for making sure this bloody sissy didn't get his butt killed while you two were out partying."

The barest hint of a smile flashed across her face. "Partying. Yeah. I especially loved the part where we had people trying to cut our noses off." A look flashed across her face, part embarrassment, part despair. "Guess it won't be long before *I'm* one of those psychos."

Thomas didn't know how to respond to that. "You're probably not that much farther along than us. Remember that—"

Brenda wouldn't let him finish. "Yeah, I know. You guys are gonna take me to the magical cure. I know." She got up then, the conversation obviously over.

Thomas looked at Newt, who shrugged. Then, as he got to his knees, he leaned in and whispered, "She your new girlfriend? I'm telling Teresa." He snickered to himself and was gone.

Thomas sat there for a minute, overwhelmed by it all. Teresa, Brenda, his friends. The warning he'd received. The Flare. The fact that they only had a few days to cross those mountains. WICKED. Whatever waited for them at the safe haven and in the future.

Too much. It was all too much.

He had to stop thinking. He was hungry, and that he *could* solve. So he got up and went searching for something to eat. And Frypan didn't disappoint.

* * *

They set off just as the sun dipped below the horizon, making the dusty orange land look almost purple. Thomas was cramped and tired, itching to walk off some steam and loosen his muscles.

The mountains slowly became jagged peaks of shadow, growing taller and taller as they walked. There were no real foothills to speak of; the flat valley just stretched forward until the ground erupted toward the sky in sheer cliffs and steep slopes. All brown and ugly, lifeless. Thomas hoped an obvious path would present itself once they'd made it that far.

No one spoke much as they marched along. Brenda stayed close but quiet. She didn't even talk to Jorge. Thomas hated how it was now. How suddenly everything was awkward between him and Brenda. He liked her, probably more than he liked anyone else now besides Newt and Minho. And Teresa, of course.

Newt approached him after darkness had fallen, the stars and moon their only guides. Their light was enough—you didn't need much when the ground was flat and all you had to do was walk toward the looming wall of rock in front of you. The *crunch crunch crunch* of

their footsteps on the earth filled the air.

"Been thinkin'," Newt said.

"About what?" Thomas didn't really care; he was just glad to have someone to talk to and get his mind off things.

"WICKED. Ya know, they broke their own bloody rules with you."

"How's that?"

"They said there *were* no rules. Said we had so much time to get to the bloody safe haven and that was that. No rules. People dying left and right, then they come down in a buggin' monster flying thing and save your butt. Doesn't make sense." He paused. "Not that I'm complaining—I'm glad you're alive and all."

"Gee, thanks." Thomas knew it was a good point, but he was tired of thinking about it.

"And then there were all those signs in the city. Weird."

Thomas looked over at Newt, barely able to see his friend's face. "What, you jealous or something?" he asked, trying to make a joke out of it. Trying to ignore the fact that the signs *had* to be a big deal.

Newt laughed. "No, you shank. Just dying to know what's really going on around here. What this is really all about."

"Yeah." Thomas nodded. He couldn't agree more. "The lady said only a few of us were good enough to be Candidates. And she *did* say I was the best Candidate, and they didn't want me dying from something they hadn't planned. But I don't know what it all means. Has something to do with all that klunk about killzone patterns."

They walked on for a minute or so before Newt spoke again. "Not worth bustin' our brains about, I guess. What's gonna happen'll happen."

Thomas almost told him then about what Teresa had said in his mind, but for some reason it just didn't feel right.

He stayed silent, and eventually Newt drifted away until once again Thomas walked alone in the dark.

A couple of hours passed before he had another conversation, this time with Minho. A lot of words flew back and forth between them, but in the end they hadn't really said much. Just passing time, rehashing the same questions they'd all gone over in their minds a million times.

Thomas's legs were a little tired, but not too bad. The mountains got ever closer. The air cooled considerably, and it felt wonderful. Brenda remained silent and distant.

And on they went.

* * *

When the first traces of dawn turned the sky a deep, dark blue, the stars beginning to wink away for the coming day, Thomas finally got the nerve to approach Brenda and talk about something. Anything. The cliffs loomed now, dead trees and chunks of scattered rock coming into focus. They'd reach the foot of the mountains by the time the sun popped over the horizon, Thomas was sure of it.

"Hey," he said to her. "How're your feet holding up?"

"Fine." It came out curt, but then she quickly spoke again, maybe trying to make up for

it. "How about you? Your shoulder seem okay?"

"I can't believe how fine it is. Doesn't hurt much at all."

"That's good."

"Yeah." He racked his brain, trying to think of something to say. "So, um, I'm sorry about all the weird stuff that happened. And ... for anything I said. My head's all kinds of crazy and messed up."

She looked over at him, and he could see a bit of softness in her eyes. "Please, Thomas. The last thing you need to do is apologize." She returned her gaze up ahead. "We're just different. Plus, you have that girlfriend of yours. I shouldn't have tried to kiss you and all that crap."

"She's not really my girlfriend." He regretted saying it as soon as it came out—didn't even know where it had come from.

Brenda huffed. "Don't be dumb. And don't insult me. If you're gonna resist this"—she paused and gestured to herself with a sweep of her hands from head to toe with a mocking smile—"then it better be for a good reason."

Thomas laughed—all the tension and awkwardness had just vanished completely. "Point taken. You're probably a crappy kisser anyway."

She punched him in the arm—luckily his good one. "You couldn't possibly be more wrong. Trust me on that one."

Thomas was just about to say something stupid when he stopped dead in his tracks. Somebody almost ran into him from behind, tripped around to his side, but he couldn't tell who—his eyes were glued in front of him, his heart completely frozen.

The sky had lightened considerably, and the leading edge of the mountains' slope lay just a few hundred feet away. Halfway between here and there, a girl had seemingly appeared out of nowhere, rising from the ground. And she was walking toward them at a brisk pace.

In her hands she held a long shaft of wood with a large, nasty-looking blade lashed to one end.

It was Teresa.

CHAPTER 44

Thomas didn't quite know how to compute what he saw. He felt no surprise or joy at Teresa's being alive—he'd already known that she was. She'd spoken to his mind just the day before. But seeing her in the flesh still lifted his spirits. Until he remembered her warning that something bad was going to happen. Until he thought about the fact she was holding a bladed spear.

The other Gladers noticed right after he did, and soon everyone had stopped to gawk at Teresa as she marched toward them, her hands gripping that weapon, her face hard as stone. She looked ready to start stabbing the first thing that moved.

Thomas took a step forward, not really sure what he planned to do. But then more movement stopped him.

On both sides of Teresa, girls appeared; they, too, seemed to come from nowhere. He turned to look behind him. They were surrounded, by at least twenty girls.

And they all held weapons, varying knives and rusty swords and jagged machetes. Several of the girls had bows and arrows, their menacing tips already aimed at the group of Gladers. Thomas felt an uneasy slice of fear. Regardless of what Teresa had said about something bad happening, surely she wouldn't let these people hurt them. Right?

Group B popped into his mind. And his tattoo saying how they were supposed to kill him.

His thoughts were cut short when Teresa stopped about thirty feet away from the group. Her companions did the same, forming a complete circle around the Gladers. Thomas turned again to take it all in. Each one of their new visitors stood stiffly, eyes squinted, weapons held out in front and ready. The bows scared him the most—he and the others would have no chance to do anything before those arrows could fly and find a home inside someone's chest.

He stopped, facing Teresa. Her eyes were focused on him.

Minho spoke first. "What's this crap about, Teresa? Nice way to greet your long-lost buddies."

At the mention of the name *Teresa*, Brenda spun and looked sharply at Thomas. He gave her a quick nod, and the surprise on her face made him sad for some reason.

Teresa didn't answer the question, and an eerie silence swept across the group. The sun continued to rise, inching toward the point where its heat would beat down on them unbearably.

Teresa walked toward them again, and stopped about ten feet from where Minho and Newt stood side by side.

"Teresa?" Newt asked. "What the bloody—"

"Shut up," Teresa said. She didn't snap or yell it. She said it calmly and with conviction, which only made it that much more frightening to Thomas. "And any of you makes a move, the bows start shooting."

Teresa brought her spear up to a better fighting position, swept it back and forth as she stepped past Newt and Minho and through the Gladers, acting as if she was searching for

something. She came to Brenda, paused. Neither said a word, but the hatred between them was visible. Teresa moved past her, never dropping her icy stare.

And then she was in front of Thomas. He tried to tell himself that she'd never use that weapon on him, but believing it wasn't easy when you were looking at the blade's sharp edge.

"Teresa," he whispered before he could stop himself. Despite the spear, despite the hard look on her face, despite the way her muscles tensed as if she was about to slash him, all he wanted was to reach out to her. He couldn't help but remember the kiss she'd given him. The way it had felt.

She didn't move, just kept staring at him, her face unreadable except for the obvious anger there.

"Teresa, what's—"

"Shut up." That same voice of calm. Of utter command. It didn't sound like her.

"But what—"

Teresa reared back and swung the butt of her spear at him, smashing it into his right cheek. An explosion of pain shot through his skull, his neck; he crumpled to his knees, a hand to his face where she'd hit him.

"I said shut up." She reached down and grabbed him by the shirt, jerked up until he stood once again. She repositioned her hands on the wooden shaft, pointed it at him. "Is your name Thomas?"

He gaped at her. His world was crashing in on him, even though he told himself she'd warned him. Told him that no matter what, he had to trust her. "You know who I—"

She swung the spear even more violently this time, crashing the bladeless end into the side of his head, right on his ear. The pain was twice as bad as the first hit; he cried out, clutching his head. But he didn't fall this time. "You know who I am!" he screamed.

"I used to, anyway," she said in a voice that was both soft and disgusted. "Now I'm going to ask you one more time. Is your name Thomas?"

"Yes!" he yelled back at her. "My name is Thomas!"

Teresa nodded, then started to back away from him, the tip of the blade once again aimed at his chest. People got out of her way as she passed the group and rejoined the circle of girls who surrounded them.

"You're coming with us," she called out. "Thomas. Come on. Remember, anyone tries something, the arrows fly."

"No way!" Minho yelled. "You're not taking him anywhere."

Teresa acted as if she hadn't heard him, her eyes riveted to Thomas in that strange squinty-eyed stare. "This isn't some stupid game. I'm going to start counting. Every time I hit a multiple of five, we'll kill one of you with an arrow. We'll do it until Thomas is the only one left, then we'll take him anyway. It's up to you."

For the first time, Thomas noticed that Aris was acting strange. He stood just a few feet to Thomas's right, and he kept turning in a slow circle, staring at the girls one by one as if he knew them each well. But somehow he kept his mouth shut.

Of course, Thomas thought. If this really was Group B, Aris had been with them. He did know them.

"One!" Teresa shouted.

Thomas wasn't taking any chances. He walked forward, pushing past people until he reached the open, then went straight toward Teresa. He ignored the comments from Minho and the others. He ignored everything. Eyes on Teresa, trying to show no emotion, he walked until he stood almost nose to nose with her.

It was what he wanted anyway, right? He wanted to be with her. Even if she'd been turned against him somehow. Even if she was being manipulated by WICKED, like Alby and Gally had been. For all he knew, her memory had been wiped again. Didn't matter. She looked serious, and he couldn't risk having someone shoot one of his friends with a bow and arrow.

"Fine," he said. "Take me."

"I only made it to one."

"Yeah. I'm really brave that way."

She hit him with the spear, so hard that he couldn't help but drop to the ground again. His jaw and head ached like smoldering fire. He spit, saw blood splatter on the dirt.

"Bring the bag," Teresa said from above.

In his peripheral vision he saw two girls walking toward him, their weapons hidden away somewhere. One of them—a dark-skinned girl with hair cut almost to her scalp—held a large frayed burlap sack. They stopped two feet from him; he got back to his hands and knees, scared to do anything more for fear of getting pummeled again.

"We're taking him with us!" Teresa yelled. "If anybody follows, I'll hit him again and we'll start shooting you. We won't really bother aiming. Just let the arrows fly any old way they feel like."

"Teresa!" Minho's voice. "You catch the Flare that quickly? Your mind's obviously gone already."

The butt of the spear smashed into the back of Thomas's head; he collapsed onto his stomach, black stars swimming in the dirt inches from his face. How could she do this to him?

"Anything else you wanna say?" Teresa asked. After a long moment of silence, she said, "Didn't think so. Put the bag over him."

Hands roughly grabbed his shoulder and spun him onto his back—their grip dug into his bullet wound enough to send a deep ache flashing through his upper body for the first time since WICKED had fixed him up.

He moaned. Faces—they didn't even look angry—hovered over him as two girls held the open end of the sack directly above his head.

"Don't resist," the dark-skinned girl said, her face shining with sweat. "Or it'll just get worse."

Thomas was perplexed. Her eyes and voice held genuine sympathy for him. But her next words couldn't have been more different.

"Better just to go along and let us kill you. Doesn't do you any good to have a lot of pain along the way."

The bag slipped over his head, and all he could see was ugly brown light.

CHAPTER 45

They shifted him around on the ground till they got the bag slipped entirely over his body. Then they tied the open end at his feet with a rope, knotting it tight and wrapping its ends up and around the rest of him, pinning him inside the bag, cinching another knot just over his head.

Thomas felt the bag going taut; then his head was pulled up. He imagined girls holding either end of this impossibly long rope. Which could only mean one thing—they were going to drag him. He couldn't take it anymore, started squirming even though he knew what it'd get him.

“Teresa! Don’t do this to me!”

This time a fist hit him right in the stomach, making him howl. He tried to double over, tried to clutch his middle, but couldn’t because of the stupid bag. Nausea swept through him; he fought it, kept his food down.

“Since you obviously don’t care about yourself,” Teresa said, “talk again and we’ll start shooting your friends. That sound good to you?”

Thomas didn’t respond; he heaved a silent sob of agony. Had he really been thinking things were looking up in the world only yesterday? His infection cured and his wound healed, away from the city of Cranks, nothing but a swift and hard hike through the mountains between them and the safe haven. He should’ve known better after everything he’d been through.

“I meant what I said!” Teresa yelled at the Gladers. “There won’t be a warning. Follow us and the arrows start flying.”

Thomas saw her outline as she knelt next to him, heard her knees crunching on the dirt. Then she grabbed him through the material of the bag, put her head against his, her mouth just half an inch from his ear. She started whispering, so faintly he had to strain to hear, concentrating to separate her words from the breeze.

“They’re blocking me from talking to you in our heads. Remember to trust me.”

Thomas, surprised, had to fight to keep his mouth shut.

“What’re you saying to him?” This came from one of the girls holding the rope attached to the bag.

“I’m letting him know just how much I’m enjoying this. How much I’m enjoying my revenge. Do you mind?”

Thomas had never heard such arrogance from her. She was either a really good actress or had started going crazy. Gained a split personality or two.

“Well,” the other girl responded. “Glad you’re having so much fun. But we need to hurry.”

“I know,” Teresa said. She gripped the sides of Thomas’s head even harder, squeezed and shook it. Then she pressed her mouth against the rough material, pushing on his ear. When she spoke, again with that hot whisper, he could feel her hot breath through the weave of the burlap. “Hang in there. It’ll be over soon.”

The words numbed Thomas's brain; he had no idea what to think. Was she being sarcastic?

She released him and stood back up. "Okay, let's get out of here. Make sure you hit as many rocks as you can along the way."

His captors started walking, dragging him along behind them. He felt the rough ground below him as he was dragged across it, the big sack providing absolutely no protection. It hurt. He arched his back, putting all his weight on his feet, letting his shoes bear the brunt of the impacts. But he knew his strength couldn't hold out forever.

Teresa walked right beside him as they pulled his body along. He could just make her out through the burlap.

Then Minho started yelling, his voice already fading with distance, the sound of being dragged against the dirt making it that much harder to hear. What Thomas *did* hear, however, gave him little hope. Between garbled unflattering names, Thomas heard the words "we'll find you" and "time is right" and "weapons."

Teresa slammed her fist into Thomas's stomach again, shutting Minho up.

And across the desert they went, Thomas bouncing over the dirt like a sack of old clothes.

Thomas imagined horrible things as they went along. His legs were weakening every second, and he knew he'd have to lower his body to the ground soon. He pictured the bleeding wounds, the permanent scars.

But maybe it wouldn't matter. They planned on killing him anyway.

Teresa had said to trust her. And even though he had a hard time doing it, he was trying to believe her. Could all the stuff she'd done to him since reappearing with the weapons and Group B really be an act? If it wasn't, why would she keep whispering to him to trust her?

His mind turned it all over in circles until he couldn't concentrate anymore. His body was being rubbed raw, and he knew he needed to figure out how to prevent every inch of skin from being scratched off.

The mountains saved him.

When they started going up the steep slope, it obviously became difficult for the girls to drag his body the way they'd done across flat ground. They tried pulling him in quick jerks—slipping and letting him slide several feet back down, then hauling him back up only to let him slip again. Teresa finally said it'd probably be easier to carry him by the shoulders and ankles. And that they should do it in shifts.

An idea hit Thomas then that was so obvious he thought surely he'd missed something. "Why don't you just let me walk!" he called through the burlap, his voice muffled and cracking from thirst. "I mean, you *do* have weapons. What am I gonna do?"

Teresa kicked him in the side. "Shut up, Thomas. We're not idiots. We're waiting until your Glader buddies can't see us anymore."

He'd done his best to stifle his groan when her foot crashed into his rib cage. "Huh? Why?"

"Because that's what we were *told* to do. Now shut up!"

"Why'd you tell him that?" one of the other girls whispered harshly.

"What does it matter?" Teresa responded, not even trying to hide what she was saying.

"We're gonna kill him anyway. Who cares if he knows what we were told to do?"

Told to do, Thomas thought. By WICKED.

A different girl spoke up. "Well, I can barely see them now. Once we reach that crevice up there, we'll be out of sight, and they'll never find us after that. Even if they do follow."

"All right, then," Teresa said. "Let's just get him that far."

Hands were soon gripping Thomas on all sides, lifting him into the air. From what he could see through the sack, Teresa and three of her new friends were carrying him. They picked their way through boulders and around dead trees, going up and up and up. He heard their heavy breaths, smelled their sweat, hated them more with each jolting step. Even Teresa. He tried one last time to reach her mind, to salvage his trust in her, but she wasn't there.

The trudge up the mountain went on for maybe an hour—with stops here and there for girls to switch off carrying duties—and it had been at least twice that long since they'd left the Gladers. The sun was reaching a point where it would become dangerous, the heat stifling. But then they rounded a massive wall, the ground leveling a bit, and entered shade. The cooler air was a relief.

"All right," Teresa said. "Drop him."

Without ceremony, they did what she said and he slammed into the ground with a heavy grunt. It knocked the wind out of him, and he lay there gasping for air as they started untying the ropes. By the time he caught his breath, the bag had been taken off.

He blinked, looking up at Teresa and her friends. They all had their weapons pointed at him, which just seemed ridiculous.

From somewhere he found a trace of courage. "You guys must think a lot of me, twenty of you with knives and machetes, me with nothing. I feel so special."

Teresa reared back with her spear.

"Wait!" Thomas cried, and she stopped. He held his hands up in deference, slowly got to his feet. "Look, I'm not gonna try anything. Just take me wherever we're going and then I'll let you kill me like a good boy. I don't have any shuck thing to live for anyway."

He looked directly at Teresa when he said this, tried to put as much spite into his words as possible. He still held on to a little hope that somehow this would end up making sense, but either way, after how he'd been treated, he wasn't in such a hot mood.

"Come on," Teresa said. "I'm sick of this. Let's get to the inside of the Pass so we can sleep the day off. Tonight we'll start heading through."

The girl with dark skin who'd helped put him in the sack spoke next. "And what about this guy we've been hauling around for the last few hours?"

"Don't worry, we'll kill him," Teresa replied. "We'll kill him just the way they told us to. It's his punishment for what he did to me."

Thomas couldn't figure out what Teresa meant by her last statement. What had he done to her? But his mind went numb as they walked and walked and walked, apparently heading back to Group B's camp. A steady climb uphill, the effort burning his legs. A sheer cliff to their left kept them in the shade as they hiked, but everything was still red and brown and hot. Dry. Dusty. The girls gave him a few sips of water, but he was sure that every drop evaporated before it hit his stomach.

They reached a large indentation in the east wall just as the noon sun broke out overhead, a golden ball of fire bent on burning them to ashes. The shallow cave went about forty feet into the mountain face; it was obvious that this was their camp, and it looked like they'd been there for a day or two. Blankets strewn about, the remains of a fire, some trash piled on the edge. Only three people were there when they arrived—girls just like the others—which meant they'd felt they needed almost everyone to kidnap Thomas.

With the bows and arrows, the knives and machetes? It seemed almost silly. A few of them would've done just as well.

Along the way, Thomas had learned some things. The dark-skinned girl's name was Harriet, and the one who was always with her, with the reddish blond hair and white, white skin, was named Sonya. Though he couldn't tell for certain, he guessed that those two had mostly been in charge until Teresa had arrived. They acted with some authority, but always deferred to her in the end.

"Okay," Teresa said. "Let's tie him to that ugly tree." She pointed at the bone-white skeleton of an oak, its roots still clinging to the rocky soil even though it had to have been dead for years and years. "And we might as well feed him so he doesn't moan and groan all day and keep us awake."

Laying it on a little thick, isn't she? Thomas thought. Whatever her true intentions, her words had started to get a little ridiculous. And he couldn't deny it anymore—he was really starting to hate her, no matter what she'd said in the beginning.

He didn't fight as they tied his torso to the trunk, leaving his hands free. Once they had him good and secure they gave him a few granola bars and a bottle of water. No one spoke to him or met his gaze. And strangely, if he wasn't mistaken, he noticed that everyone looked a little guilty. He started eating, and as he did he carefully took in everything around him. His thoughts wandered all over the place as the rest of them began settling in to sleep out the remaining daylight. Something wasn't right about all this.

Teresa's display certainly didn't seem like an act. It never had. Was it possible that she was doing the exact opposite of what she'd told him—making him think he should trust her when her real plan had been and was to—

With a jolt he remembered the tag outside her door back in the dorm. *The Betrayer*. He'd completely forgotten about it until that moment. Things started to make more sense.

WICKED was the boss, here. They were the groups' only hope of surviving. If they'd really told her to kill him, would she do it? To save herself? And what was that line she'd

spit out about his having done something to her? Could they even be manipulating her thoughts? Making her not like him anymore?

Then there was his tattoo and the signs in the city. The tattoo had warned him; the signs had told him he was the real leader. The label next to Teresa's door had been another warning.

Still—he had no weapons and he was tied to a tree. Group B outnumbered him by more than twenty and they all *had* weapons. Real easy.

Sighing, he finished up his food and felt a little better physically. And though he didn't quite know how everything added up, he had a new confidence that he was closer to understanding. And that he couldn't quit.

Harriet and Sonya had pallets laid out nearby; they kept sneaking looks at him as they readied for sleep. Again Thomas noticed those odd expressions of shame or guilt. He saw it as an opportunity to fight for his life with words.

"You guys don't really wanna kill me, do you?" He asked it in a tone that said he'd caught them in a lie. "Have you ever even killed anyone before?"

Harriet gave him a harsh glare, stopping just before she laid her head down on a wad of blankets. She propped herself up on her elbow. "Based on what Teresa told us, we escaped our Maze three days faster than your group did. Lost fewer people and killed more Grievers to do it. I think knocking off one little insignificant teenage boy won't be too tough."

"Think of the guilt you'll feel." He could only hope the thought would dig at them.

"We'll get over it." She stuck her tongue out at him—actually stuck her tongue out!—then put her head down and closed her eyes.

Sonya sat cross-legged, looking about as far from sleep as humanly possible. "We don't have a choice. WICKED said that was our only task. If we don't do it, they won't let us in at the safe haven. We'll die out here in the Scorch."

Thomas shrugged. "Hey, I understand. Sacrifice me to save yourselves. Very noble."

She stared at him for a long time; he had to fight not to drop his gaze. She finally looked away and lay down with her back to him.

Teresa walked over, her face twisted in annoyance. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," mumbled Harriet. "Tell him to shut up."

"Shut up," Teresa said.

Thomas huffed a sarcastic laugh. "What're you gonna do, kill me if I don't?"

She didn't say anything, just kept looking at him, her face blank.

"Why do you hate me all of a sudden?" he asked. "What did I do to you?"

Sonya and Harriet both had turned to listen, looking back and forth between Thomas and Teresa.

"You know what you did," Teresa finally said. "So does everyone here—I told them all about it. But even still, I wouldn't have sunk to your level and tried to kill you. We're only doing that because we have no choice. Sorry. Life's tough."

Did something just flash in her eyes? Thomas wondered. What was she trying to tell him? "What are you talking about, *sink to my level*? I'd never kill a friend to save my own butt. Never."

"Me neither. Which is why I'm glad we're not friends." She started to turn away.

"So what'd I do to you?" Thomas asked quickly. "Sorry, I'm kind of havin' a memory

lapse—ya know, we have those a lot around here. Remind me.”

She twisted back around and glared at him with fiery eyes. “Don’t insult me. Don’t you dare sit there and act like nothing happened. Now shut up or I’ll give you another bruise on that pretty face of yours.”

She stomped away, and Thomas kept silent. He shifted until he was somewhat comfortable, his head leaning back on the dead wood of the tree. Everything about his current situation stank, but he was determined to figure it out and survive.

Eventually he slept.

CHAPTER 47

Thomas slept fitfully for a few hours, tossing and turning, trying to find a comfortable position on the hard rock. He finally fell into a deep slumber, and then came the dream.

Thomas is fifteen. He doesn't know how he knows this. Something to do with the timing of the memory. Is it a memory?

He and Teresa are standing in front of a massive bank of screens, each one showing various images from the Glade and the Maze. Some of the views are moving, and he knows why. These camera shots are coming from beetle blades, and every once in a while they have to change position. When they do, it's like looking through the eyes of a rat.

"I can't believe they're all dead," Teresa says.

Thomas is confused. Once again he doesn't quite understand what's happening. He's inside this boy who's supposed to be him, but he doesn't know what Teresa's talking about. Obviously not the Gladers—on one screen he can see Minho and Newt walking toward the forest; on another, Gally sitting on a bench. Then Alby yelling at someone Thomas doesn't recognize.

"We knew it would happen," he finally responds, not sure why he said it.

"It's still hard to take." They aren't looking at each other, just analyzing the screens. "Now it's up to us. And the people in the barracks."

"That's a good thing," Thomas says.

"I almost feel as sorry for them as I do for the Gladers. Almost."

Thomas wonders what this means as his younger dream version clears his throat. "Do you think we've learned enough? Do you really think we can pull this off with all the original Creators dead?"

"We have to, Tom." Teresa steps over to him and grabs his hand. He looks down at her but he can't read her expression. "Everything's in place. We have a year to train the replacements and get ready."

"But it's not right. How can we ask them to—"

Teresa rolls her eyes and squeezes his hand so hard it hurts. "They know what they're getting into. No more talking like that."

"Yeah." Somehow Thomas knows this version of himself in the vision he's seeing feels dead inside. His words mean nothing. "All that matters now are the patterns. The killzone. Nothing else."

Teresa nodded. "No matter how many die or get hurt. If the Variables don't work, they'll end up the same anyway. Everyone will."

"The patterns," Thomas says.

Teresa squeezes his hand. "The patterns."

When he woke up, the light dimming to a dull gray as the sun sank to a horizon he couldn't see, Harriet and Sonya were sitting just a few feet from him. Both staring at him strangely.

"Good evening," he said with false enthusiasm, the troubling dream still fresh in his mind. "Can I help you ladies?"

"We want to know what you know," Harriet said quietly.

The lingering fog of sleep quickly vanished. "Why should I help you?" He wanted to sit and think about what he'd dreamed, but he knew something had changed—he could see it in Harriet's gaze—and he couldn't pass up the chance to save himself.

"I don't think you have much choice," Harriet said. "But if you share whatever you've learned or figured out, maybe we can help you."

Thomas looked around for Teresa but couldn't see her. "Where is—"

Sonya interrupted him. "She said she wanted to scout the area to see if your friends followed us. Been gone for about an hour."

In his mind, Thomas could see the Teresa of his dream. Watching those screens, talking about dead Creators and the killzone. Talking about *patterns*. How did it all fit together?

"Forget how to talk?"

His eyes focused on Sonya. "No, um ... does this mean you guys are having second thoughts about killing me?" The words sounded stupid to him, and he wondered how many people in the history of the world had ever asked a question like that.

Harriet smirked. "Don't go jumping to conclusions. And don't think we've gone all righteous. Let's just say we have our doubts and want to talk—but your odds are slim."

Sonya picked up her line of thought. "The smartest thing right now seems to be to do what we were told. There are a lot more of us than you. I mean, come on. If it was *your* decision, what would you do?"

"Pretty sure I'd choose the option of not killing myself."

"Don't be a jerk. This isn't funny. If you could choose, and the two options were you die or all of us die, which one would you pick? This is all about you or us."

Her face showed she was very serious, and the question hit Thomas like a thump to his chest. She was right, on some level. If that really would happen—they'd all die if they didn't get rid of him—then how could he expect them not to do it?

"You gonna answer?" Sonya pushed.

"I'm thinking." He paused, wiped some sweat off his forehead. Once again, the dream tried to creep to the front of his mind and he had to push it back. "Okay, I'm being honest here. I promise. If I were in your shoes, I'd choose not to kill me."

Harriet rolled her eyes. "Easy for you to say, since it's your life on the line."

"It's not just that. I think it's some kind of test and maybe you're not really supposed to do it." Thomas's heartbeat picked up—he really did mean what he said, but he doubted they'd believe him even if he tried to explain it. "Maybe we *should* share what we know, figure something out."

Harriet and Sonya exchanged a long look.

Sonya finally nodded; then Harriet said, "We've had our doubts about this whole thing from the beginning. Something about it isn't right. So yeah, you better talk. But let us get everybody over here first." They stood up to go rouse the others.

"Hurry, then," Thomas said, wondering if he really did have a chance to get out of this mess. "We better do this before Teresa gets back."

CHAPTER 48

It didn't take long for them to gather everyone—Thomas figured the intrigue of hearing what the dead-guy-walking had to say was just too good to pass up. The girls stood in a tight group in front of him; he remained tied to the ugly, lifeless tree.

"All right," Harriet said. "You talk first, then we will."

Thomas nodded and cleared his throat. He began talking even though he hadn't totally planned what to say yet.

"All I know about your group is what I learned from Aris. And it seems like we all went through pretty much the same thing inside the Maze. But since we escaped, lots of things have been different. And I'm not sure what you know about WICKED."

Sonya cut in. "Not much."

This encouraged Thomas, made him feel like he had an advantage. And it seemed a big mistake for Sonya to have admitted what she did. "Well, I've learned a lot about them. All of us are special in some way—we're being tested or something because they have plans for us." He paused then, but no one showed much of a reaction, so he went on.

"A lot of the things they're doing to us don't make sense because they're just part of the trials—what WICKED calls the Variables. Seeing how we react in certain situations. I don't understand all of it, not even close, but I think this whole thing about killing me is just another layer. Or another lie. So ... I think this is just another Variable to see what we'll all do."

"In other words," Harriet said, "you want us to risk *our* lives because of this brilliant deduction."

"Don't you see? Killing me has no point. Maybe it's a test for you, I don't know. But I do know that I can help you if I'm alive, not if I'm dead."

"Or," Harriet replied, "we're being tested to see if we have the guts to kill our competitors' leader. Isn't *that* the whole point? See which group succeeds? Weed out the weak and leave the strong?"

"I haven't even *been* the leader—Minho has." Thomas shook his head adamantly. "No, think about this. How are you showing any strength by killing me? I'm way outnumbered and you have all these weapons. How does that prove who's stronger?"

"Then what *does* it have to do with?" a girl from the back called out.

Thomas paused, choosing his words carefully. "I think it's a test to see if you'll think for yourself, change plans, make rational decisions. And the more of us there are, the better odds we have of making it to the safe haven. Killing me makes no sense, does no one any good. You've proven any power you needed to by capturing me. Show them you won't blindly take it all the way."

He stopped, relaxed back against the tree. He couldn't think of anything else. It was up to them now. He'd given it his best shot.

"Interesting stuff," Sonya said. "Sounds a lot like something a person who's desperate not to die would say."

Thomas shrugged. "I really feel like it's the truth. I think that if you kill me, you'll have failed the real test WICKED is throwing at you."

"Yeah, I bet you think that," Harriet said. She stood up. "Look, to be honest, we've been thinking the same types of things. But we wanted to see what you had to say. Sun should be down soon, and I'm sure Teresa will be back any minute. We'll talk about it when she gets here."

Thomas spoke up quickly, worried that Teresa wouldn't be swayed. "No! I mean, she's the one who seems the most gung ho about killing me." He said this even though deep down he hoped he didn't mean it. As badly as she'd treated him, surely she wasn't serious about taking it all the way to murder. "I think you guys should make the decision."

"Calm down," Harriet said, a half-smile on her face. "If we decide not to kill you, there's nothing she can freaking do about it. But if we ..." She stopped, a strange look flashing across her face. Was she worried she'd said too much? "We'll figure it out."

Thomas tried not to show his relief. He might have appealed to their pride a little bit, but he tried not to let his hopes get too high.

Thomas watched as the girls gathered their belongings and packed them into backpacks—*Where'd they get those?* he wondered—readying for the night's journey, to wherever that might be. Murmurs and whispers of conversation floated through the air as people kept glancing his way, obviously discussing what he'd said.

The darkness grew deeper and deeper, and Teresa finally appeared from the direction they'd come in earlier that day. She noticed right away that something was different, probably by the way everyone kept looking between her and Thomas.

"What?" she asked, the same hard look on her face she'd worn since the day before.

It was Harriet who answered. "We need to talk."

Teresa looked confused, but went to the far side of the recess in the cliff with the rest of the group. Furious whispers immediately filled the air, but Thomas couldn't make out a word anybody said. His stomach clenched in anticipation of the verdict.

From where he stood he could see that the conversation had started to get passionate, and Teresa looked as riled up as anyone. He watched her expression intensify as she tried to make some point. It seemed like it was her against the rest of them, which made Thomas very nervous.

Finally, just as nightfall was almost complete, Teresa turned, stomped from the group of girls, and started walking away from the camp, heading north. She had her spear slung over one shoulder, a backpack over the other. Thomas watched her go until she disappeared between the narrow walls of the Pass.

He glanced back at the group, many of whom looked relieved, and Harriet came walking over. Without saying a word, she knelt down and untied the rope securing him to the tree.

"Well?" Thomas finally asked. "Did you guys decide anything?"

Harriet didn't answer until she'd completely freed him; then she sat back on her heels and looked at him, her dark eyes reflecting the faint light of the stars and moon. "It's your lucky day. We decided not to kill your puny butt after all. It can't be a coincidence that we've all been thinking the same things deep down."

Thomas didn't feel the expected rush of relief. In that moment he realized that he'd known that was what they would decide all along.

"But I tell you what," Harriet said as she stood up, holding a hand out to help him do the same. "Teresa does *not* like you. I'd watch my back around her if I were you."

Thomas let Harriet pull him up, confusion and hurt warring for dominance inside him.

Teresa really did want him dead.

CHAPTER 49

Thomas was quiet as he ate with Group B and prepared to leave. Soon they started making their way through the dark pass of the mountains, heading for the safe haven that was supposed to wait on the other side. It felt odd to suddenly be friendly with these people after what they'd done to him, but they acted like nothing unusual had ever happened. They treated him like, well, like one of the girls.

But he did keep his distance a little, hanging toward the back, wondering if he could fully trust their change of heart about him. What was he supposed to do? Even if Harriet and the others *let* him leave, should he try to find his own group, Minho and Newt and everyone else? He desperately wanted to be with his friends and Brenda again. But he knew time was running out, and he had no food or water to make it on his own. He had to hope they'd find their own way to the safe haven.

So he kept walking, staying close to Group B but not too close.

A couple of hours went by, nothing but tall cliffs of stone and the crunching of dirt and rock under his feet to keep him company. It felt good to move again, to stretch his legs and muscles. The deadline was fast approaching, though. And who knew what obstacle might spring up next? Or had the girls planned something else for him? He thought a lot about the dreams he'd been having, but still couldn't put enough together to truly understand what was going on.

Harriet drifted back until the two of them were walking side by side.

"Sorry we dragged you through the desert in a bag," she said. He couldn't see her face in the dimming light very well, but he imagined a smirk there.

"Oh, no problem, it felt good to take a load off for a while." Thomas knew he had to play the part, show some humor. He couldn't trust the girls completely yet, but he had no other options.

She laughed, a sound that put him at ease a bit. "Yeah, well, the man from WICKED gave us very specific instructions about you. But it was Teresa who got all obsessed about it. Almost like killing you was her idea."

This dug at Thomas, but he finally had a chance to learn some things and he wasn't going to let that go. "Did the guy have a white suit and kind of look like a rat turned human?"

"Yeah," she said without hesitating. "Same guy who talked to your group?"

Thomas nodded. "What were the ... specific instructions he gave you?"

"Well, most of our trip has been through underground tunnels. That's why you didn't see us in the desert. The first thing we were supposed to do was that weird thing where you and Teresa spoke in that building on the south side of the city. Remember?"

Thomas's stomach fell. She'd been with her group at that point? "Uh, yeah, I remember."

"Well, you've probably figured it out, but all of that was an act. Kind of a prepper to give you some false security. She even told us they somehow ... *controlled* her long enough to make her kiss you. Is that true?"

Thomas stopped walking, bent down and put his hands on his knees. Something had sucked the breath right out of him. That was it. He'd officially and completely lost any trace of doubt. Teresa had turned against him. Or maybe she had never really been on his side.

"I know this sucks," Harriet said softly. "It seems like you used to feel really close to her."

Thomas stood up again, slowly sucked in a long breath. "I ... just ... I had hoped it was the other way around. That they were forcing her to try to hurt us, that she broke away long enough to ... to kiss me."

Harriet put a hand on his arm. "Ever since she joined us, she's made you out to be a monster who did something really awful to her, only she'd never tell us what it was. But I gotta tell ya—you're not anything like how she described you. That's probably the real reason we changed our minds."

Thomas closed his eyes and tried to calm his heart. Then he shook it off and started walking again. "Okay, tell me the rest. I need to hear it. All of it."

Harriet got in stride with him. "Everything else about the instructions to kill you had to do with catching you in the desert like we did and bringing you back here. We were even told to keep you in the bag until we got out of Group A's sight. Then ... well, then the big day was supposed to be the day after tomorrow. There's supposed to be a place built into the mountain on the north side. A special place to ... kill you."

Thomas wanted to stop again but kept his feet moving. "A *place*? What does that mean?"

"I don't know. He just told us we'd know what to do when we got there." She paused, then snapped her fingers as if she'd just thought of something. "I bet that's where she went earlier."

"Why? How close are we to the other side?"

"No idea, actually."

They fell into silence and kept walking.

* * *

It took longer than Thomas would've thought. They were in the middle of the second night of marching when shouts up ahead announced that they'd reached the end of the Pass. Thomas, who'd stayed at the back of the group, broke into a run to catch up; he desperately wanted to see what lay on the north side of the range. One way or another, his fate waited there.

The group of girls had clustered in a wide swath of broken rock that fanned out from the narrow canyon of the Pass before dropping in a steep slope to the bottom of the mountain far below. The three-quarter moon shone down on the valley in front of them, making it look dark purple and eerie. And very flat. With nothing for miles and miles but sparse, dead land.

Absolutely nothing.

No sign of anything that could be a safe haven. And they were supposed to be within a few miles of it.

"Maybe we just can't see it." Thomas didn't know who said it, but he knew every person there understood exactly why she did. Trying to hold on to hope.

"Yeah," Harriet added, sounding upbeat. "It might just be another entrance to one of

their underground tunnels. I'm sure it's there."

"How many more miles do you think we have left?" Sonya asked.

"Can't be more than ten, based on where we started and how far the man said we had to go," Harriet answered. "Probably more like seven or eight. I thought we'd come out over here and we'd see a nice big building with a smiley face on it."

Thomas had been searching the darkness the whole time, but he couldn't see anything, either. Just a sea of black stretching to the horizon, where it seemed like a curtain of stars had been pulled down. And no sign of Teresa anywhere.

"Well," Sonya announced. "Not much choice but to keep heading north. We should've known better than to expect something easy. Maybe we can make it to the bottom of the mountain by sunrise. Sleep on flat ground."

The others agreed with her and were just about to set off down a barely visible footpath leading from the fan of rock when Thomas spoke up. "Where's Teresa?"

Harriet looked back at him, the moonlight bathing her face in a pale luminescence. "At this point, I don't really care. If she's a big enough girl to go runnin' around when she doesn't get her way, she's big enough to catch up and find us when she gets over it. Come on."

They started off, heading down the switchback-laden path, the loose soil and rock crunching underfoot. Thomas couldn't help but take a look behind him, searching the mountain face and the narrow entrance to the Pass for signs of Teresa. He was so confused about everything, but still had a strange urge to see her. He gazed across the dark slopes, but saw only dim shadows and reflections of the moonlight's glow.

He turned and started walking, almost relieved he hadn't spotted her.

The group made their way down the mountain, crisscrossing back and forth on the trail in silence. Thomas lingered in the back again, surprised at how blank his mind felt. How numb. He had absolutely no idea where his friends were, no idea what dangers might be waiting for him.

After an hour or so of traveling, his legs starting to burn from the awkward downhill walk, the group came across a pocket of dead trees that arrowed up the mountain in a big swath. It almost looked as if at one time a waterfall might have irrigated to the odd formation of trees. Though if it had, the last drop had long since surrendered to the Scorch.

Thomas, still last in line, was just passing the far side of the trees when a voice spoke his name, startling him so much he almost tripped. He turned sharply to see Teresa step out from behind a thick knot of white wood, spear gripped in her right hand, her face hidden in shadow. The others must not have heard, because they kept walking.

"Teresa," he whispered. "What ..." He didn't even know what to say.

"Tom, we need to talk," she responded, almost sounding like the girl he thought he knew. "Don't worry about them, just come with me." She gestured to the trees behind her with a quick jerk of her head.

He looked back to the girls of Group B, still heading away from him, then turned to face Teresa again. "Maybe we should—"

"Just come on. The act is over." She turned away without waiting for a response and stepped into the lifeless forest.

Thomas thought hard for two whole seconds, his mind spinning in confusion, instinct screaming at him not to do it. But he followed her.

CHAPTER 50

The trees might have been dead, but their branches still pulled on Thomas's clothes and scratched at his skin. The wood shone white in the moonlight, and the streaks and pools of shadow across the ground gave the whole place a haunted feel. Teresa kept walking in silence, floating up the mountainside like an apparition.

Finally, he found the courage to speak. "Where're we going? And you really expect me to believe all that was an act? Why didn't you stop when everybody else agreed not to kill me?"

But her reply was strange. Barely turning her head, she asked, "You've met Aris, right?" She didn't break stride, just kept moving.

Thomas stopped for a second, completely taken aback. "Aris? How do you even know about him? What's he got to do with this?" He hurried to catch up with her again, curious but dreading the answer for some reason.

She didn't respond right away, picking her way through a particularly tight pack of branches; one flew back and smacked him in the face after she let it fly. Once through, she finally stopped and turned to him, right where a shaft of moonlight illuminated her face. She looked unhappy.

"I happen to know Aris very well," she said in a tight voice. "Much better than you're going to like. Not only was he a big part of my life before the Maze, he and I can speak in our minds, just like you and I used to do. Even when I was in the Glade, we communicated all the time. And we knew they'd eventually put us back together."

Thomas searched for a response. What she'd said was so unexpected he thought it must be a joke. Another trick by WICKED.

She waited, arms folded, as if she enjoyed seeing him struggle to speak.

"You're lying," he finally said. "That's all you do is lie. I don't understand why, or what's going on, but—"

"Oh, come on, Tom," she said. "How could you possibly be so stupid? After all that's happened to you, how could anything surprise you anymore? Everything about us was part of some ridiculous test. And it's over. Aris and I are going to do what we were told to do, and life goes on. WICKED's all that matters now. That's it."

"What are you *talking* about?" He couldn't have felt any emptier.

Teresa looked past him, over his shoulder. He heard the snap of breaking twigs on the ground, and somehow he held on to his dignity enough to not turn around to see who had snuck up on him.

"Tom," Teresa said. "Aris is right behind you, and he has a very big knife. Try anything and he'll slice your neck. You're coming with us and you're gonna do exactly what we tell you. Understand?"

Thomas stared at her, hoping the rage he felt inside showed clearly on his face. He'd never felt so angry in his life—what he could remember of it.

"Say hi, Aris," she said. And then, the worst thing yet—she smiled.

"Hi, Tommy," the boy said from behind. It was definitely him, just not as friendly as before. "Such a thrill to be with you again." The point of his knife just touched Thomas's back.

Thomas remained silent.

"Well," Teresa said. "At least you're acting like a grown-up about this. Just keep following me—we're almost there."

"Where are we going?" Thomas asked in a steely voice.

"You'll find out soon enough." She turned and started walking through the trees again, using her spear like a staff.

Thomas hurried to follow before Aris got the satisfaction of pushing him. The trees got thicker and closer together, and the moonlight flitted away. Darkness pressed in, sucking light and life right out of him.

They reached a cave, the thick copse of trees serving as a tight wall at its entrance. Thomas didn't have any warning—one minute they were picking their way through prickly branches, the next they were in a tall, narrow hole in the side of the mountain. A dull light source shone from deep inside, a sickly green rectangle that made Teresa look like a zombie when she moved to the side for the other two to enter.

Aris stepped around him, his blade aimed like a gun at Thomas's chest as he backed to the wall opposite Teresa and leaned against it. Thomas could do nothing but look back and forth between them. Two people who every instinct had told him were his friends. Until now.

"Well, we're here," Teresa said, looking at Aris.

He didn't take his eyes off Thomas. "Yep, we're here, all right. You're serious about him talking the others into sparing him? What is he, some kind of superpsychologist?"

"It kind of helped, actually. Made it easier to get him here." Teresa threw a condescending glance toward Thomas, then crossed the cave to Aris. As Thomas watched, she stood on her toes to kiss Aris on the cheek and grinned. "I'm so glad we're finally back together."

Aris smiled. He shot Thomas a look of warning, then risked looking away long enough to tilt his head toward Teresa. And kiss her on the lips.

Thomas tore his eyes away and closed them. Her pleas for him to trust her, her quick whisper to hang in there—it had all been to get him here. To bring him more easily to this point.

So that she could fulfill some evil purpose concocted by WICKED.

"Get it over with," he finally said, not daring to open his eyes again. He didn't want to know what they were doing, why they were quiet. But he wanted them to think he'd given up. "Just get it over with."

When they didn't answer, he couldn't help but take a peek. They were whispering to each other, stealing kisses between words. Something like burning oil filled his stomach.

He looked away again, focusing on the odd source of light in the back of the cave. A large rectangle of pale green, set into the dark stone, pulsed with an ethereal glow. It was as tall as an average man, maybe four feet wide. Stains streaked across its dull surface—a grimy window to something that looked like radioactive sludge, glowing and dangerous.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Teresa step away from Aris, their lovefest evidently over. He looked at her, wondering if his eyes showed just how much she had crushed him.

"Tom," she said. "If it helps, I'm really sorry I hurt you. I did what I had to do back in the Maze, and being all buddy-buddy seemed like my best shot at getting the memories we needed to figure out that code and escape. And I didn't have much choice here in the Scorch. All we had to do was get you here to pass the Trials. *And it's either you or us.*"

Teresa paused for a second, and there was a strange glint in her eye. "Aris is my best friend, Tom," she said calmly, evenly.

And that was what finally made Thomas crack. "I ... don't ... care!" he screamed, though nothing could've been further from the truth.

"I'm just saying. If you care about me, then you should understand why I'd be willing to do whatever it takes to make it through this and keep him safe. Wouldn't you have done the same for me?"

Thomas couldn't believe how far away he felt from the girl he'd once thought was his best friend. Even in all of his memories—it was always the two of them. "What is this? Are you trying to come up with all the ways possible in the universe to hurt me? Just shut your shuck mouth and do whatever it is you brought me here to do!" His chest heaved with angry breaths, his heart thumping a deadly pace.

"Fine," she replied. "Aris, let's open the door. Time for Tom to go."

Thomas was done talking, to either of them. But he certainly wasn't going down without a fight. He resolved to wait and watch for the best opportunity.

Aris kept his knife pointed at him as Teresa made her way toward the big rectangle of illuminated green glass. Thomas couldn't deny his curiosity about the door.

She reached a point where the glow silhouetted her whole body. It made her edges fuzzy, as if she were dissolving. She walked across the cave until she'd left the light completely, then reached for the stone wall, started punching a finger on what had to be some sort of keypad that Thomas couldn't see.

She finished up and stepped back toward him.

"We'll see if that actually works," Aris said.

"It will," Teresa replied.

A loud pop sounded, followed by a sharp hiss. Thomas watched as the right edge of the glass began to swing outward like a door. As it opened, wispy streams of white mist swirled through the widening crack, almost immediately evaporating into nothing. It was like a long-abandoned freezer releasing its cold air into the heat of the night. Darkness lurked inside even as the rectangle of glass continued to emit its strange green radiance.

So the door wasn't a window at all, Thomas thought. Just a green door. Maybe toxic waste *wasn't* in his near future. He hoped.

The door finally stopped, thumping with an icy screech against the wall of jagged rock. A pit of black now lay where the door had once been—there wasn't enough light to reveal what lay inside. The mist had completely stopped as well. Thomas felt an abyss of anxiety open up beneath him.

"Do you have a flashlight?" Aris asked.

Teresa put her spear on the ground, then pulled her backpack off and dug through its contents. A moment later she pulled out a flashlight and flicked it on.

Aris nodded back toward the opening. "Take a look while I watch him. Don't try anything, Thomas. I'm pretty sure what they have planned for you is easier than getting stabbed to death."

Thomas didn't answer, keeping his pathetic oath to stay silent from here on out. He thought about the knife and whether he could take it from Aris.

Teresa had stepped up right to the side of the gaping rectangular hole; she shone her flashlight inside. Swept it up and down, left to right. It cut through a fine cloud of mist as she did so, but the dwindling moisture was thin enough to reveal the interior.

It was a small room, only several feet deep. Its walls appeared to be made of some silvery metal, their surfaces broken up by small protrusions maybe an inch high, each ending in a black hole. The little knobs or spouts were set about five inches apart, making a square grid across the walls.

Teresa turned to Aris, flicking off the flashlight as she did so. "Looks about right," she said.

Aris snapped his head back to look at Thomas, who had been so focused on the strange room he'd missed another chance to do something. "Exactly like they said it would be."

"So ... I guess this is it?" Teresa asked.

Aris nodded, then switched his knife to the other hand, holding it more tightly. "This is it. Thomas, be a good boy and go on inside. Who knows, maybe this is all a big test and once you're in they'll let ya go and we can all have a happy reunion."

"Shut up, Aris," Teresa said. It was actually the first thing she'd said in quite some time that didn't make Thomas want to punch her. She then turned back to Thomas, avoiding his eyes. "Let's get this over with."

Aris waved his blade, indicating that Thomas should walk forward. "Come on. Don't make me drag you in."

Thomas looked at him, struggling to keep a blank expression as his mind spun in a million directions. A surge of panic boiled inside him. It was now or never. Fight or die.

He turned his gaze to the open doorway and started slowly walking toward it. Three steps and he'd halved the distance. Teresa had straightened, her arms tensed in case he caused trouble. Aris kept his weapon trained on Thomas's neck.

Another step. Another. Now Aris stood directly to his left, just two or three feet away. Teresa was behind him, out of sight, the open doorway and the odd silver room with walls covered in holes right in front of him.

He stopped, looked sideways at Aris. "What did Rachel look like as she bled to death?" It was a gamble, a pitch to throw him off.

Shocked and hurt, Aris froze, giving Thomas the split second he needed.

He jumped toward the other boy and swung his left arm in an arc to smack the knife out of his hand. It clattered across the rocks. Thomas slammed his right fist into Aris's stomach, sending him to the ground, desperately trying to suck in a breath.

The click of metal against rock stopped Thomas from kicking the boy at his feet. He looked up to see that Teresa had picked up her spear. They locked eyes for an instant; then she charged him. Thomas threw his hands up to protect himself but it was too late—the butt of the weapon swung through the air and smacked him on the side of the head. Stars floated before his eyes as he fell, fighting to stay conscious. As soon as he hit the ground, he scrambled to his hands and knees to get away.

But he heard Teresa scream, and a second later the wood came crashing down on the top of his skull. With a thump Thomas collapsed again; something wet oozed through his hair and trickled onto both temples. Pain tore through his head, as if an axe had been driven straight into his brain. It spread to the rest of his body, making him nauseated. He somehow pushed off the ground and flopped onto his back to see Teresa with the weapon raised above her once more.

"Get in the room, Thomas," she said through heavy breaths. "Get in the room or I'll hit you again. I swear I'll keep doing it till you pass out or bleed to death."

Aris had recovered and gotten back to his feet; he stood right next to her.

Thomas reared both legs back and kicked out, connecting with a knee on both of them. They screamed and crumpled, falling on top of each other. The physical effort sent a horrible rush of pain raging through Thomas. White flashes blinded him; the world was spinning. He groaned as he struggled to move, got back on his stomach, tried to get his

hands under himself. He'd barely pushed a few inches off the ground when Aris landed on his back, slamming him down. Soon the boy's arm wrapped around Thomas's neck, squeezing.

"You're going in that room," Aris spit in his ear. "Help me, Teresa!"

Thomas couldn't find any strength to fight them off. The double blow to his head had somehow sapped him of everything, as if all his muscles had gone dormant because his brain didn't have enough energy to tell them what to do. Soon Teresa had grabbed both of his arms; she started dragging him toward the open doorway, Aris pushing him. Thomas kicked feebly. Rocks dug into his skin.

"Don't do this," he whispered, giving in to desperation. Every word sent a surge of pain across his nerves. "Please ..." All he saw now were flashes of white on black. A concussion, he realized. He had a terrible, terrible concussion.

He was barely aware of his body crossing the threshold, of Teresa resting his arms against the cool metal of the back wall, stepping over him, helping Aris flip his legs up and over so that he now lay in a heap, facing the side. Thomas couldn't even find the strength to look at them.

"No," he said, but it was merely a whisper. The image of the sick boy, Ben, being Banished back in the Glade swam into his brain. An odd time to think it, but now he knew how that kid had felt in those last seconds before the walls slammed shut, trapping him in the Maze forever.

"No," he repeated; it was so quiet he couldn't imagine they heard him. He ached from head to toe.

"You're so stubborn," he heard Teresa say. "You had to make it harder on yourself! Harder on all of us!"

"Teresa," Thomas whispered. He dug through the pain and tried to call out to her telepathically, even though it hadn't worked in a long time. *Teresa.*

I'm sorry, Tom, she answered back, in his mind once again. *But thanks for being our sacrifice.*

He hadn't realized the door was swinging closed, but it slammed shut just as that last horrible word floated across his darkening thoughts.

CHAPTER 52

The back of the door they'd shut on him glowed green, turning the small room into a creepy, sickening prison. He might've cried, might've gushed tears and snot and wailed like a baby if his head didn't hurt so much. The pain drilled through his skull, and his eyes felt as if they were boiling in lava.

But even then, through all that, the deeper ache of truly losing Teresa gnawed away at his heart. He just couldn't let himself cry.

He lost all concept of time as he lay there. It was as if whoever was behind it all wanted to give him a chance to reflect on what had happened while he waited for the end. On how Teresa's message to trust her no matter what had ended up being a cruel trick that only magnified her two-faced treachery.

An hour passed. Maybe two or three. Maybe only thirty minutes. He had no idea.

And then the hissing started.

The faint light of the glowing door revealed sprays of mist shooting from the holes that dotted the metal walls in front of him. He turned his head, sending a fresh wave of pain across his skull, and saw that all the openings were expelling similar jets of fog.

And it all hissed like a squirming nest of poisonous vipers.

So this is it? he thought. After everything he'd been through, after all the mysteries and fighting and fleeting moments of hope, they were just going to kill him with some kind of poison gas? Stupid, that was what this was. Stupid. He'd battled Grievers and Cranks, survived a gunshot and infection. WICKED. They were the ones who'd saved him! And now they were just going to gas him to death?

He sat up, actually crying out from the jolt of pain it caused. He looked around, looked for anything he might be able to ...

Tired. So tired.

Something in his chest felt wrong. Sick.

The gas.

Tired. Hurt. Body exhausted.

Breathing in gas.

Couldn't help himself.

So ... tired ...

Inside him. Wrong.

Teresa. Why did it have to end that way?

Tired ...

Somewhere on the edge of his consciousness, he was aware of his head thumping against the floor.

Betrayal.

So ...

Tired ...

CHAPTER 53

Thomas didn't know if he was dead or alive, but it felt like he was asleep. Aware of himself, but as if through a haze. He slipped into yet another memory-dream.

Thomas is sixteen. He's standing in front of Teresa and some girl he doesn't recognize.

And Aris.

Aris?

All three of them are looking at him with grim faces. Teresa is crying.

"It's time to go," Thomas says.

Aris nods. "Into the Swipe, then into the Maze."

Teresa does nothing but wipe away some tears.

Thomas reaches out a hand and Aris shakes it. Then Thomas does the same with the girl he doesn't know.

Then Teresa rushes forward and pulls him into an embrace. She's sobbing, and Thomas realizes that he's also crying. His tears wet her hair as he hugs her tightly.

"You have to go now," Aris says.

Thomas looks at him. Waits. Tries to enjoy this moment with Teresa. His last moment of full memory. They won't be like this again for a very long time.

Teresa looks up at him. "It's going to work. It's all going to work."

"I know," Thomas says. He feels a sadness that makes every last bit of him ache.

Aris opens a door and beckons for Thomas to follow him. Thomas does, but manages to look back at Teresa one last time. Tries to look hopeful.

"See ya tomorrow," he says.

Which is true, and it hurts.

The dream faded, and Thomas fell into the blackest sleep of his life.

CHAPTER 54

Whispers in the dark.

That was what Thomas heard when he began returning to consciousness. Low but harsh, like sandpaper rubbing across his eardrums. He didn't understand any of it. It was so dark it took him a second to realize that his eyes were open.

Something cool and hard pressed against his face. The ground. He hadn't moved since the gas had knocked him out. Shockingly, his head didn't hurt anymore. In fact, nothing did. Instead, a feeling of refreshed euphoria swam through him, almost made him dizzy. Maybe he was just happy to be alive.

He got his hands under himself and pushed up into a sitting position. A look around did nothing—not even the faintest glimmer of light broke up the utter darkness. He wondered what had happened to the green glow of the door that Teresa had shut on him.

Teresa.

His elation drained away. Remembering what she'd done to him. But then ...

He wasn't dead. Unless the afterlife was just a crappy room of blackness.

He rested for a few minutes, letting his mind wake up and settle before he finally got to his feet and started feeling around. Three cool metal walls with evenly spaced upraised holes. One smooth wall that felt like plastic. He was definitely in that same little room.

He pounded on the door. "Hey! Anybody out there?"

His thoughts started spinning. The memory-dreams, several now—so much to process, so many questions. The things that had first come back to him with the Changing in the Maze were slowly starting to come into focus, solidify. He'd been part of WICKED's plans, part of all this. He and Teresa had been close—best friends, even. All of it had seemed right. Doing these things for the greater good.

Only, Thomas didn't feel so good about it now. All he felt was anger and shame. How could anything justify what they'd done? What WICKED—what *they*—were doing? Though he certainly didn't think of himself this way, he and the others were just kids. Kids! He didn't like himself very much anymore. He wasn't sure when he'd reached this turning point. But something had cracked within him.

And then there was Teresa. How could he ever have felt so much for her?

Something cracked, then hissed, interrupting his line of thinking.

The door started to open, slowly swinging outward. Teresa stood there in the pale light of early morning, her face streaked with tears. As soon as there was enough room, she threw her arms around him, pressing her face against his neck.

"I'm so sorry, Tom," she said; her tears were wet against his skin. "I'm so, so, so sorry. They said they'd kill you if we didn't do everything just like they told us. No matter how horrible. I'm sorry, Tom!"

Thomas couldn't answer, couldn't bring himself to hug back. Betrayal. The sign on Teresa's door, the conversation between the people in his dreams. Pieces were falling into

place. For all he knew, she was just trying to trick him again. The betrayal meant he couldn't trust her anymore, and his heart told him he couldn't forgive her.

On some level, he realized that Teresa had kept her initial promise to him after all. She had done those awful things against her will. What she had said in the shack had been true. But he also knew that things could never, never be the same between them.

He finally pushed Teresa away. The sincerity in her blue eyes did little to diminish his lingering doubt. "Uh ... maybe you should tell me what happened."

"I told you to trust me," she answered. "I told you that bad, bad things would happen to you. But the bad stuff was all an act." She smiled then, and it was so pretty Thomas longed to find a way to forget what she'd done.

"Yeah, but you didn't seem to struggle too much, beating the klunk out of me with a spear and throwing me into a gas chamber." He couldn't hide the mistrust raging in his heart. He glanced at Aris, who looked sheepish, like he'd intruded on a private conversation.

"I'm sorry," the boy said.

"Why didn't you tell me we knew each other before?" Thomas responded. "What ..." He didn't know what to say.

"It was all an *act*, Tom," Teresa said. "You have to believe us. We were promised from the very beginning that you wouldn't die. That this chamber thing had its own purposes and then it'd be over. I'm so sorry."

Thomas looked back at the still-gaping door. "I think I need some time to process all this." Teresa wanted him to forgive her—for everything to be how it used to be immediately. And instinct told him to hide his bitter feelings, but it was hard.

"What happened in there, anyway?" Teresa asked.

Thomas returned his gaze to her. "How about you talk first, then me. I think I earned that much."

She tried to take his hand but he moved it, pretending he had an itch on his neck. When he saw the flash of hurt cross her face, he felt the slightest bit of vindication.

"Look," she said. "You're right. You deserve an explanation. I think it's okay to tell you everything now—not that we know too much of the *why*."

Aris cleared his throat, an obvious interjection. "But, um, we better do it while walking. Or running. We only have a few hours left. Today is the day."

Those words jarred Thomas completely out of his stupor. He looked down at his watch. Only five and a half hours remained if Aris was right that they'd reached the end of the two weeks—Thomas had kind of lost track himself, not knowing how long he'd been in the chamber. And none of this other stuff mattered at all if they didn't make it to the safe haven. Hopefully Minho and the others had already found it.

"Fine. Let's just forget this for now," he said, then changed the subject. "Is anything different out there? I mean, I saw it in the dark, but—"

"We know," Teresa interrupted. "There's no sign of a building. Nothing. It looks even worse in the daylight. Just forever and ever of flat wasteland. There isn't a tree or a hill, much less any *safe haven*."

Thomas looked at Aris, then back at Teresa. "Then what're we supposed to do? Where do we go?" He thought of Minho and Newt, the Gladers, Brenda and Jorge. "Have you seen

any of the others?"

Aris answered. "All the girls from my group are down there, walking north like they're supposed to, already a couple miles out. We spotted your friends at the base of the mountain a mile or two west of here. Can't tell for sure, but looks like no one new is missing, and they're heading in the same direction as the girls."

Relief filled Thomas. His friends had made it—hopefully all of them.

"We gotta get moving," Teresa said. "Just because nothing's there doesn't mean anything. Who knows what WICKED is up to? We just have to do what they told us. Come on."

Thomas had been experiencing a brief moment of wanting to give up, to sit down and forget it all—let whatever was going to happen, happen. But almost as fast as it came out, it disappeared. "Okay, let's go. But you better tell me everything you know."

"I will," she answered. "You guys up for running once we're out of these dead trees?"

Aris nodded, but Thomas rolled his eyes. "*Please.* I'm a Runner."

She raised her eyebrows. "Well, then, we'll just have to see who stops before who."

In answer, Thomas stepped out of the small clearing and into the lifeless forest first, refusing to dwell on the storm of memories and emotions that tried to weigh him down.

The sky didn't lighten much as morning ticked on. Clouds blew in, gray and thick, so thick that Thomas wouldn't have had any idea of the time if it weren't for his watch.

Clouds. Last time that had happened ...

Maybe this storm wouldn't be so bad. Maybe.

Once they left the dense pack of dead trees, they didn't pause. An obvious trail led toward the valley below, switching back and forth like a jagged scar on the mountain face. Thomas estimated it would take a couple of hours just to get to the bottom—running on the steep, slippery slopes looked like a good way to break an ankle or leg. And if that happened, they'd never make it.

The three agreed they'd hike quickly but safely, then book it once they were on flat land. They started down—Aris, then Thomas, then Teresa. The dark clouds churned above them as wind gusted in seemingly every direction. Just as Aris had said, Thomas could see two separate packs of people in the desert below—his Glader friends, not far from the base of the mountain, then Group B, maybe a mile or two farther out.

Once again Thomas was relieved, and his step felt lighter as he made his way.

After the third switchback, Teresa spoke up from behind him. "So, guess I'll start the story from where we left off."

Thomas just nodded. He couldn't believe how good he felt physically—his stomach miraculously full, the pain from being beaten up gone, fresh air and brisk wind to make him feel alive. He had no idea what was in that gas he'd breathed, but it seemed far from poisonous. Still, his mistrust of Teresa itched at him; he didn't want to be overly nice.

"It all started right when we were talking to each other in the middle of the night—that very first one right after the rescue from the Maze. I was kind of half asleep and then these people were in my room, all dressed funny. Creepy. Baggy jumpsuits and goggles."

"Serious?" Thomas asked over his shoulder. They sounded just like the people he'd seen after being shot.

“Freaked me out—and I tried calling to you, but it suddenly cut out. The telepathy thing, I mean. I don’t know how I knew, but it just vanished. From then until now it’s only come and gone in spurts.”

Then she spoke in his mind. *You can hear me perfectly now, right?*

Yeah. Did you and Aris really talk while we were in the Maze?

Well ...

She trailed off, and when Thomas looked back at her, she had a worried look on her face.

What’s wrong? he asked, turning his attention back to the trail before he did something stupid like trip and go tumbling down the mountain.

I don’t wanna go into that yet.

“Go—” He stopped himself before he said it out loud. *Go into what?*

Teresa didn’t answer.

Thomas tried as hard as he could to shout inside her mind. *Go into what!*

She stayed silent a few seconds longer before finally answering.

Yeah, he and I have been talking since I first showed up in the Glade. Mostly while I was in that stupid coma.

It took every ounce of Thomas's willpower not to stop and turn toward her. *What? Why didn't you tell me about him back in the Maze?* As if he needed another reason to dislike either of them.

"Why'd you guys stop talking?" Aris suddenly asked. "You yappin' about me in those pretty little heads of yours?" Impossibly, he didn't seem the least bit sinister at all anymore. It was almost as if everything that had happened back in the dead forest had been a creation of Thomas's imagination.

Thomas let out a heavy breath that had been building in his lungs. "I can't believe this. You two've been—" He stopped, realizing that maybe he wasn't so surprised after all. He'd *seen* Aris in the splotchy memories of his most recent dream. He was a part of this, whatever *this* was. And the way they'd acted toward each other in that brief recall seemed to say they were on the same side. *Used to be, anyway.*

"Shuck it," Thomas finally said. "Just keep talking."

"All right," Teresa said. "There's a lot of stuff to explain, so from now on just keep quiet and listen. Got it?"

Thomas's legs were starting to burn from their steady pace on the slope. "Okay, but ... how do you know when you're talking to me and when you're talking to him? How does that work?"

"It just does. That's like me asking how you know when you're telling your right leg to move and when you're telling your left leg to move. I just ... know. It's built into my brain somehow."

"We've done it, too, man," Aris said. "Don't you remember?"

"Of course I remember," Thomas muttered, annoyed and frustrated on so many levels. If only he could have everything back—every last memory—he knew the pieces would fall into place and he could just move forward. He couldn't fathom why WICKED felt it was so important to keep their minds clean of memory. And why the occasional leakage lately? Was that on purpose or an accident? A lingering effect of the Changing?

Too many questions. Too many shuck questions, all without answers. "All right," he finally said. "I'll keep my mouth and brain shut. Keep going."

"We can talk about Aris and me later. I don't even remember what we spoke about—I lost almost everything when I woke up. Our comas had to be part of the Variables, so maybe we could communicate just so we wouldn't go crazy. I mean, we *were* part of setting it all up, right?"

"Setting it all up?" Thomas asked. "I don't—"

Teresa reached forward and swatted him on the back. "Thought you were gonna be quiet?"

"Yeah," Thomas grumbled.

"Anyway, these people came into my room dressed in those creepy outfits and my telepathy with you cut off. I was scared and only half awake. Part of me thought it was just

a bad nightmare. Then the next thing I knew, they put something over my mouth that smelled horrible and then I passed out. When I woke up I was lying in a bed in a different room and a bunch of people were sitting in chairs on the opposite side of this weird glass wall. I couldn't see it until I touched it—almost like a force field or something.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said. “We had something like that, too.”

“So then they started talking to me. That’s when they told me this whole plan of what Aris and I had to do to you—and they expected me to tell him. By, you know, speaking in his mind, even though he was now with your group. Our group. Group A. They took me from my room and sent me to be with Group B; then they told us about the mission to the safe haven, about having the Flare. We were scared, confused, but we had no choice. We went through these underground tunnels until we got to the mountains—we avoided the city altogether. When you and I met in that little building, and then everything that happened from the time we came down to you in the valley with all those weapons—all of that was planned.”

Thomas thought about the sketchy memories he’d had in his dreams. Something told him he’d known that a scenario like this might need to happen before he ever went to the Glade and the Maze. He had a hundred questions to ask Teresa, but decided to hold back for a little while longer.

They turned at another switchback; then Teresa continued. “I only know two things for sure. One, they said that if I did anything against their plan they’d kill you. Said they ‘had other options,’ whatever that means. The second thing I know is that the reason for all this was that you had to truly and absolutely feel betrayed. The whole purpose of what we did to you was to ensure that that happened.”

Again Thomas thought of the memories. He and Teresa had both used the word *patterns* right before he left her. What did it mean?

“So?” Teresa asked after they’d walked in silence for a while.

“So … what?” Thomas replied.

“So what do you think?”

“That’s it? That’s your whole explanation? I’m supposed to feel all happy now?”

“Tom, I couldn’t take any chances. I was convinced they’d kill you unless I went along. No matter what, in the end you had to feel like I’d completely betrayed you. That’s why I put so much into it. But why this was all so important? I have no idea.”

Thomas realized suddenly that all this information had started another headache. “Well, you sure were good at it. What about in that building? When you kissed me? And … why did Aris need to be involved in all this?”

Teresa grabbed his arm and made him stop and turn to face her. “They had everything calculated. All for the Variables. I don’t know how it all fits together.”

Thomas slowly shook his head. “Well, none of this crap makes any sense to me. And excuse me for feeling a little ticked off.”

“Did it work?”

“Huh?”

“For some reason they wanted you betrayed, and it worked. Right?”

Thomas paused, looked into her blue eyes for a long time. “Yeah. It did.”

“I’m sorry for what I did. But you’re alive, and so am I. And so is Aris.”

"Yeah," he repeated. He really didn't feel like talking to her anymore.

"WICKED got what they want, and I got what I want." Teresa looked at Aris, who'd kept walking for a while and now stood down on the next level of the path. "Aris, turn around, face the valley."

"What?" he replied. He looked confused. "Why?"

"Just do it." She didn't have the mean streak in her voice anymore, hadn't since the gas chamber, but if anything, that made Thomas even more suspicious. What was she up to now?

Aris sighed and rolled his eyes, but did what she said, turning his back to them.

Teresa didn't hesitate. She wrapped her arms around Thomas's neck, pulling him in. He didn't have enough will to resist.

They kissed, but nothing stirred inside Thomas. He felt nothing.

CHAPTER 56

The wind intensified, whipping and swirling.

Thunder rumbled in the darkening sky, giving Thomas an excuse to pull away from Teresa. He decided again to hide his hard feelings. Time was running out and they still had a long way to go.

Doing his best acting job, he gave Teresa a smile and said, “Guess I got it—you did a bunch of weird stuff, but you were forced to, and now I’m alive. That’s it, right?”

“That’s about it.”

“Then I’m gonna quit thinking about it. We need to catch up with the others.” The best chance he had to make it to the safe haven was to work with Teresa and Aris, so he would. He could think about Teresa and all she’d done later.

“If you say so,” she said with a forced smile, as if she sensed that something wasn’t quite right. Or maybe she didn’t like the prospect of facing the Gladers after what had happened.

“Are you guys done up there?” Aris yelled, still facing the other direction.

“Yes!” Teresa called back. “And don’t expect me to ever kiss *you* on the cheek again. I think my lips have a fungus now.”

Thomas almost gagged at hearing that. He set off down the mountain again, moving before Teresa tried to hold his hand.

* * *

It took another hour to get to the bottom of the mountain. The slope leveled a bit as they got closer, allowing them to increase their pace. Eventually the switchbacks stopped altogether, and they jogged the last mile or so to the flat and desolate wasteland stretching to the horizon. The air was hot, but the overcast sky and the wind kept it bearable.

Thomas still couldn’t get a very good look at the slowly converging Groups A and B up ahead, especially now that he’d lost the bird’s-eye view and dust had clouded the air. But both the boys and the girls still moved in their own tight packs, heading north. Even from his vantage point, they appeared to be leaning into the stiffening wind as they walked.

Thomas’s eyes stung from the dirt flying through the air. He kept wiping at them, which only made it worse, made the surrounding skin feel raw. The world continued to darken as the clouds thickened in the sky above.

After a quick break to eat and drink—their remaining supplies were dwindling fast—the three of them took a moment to observe the other groups.

“They’re just walking up there,” Teresa said, pointing ahead with one hand while shielding her eyes from the wind with the other. “Why aren’t they running?”

“Because we still have over three hours until the deadline,” Aris responded, looking at his watch. “Unless we totally figured wrong, the safe haven should be only a few miles from this side of the mountains. But I don’t see anything.”

Thomas hated to admit it, but the hope that they were just missing something from a distance had faded away. “By the way they’re dragging, they obviously can’t see it, either.

It must not be there—they don't have anything to run to but more desert.”

Aris glanced at the gray-black sky. “Looks ugly up there. What if we get another one of those nice lightning storms?”

“We'd be better off staying in the mountains if that happens,” Thomas said. Wouldn't that be a perfect way to end all this, he thought. Burned to a crisp by bolts of electricity while searching for some safe haven that had never been there in the first place.

“Let's just catch up to them,” Teresa said. “Then we can figure out what to do.” She turned to look at both boys and put her hands on her hips. “You guys ready?”

“Yeah,” Thomas said. He was trying not to sink into the pit of panic and worry that threatened to swallow him. There had to be an answer to all this. Had to.

Aris just shrugged in response.

“Then let's run,” Teresa said. And before Thomas could answer she was already gone, with Aris close at her heels.

Thomas took a deep breath. For some reason it all reminded him of the first time he'd run out into the Maze with Minho. Which worried him. He exhaled and set off after the other two.

After maybe twenty minutes of running, the wind forcing him to work twice as hard as he'd ever had to in the Maze, Thomas spoke out to Teresa in his mind. *I think I've had some more memories come back to me lately. In my dreams.* He'd been wanting to tell her, but not really in front of Aris. A test, more than anything, to see how she responded to what he'd remembered. See if he could find any clues to her true intentions.

Really? she answered.

He could sense her shock. *Yeah. Weird, random things. Stuff from when I was a little kid. And ... you were there, too. I had glimpses of how WICKED treated us. A little about right before we went to the Glade.*

She paused before answering, maybe afraid to ask the questions that eventually came to him. *Does any of it help us? Do you remember much of it?*

Most of it. But there wasn't enough there to really mean a whole lot.

What did you see?

Thomas told her about each little segment of memory—or dream—he'd seen over the last couple of weeks. About seeing his mom, about overhearing conversations about surgery, about him and her spying on members of WICKED, hearing things that didn't make a whole lot of sense. About them testing and practicing their telepathy. And, finally, about saying goodbye right before he went to the Glade.

So Aris was there? she asked, but before he could answer, she continued. *Of course, I already knew that. That the three of us were all part of this. But weird about everyone dying, the replacements, all that. What do you think it means?*

I don't know, he answered. *But I feel like if we had the time to just sit and talk about it we could help each other bring it all back.*

Me too. Tom, I'm really sorry. I can tell you're having a hard time forgiving me.

Would you be any different?

No. I kind of accepted it, in a way. That saving you was worth losing what we might've had.

Thomas had no clue how to respond to that.

Not that they could've talked much more even if he wanted to. With the wind howling and the dust and debris flying through the air and the clouds churning and blackening and the distance to the others getting shorter ...

There just wasn't time.

And so they kept running.

* * *

The two groups ahead of them eventually met up in the distance. More interesting to Thomas, though, was that it didn't appear to be an accident at all. The girls of Group B had reached a point and stopped; then Minho—Thomas could make him out now and was relieved to see him alive and well—and the Gladers had changed direction to go east to meet them.

And now, just a half-mile away, they all stood around something Thomas couldn't see, packing in a tight circle to look at whatever it was.

What's going on up there? Teresa asked Thomas in his mind.

Don't know, he answered.

The two of them, along with Aris, picked up the pace.

It only took another few minutes across the dusty wind-whipped plain before they reached Groups A and B.

Minho had stepped away from the larger pack of people and stood facing them when they finally made it. His arms were folded, his clothes filthy, his hair greasy, his face still showing signs of his burns. But somehow he was smiling. Thomas couldn't believe how good it felt to see that smirky grin again.

"It's about time you slowpokes caught up with us!" Minho yelled at them.

Thomas stopped right in front of him and doubled over to catch his breath for a few seconds, then straightened. "I thought you'd be fightin' tooth and nail with these girls after what they did to us. To me, anyway."

Minho looked back at the now-mingling group of boys and girls, then returned his gaze to Thomas. "Well, first of all, they have nastier weapons, not to mention bows and arrows. Plus, some chick named Harriet explained everything. We're the ones who should be surprised—that you're still with them." He gave a nasty glare to Teresa, then Aris. "Never trusted either one of those shuck traitors."

Thomas tried to hide his mixed emotions. "They're on our side. Trust me." And in a twisted, backward way he really was starting to believe it. As sick as it made him feel.

Minho laughed bitterly. "Figured you'd say something like that. Let me guess, it's a long story?"

"Yeah, very long story," Thomas answered, then changed the subject. "Why'd you all stop here? What's everybody looking at?"

Minho stepped to the side, sweeping his arm behind him. "Have a peeky-peek yourself." Then he yelled to the two groups, "*You guys make a path!*"

Several Gladers and girls looked back, then slowly shuffled to the side until a narrow break in the crowd formed. Thomas immediately saw that the object that held everyone's attention was a simple stick poking out of the arid ground. An orange strip of ribbon hung

from the top, whipping in the wind. Letters were printed on the thin banner.

Thomas and Teresa exchanged a look; then Thomas pushed ahead for a closer inspection. Even before he got there, he could read the words printed on the ribbon, black on orange.

THE SAFE HAVEN

CHAPTER 57

Despite the wind and the hubbub of people, the world quieted around Thomas for a minute, as if his ears had been stuffed with cotton. He fell to his knees and numbly reached out to touch the flapping orange ribbon. *This was the safe haven? Not a building, a shelter, something?*

Then, as quickly as it had disappeared, sound rushed back in, snapping him back to reality. Mostly the rush of wind and the chatter of conversation.

He turned back to Teresa and Minho, who stood side by side, Aris behind them peeking over their shoulders.

Thomas glanced at his watch. "We have over an hour left. Our safe haven is a stick in the ground?" Confusion muddled his mind—he wasn't quite sure what to think or say.

"Wasn't so bad, when you think about it," Minho said. "More than half of us made it here. Looks like even more of the girlie group."

Thomas stood up, trying to control his anger. "The Flare turn you crazy already? Yeah, we got here. Safe and sound. To a *stick*."

Minho scoffed at him. "Dude, they wouldn't send us here for no reason. We made it in the time they gave us. Now we just wait until the clock ticks down and something'll happen."

"That's what worries me," Thomas said.

"Hate to say it," Teresa added, "but I agree with Thomas. After everything they've done to us, it'd be way too easy to have a little sign here, and then they come get us in a nice helicopter as a reward. Something bad's gonna happen."

"Whatever you say, traitor," Minho said, his face hiding none of the hatred he felt for Teresa. "I don't want to hear another word from you." He walked away, angrier than Thomas had ever seen him.

Thomas looked at Teresa, who was visibly taken aback. "You shouldn't be surprised."

She just shrugged. "I'm sick of apologizing. I did what I had to do."

Thomas couldn't believe she was serious. "Whatever. I need to find Newt. I want—"

Before he could finish, Brenda appeared out of the crowd, glancing back and forth between him and Teresa. The wind tore through her long hair, whipping it frenziedly so that she kept pushing it behind her ears only to have it fly out again.

"Brenda," he said. For some reason he felt guilty.

"Hey there," Brenda said, walking up to stand right in front of him and Teresa. "This the girl you were tellin' me about? When you and I were snuggling in that truck?"

"Yeah." The word popped out of Thomas's mouth before he could stop it. "No. I mean ... yeah."

Teresa held her hand out to Brenda, who shook it. "I'm Teresa."

"Nice to meet you," Brenda replied. "I'm a Crank. I'm slowly going crazy. I keep wanting to chew off my own fingers and randomly kill people. Thomas here promised to save me." Though she was obviously joking, she didn't even crack a smile.

Thomas had to hide a wince. "Funny, Brenda."

"Glad to see you still have a sense of humor about it," Teresa said. But her face could've turned water to ice.

Thomas looked down at his watch. Fifty-five minutes left. "I, um, need to talk to Newt." He turned and quickly walked away before either girl could say anything. He wanted to be as far away from both of them as possible.

Newt was sitting on the ground with Frypan and Minho, all three looking as if they were waiting for the end of the world.

The tearing wind had gained a moisture to it, and the billowing, churning clouds above them had lowered considerably, like a dark fog dropping to swallow the earth. Glimpses of light flashed here and there in the sky, burning patches of purple and orange in the grayness. Thomas hadn't seen an actual lightning bolt yet, but he knew they were coming. The first big storm had begun just like this.

"Hey, Tommy," Newt said when Thomas joined them. He sat down next to his friend and wrapped his arms around his knees. Two simple words with nothing behind them. It was as if Thomas had just gone for a leisurely walk instead of being kidnapped and almost killed.

"Glad to see you guys made it here," Thomas said.

Frypan snorted his usual animal-like bark of a laugh. "Same back at ya. Looks like you had more fun, though. Hangin' with your love goddess. Guess you two kissed and made up?"

"Not exactly," Thomas said. "It wasn't fun."

"Well, what happened?" Minho asked. "How can you trust her after all that?"

Thomas hesitated at first, but he knew he had to tell them everything. And there was no better time than the present. He sucked in a deep breath and started talking. He told them about WICKED's plan for him, the camp, his talk with Group B, the gas chamber. Still none of it made sense, but he felt a little better telling his friends.

"And you forgave that witch?" Minho asked when Thomas finally finished. "I won't. Whatever those shuck WICKED people wanna do, fine by me. Whatever you wanna do, fine by me. But I don't trust her, I don't trust Aris, and I don't like either one of them."

Newt seemed to consider it more deeply. "They went through all that—all that planning and acting—just to make you feel *betrayed*? Doesn't make any bloody sense."

"Tell me about it," Thomas muttered. "And no, I haven't forgiven her. But for now I think we're in the same boat." He looked around—most people were sitting down, staring off into the distance. Not much conversation, and not a whole lot of mingling between the two groups. "What about you guys? How'd you make it here?"

"Found a gap through the mountains," Minho answered. "Had to fight through some Cranks camping in a cave, but other than that, no problems. Food and water's almost out, though. And my feet hurt. And I'm pretty sure another big bolt of shuck lightning's about to come down and make me look like a piece of Frypan's bacon."

"Yeah," Thomas said. He glanced back at the mountains, guessed that all in all they'd probably come about four miles from the base. "Maybe we should bag this whole safe haven thing and try to find shelter." But even as he said it, he knew it wasn't an option. At least not until the time ran out.

"No way," Newt replied. "We didn't come this far to go back now. Let's just hope the

buggin' storm holds off a little longer." He looked up at the almost black clouds with a grimace.

The other three Gladers had grown silent. The wind had continued to pick up, and its rushing roars and whips now made it hard to hear each other anyway. Thomas looked at his watch.

Thirty-five minutes. No way this storm would hold for—

"What's that!" Minho shouted, jumping to his feet; he pointed at a spot over Thomas's shoulder.

Thomas turned to look as he stood up, alarm igniting inside him. The terror on Minho's face had been unmistakable.

About thirty feet from the group, a large section of the desert ground was ... opening. A perfect square—maybe fifteen feet wide—pivoted on a diagonal axis as the dirt-packed side slowly spun away from them and what had lain underneath rose up to replace it. The sound of groaning, twisting steel pierced the air, louder than the roaring wind. Soon the rotating square had fully flipped, and where once had been desert ground now lay a section of black material, with an odd object sitting on top of it.

It was oblong and white with rounded edges. Thomas had seen something just like it before. Several of them, in fact. After they'd escaped the Maze and entered the huge chamber where the Grievers had come from, they'd seen several of these coffinlike containers. He hadn't had much time to think about it then, but seeing it now, he thought those must've been where the Grievers stayed—slept?—when not hunting humans in the Maze.

Before he had time to react, more sections of the desert floor—surrounding their group in a large circle—started to rotate open like dark, gaping jaws.

Dozens of them.

The squeal of metal was deafening as the square sections slowly spun on their axles. Thomas had his hands to his ears, trying to keep the sound out. The others in the group were doing the same. All around them, scattered evenly and fully encircling the area in which they stood, patches of desert ground rotated until they disappeared, each one eventually replaced with a large black square when it finally settled with a loud clank, one of those bulbous white coffins resting on top. At least thirty in all.

The scream of metal rubbing against metal stopped. No one spoke. The wind ripped across the land, blowing dust and dirt in streams across the rounded containers. It made a gritty pinging sound. There was so much of it, it blended into a noise that made Thomas's spine itch; he had to squint to keep stuff out of his eyes. Nothing else had moved since the foreign, almost alien objects had been revealed. There was only that sound and wind and cold and stinging eyes.

Tom? Teresa called to him.

Yeah.

You remember those, right?

Yeah.

You think Grievers are inside?

Thomas realized that was exactly what he thought, but he'd also finally accepted that he could never expect anything. He reasoned it out for a second before he answered. *I don't know. I mean, the Grievers had really moist bodies—it'd be hard on them out here.* It seemed like a stupid thing to say, but he was grasping for anything.

Maybe we're meant to ... get inside them, she said after a pause. *Maybe they are the safe haven, or they'll transport us somewhere.*

Thomas hated the idea, but thought that maybe she was right. He tore his eyes away from the large pods and looked for her. She was already walking toward him. Fortunately, she was alone. He couldn't handle both her and Brenda right then.

"Hey," he said out loud, but the wind seemed to carry the sound away before it even left his mouth. He started to reach out for her hand but then pulled it back, almost forgetting how things had changed. She didn't seem to notice as she walked over to Minho and Newt and nudged both of them in greeting. They turned to face her and Thomas moved closer to conference with them.

"So what do we do?" Minho asked. He gave Teresa an annoyed look like he didn't want her to be any part of the decision making.

Newt answered. "If those things have bloody Grievers in 'em, we best start gettin' ready to fight the shuck buggers."

"What're you guys talking about?"

Thomas turned to see Harriet and Sonya—it'd been Harriet who'd spoken. And Brenda stood right behind them, with Jorge by her side.

"Oh, great," Minho muttered. "The two queens of glorious Group B."

Harriet just acted like she hadn't heard. "I'm assuming you all saw those pods back in your WICKED chamber, too. They had to be where the Grievers charged up or whatever it was they did."

"Yeah," Newt said. "Gotta be that."

In the sky above, thunder crackled and boomed, and those flashes of light grew brighter. The wind tore at everyone's clothes and hair and everything smelled wet but dusty—a strange combination. Thomas checked the time again. "We've only got twenty-five minutes. We're either gonna be fighting Grievers or we need to get inside those big coffins at the right time. Maybe they're the—"

A sharp hiss cut through the air from all directions. The sound pierced Thomas's eardrums and he clamped his hands to the sides of his head again. Movement on the perimeter surrounding them caught his attention, and he watched carefully what was happening with the large white pods.

A line of dark blue light had appeared on one side of each container, then expanded as the top half of the object began to move upward, opening on hinges like the lid of a coffin. It made no sound, at least not enough to be heard over the rushing wind and rumbling thunder. Thomas sensed the Gladers and the others slowly moving closer together, forming a tighter knot. Everyone was trying to get as far away from the pods as possible—and soon they were a coiled pack of bodies encircled by the thirty or so rounded white containers.

The lids continued moving until they'd all swung open and dropped to the ground. Something bulky rested inside each vessel. Thomas couldn't make out much, but from where he stood he couldn't see anything like the odd appendages of the Grievers. Nothing moved, but he knew not to let his guard down.

Teresa? he said to her mind. He didn't dare try talking loudly enough to be heard—but he had to talk to someone or go nuts.

Yeah?

Someone should go take a look. See what's in it. He said it, but he really didn't want to be the one to do it.

Let's go together, she said easily.

She surprised him with her courage. *Sometimes you have the worst ideas,* he responded. He'd tried to make it *feel* sarcastic, but he knew the truth of it far more than he wanted to admit to himself. He was terrified.

"Thomas!" Minho called. The wind, still wild, was drowned out by the approaching thunder and lightning now, crackling and exploding in brilliant displays above them and on the horizon. The storm was about to fully beat down its fury on them.

"What?" Thomas yelled back.

"You, me, and Newt! Let's go check it out!"

Thomas was just about to move when something slipped out of one of the pods. A collective gasp escaped those closest to Thomas, and he turned for a better look. Things were moving in all the pods, things he couldn't quite understand at first. Whatever they were, they were definitely coming out of their oblong homes. Thomas focused on the pod nearest to him, strained his eyes to discern what exactly he was about to face.

A misshapen arm hung over the edge, and its hand dangled a few inches above the ground. On it were four disfigured fingers—stubs of sickly beige flesh—none of them the

same length. They wiggled and grasped for something that wasn't there, as if the creature inside was searching to get a grip to pull itself out. The arm was covered with wrinkles and lumps, and there was something completely strange right where what passed for an elbow was located. A perfectly rounded protrusion or growth, maybe four inches in diameter, glowing bright orange.

It looked like the thing had a lightbulb glued to its arm.

The monster continued to emerge. A leg flopped out, its foot a fleshy mass, four knobs of toes wriggling as much as its fingers. And on the knee, another one of those impossible orange spheres of light, seemingly growing right out of its skin.

"What is that thing?" Minho shouted over the noise of the surging storm.

No one answered. Thomas was dazed, staring at the creature—mesmerized and terrified at the same time. He did finally look away long enough to see that similar monsters were coming out of every pod—all at the same pace—then returned his attention to the closest one.

It had somehow gained purchase enough with its right arm and leg to begin pulling the rest of its body out. Thomas looked on in horror as the abominable thing flopped and wiggled until it lurched over the edge of the open pod and stumbled to the ground. Roughly human-shaped, though at least a couple of feet taller than anyone around Thomas, its body was naked and thick, pockmarked and wrinkled. Most disturbing were more of those bulbous growths, maybe two dozen total, spread over the thing's body and glowing with brilliant orange light. Several on its chest and back. One on each elbow and knee—the bulb on the right knee had busted in a flurry of sparks when the creature landed on the ground—and several sticking out of a big lump of ... what had to be a head, though it didn't have any eyes, nose, mouth or ears. No hair, either.

The monster got to its feet, swayed a bit as it balanced, then turned to face the group of humans. A quick glance around showed that each pod had delivered its creature, all of them now standing in a circle around the Gladers and Group B.

In unison, the creatures raised their arms until they pointed toward the sky. Then, all at once, thin blades shot out of the tips of their stubby fingers, out of their toes, out of their shoulders. The flashes of lightning in the sky glittered off their surface, sharp and gleaming silver. Though there was no sign of any kind of mouth, a deathly, creepy moan emanated from their bodies—it was a sound Thomas could feel more than hear. And it had to be loud to be heard over the terrible thunder.

Maybe Grievers would've been better, Teresa said inside Thomas's mind.

Well, they're enough alike that it's obvious who created these things, he said back, straining to stay calm.

Minho turned quickly and faced the crowd of still-gaping people surrounding Thomas. "There's about one for each of us! Grab whatever you got for a weapon!"

Almost as if they'd heard the challenge, the lightbulb creatures started moving, walking forward. Their first couple of steps were lumbering, but then they recovered, growing steady and strong and agile. Coming closer with every step.

Teresa handed Thomas a really long knife, almost a sword. He couldn't imagine where she'd been hiding these things, but she now held a short dagger in addition to her spear.

As the lighted giants stepped closer and closer, Minho and Harriet spoke to their respective groups, moving them around, positioning them, their shouts and commands torn away by the wind before Thomas could hear anything. He dared take his eyes off the approaching monsters long enough to look at the sky. Tendrils of lightning forked and arced across the bottom of the dark clouds, which seemed to hang only a few dozen feet above them. The acrid smell of electricity permeated the air.

Thomas looked back down, concentrated on the creature closest to him. Minho and Harriet had been able to get the groups to stand together in an almost perfect circle, facing outward. Teresa stood next to Thomas, and he would've said something to her if he could've thought of anything. He was speechless.

WICKED's latest abominations were only thirty feet away.

Teresa finally elbowed him in the ribs. He looked to see her pointing at one of the creatures, telling Thomas—making sure he knew—that she'd chosen her foe. He nodded, then gestured toward the one he'd been thinking was his all along.

Twenty-five feet away.

Thomas had the sudden thought that it was a mistake to wait for them—that they needed to be spread out more. Minho must've had the same idea.

"Now!" their leader yelled, a bare and distant bark because of the storm's sounds. "Charge them!"

A slew of thoughts spun through Thomas's mind in that instant. Worry for Teresa, despite the changes between them. Worry for Brenda—standing stoically just a few people down the line from him—and regret over how they had barely spoken since being reunited. He imagined her having come all this way only to be killed by a vicious man-made creature. He thought of the Grievers, and his and Chuck and Teresa's charge back in the Maze to get to the Cliff and the Hole, the Gladers fighting and dying for them so they could punch in the code and stop it all.

He thought of all they'd gone through to arrive at this point, once again facing a biotech army sent by WICKED. He wondered what it all meant, whether it was worth trying to survive anymore. The image of Chuck taking that knife for him popped into his head. And that did it. Snapped him out of those nanoseconds of frozen doubt and fear. Screaming at the top of his lungs, he wielded his huge knife with both hands above his head and rushed forward, straight for his monster.

To his left and right, the others also charged, but he ignored them. He had to, forced himself to. If he couldn't take care of his own assignment, worrying about others wouldn't amount to anything.

He closed in. Fifteen feet. Ten feet. Five. The creature had stopped walking, bracing its legs in a fighting stance, hands outstretched, blades pointing directly at Thomas. Those

shining orange lights pulsed now, flaring and receding, flaring and receding, as if the hideous thing actually had a heart somewhere inside. It was disturbing to see no face on the monster, but it helped Thomas think of it as nothing more than a machine. Nothing more than a man-made weapon that wanted him dead.

Right before he reached the creature, Thomas made a decision. He dropped to slide on his knees and shins and swung the swordlike weapon in an arc behind and around him, slamming the blade into the monster's left leg with a full and powerful two-handed thrust. The knife cut an inch into its skin but then clanked against something hard enough to send a jolt shivering up both of Thomas's arms.

The creature didn't move, didn't retract, didn't let out any sort of sound, human or inhuman. Instead it swiped downward with both blade-studded hands where Thomas now knelt before it, his sword embedded in the monster's flesh. Thomas jerked it free and lunged backward just as those blades clattered against each other where his head had been. He fell on his back and scooted away from the creature as it took two steps forward, kicking out with the knives on its feet, barely missing Thomas.

The monster let out a roar this time—a sound almost exactly like the haunted moans of the Grievers—and dropped to the ground, thrashing its arms, trying to impale Thomas. Thomas spun away, rolling three times as he heard metal tips scraping along the dirt-packed ground. He finally took a chance and jumped to his feet, immediately sprinting several yards away before turning around, sword gripped in his hands. The creature was just getting to its own feet, slicing at the air with its stubby bladed fingers.

Thomas sucked in huge gulps of air and could see the others battling in his peripheral vision. Minho jabbing and stabbing with knives in both hands, the monster actually taking steps backward, away from him. Newt scrambling across the ground, the creature he fought lumbering after him, obviously injured. Slowing. Teresa was the closest to him, jumping and dodging and poking her foe with the butt of her spear. Why was she doing that? Her monster seemed to be badly hurt as well.

Thomas pulled his attention back to his own battle. A blur of silver movement made him duck, a wisp of wind in his hair from the swipe of the creature's arm. Thomas spun, crouched close to the ground, stabbing at anything he could as the monster pursued him, barely missing him with several more attacks. Thomas connected with one of the orange bulb growths, smashing it in a flash of sparks; the light died instantly. Knowing his luck had to be running short, he dove toward the ground, tucking and rolling again until he sprang to his feet a couple of yards away.

The creature had paused—at least as long as it had taken Thomas to make his escape move—but now it came after him again. An idea formed in Thomas's mind, and it grew to clarity when he looked back at Teresa's fight, her creature now moving in jilted, slow attacks. She kept after the bulbs, popping them as they exploded in that same display of fireworks. She'd destroyed at least three-fourths of the odd growths.

The bulbs. All he needed to do was destroy the bulbs. Somehow they were linked to the creature's power or life or strength. Could it really be that easy?

A quick glance around the rest of the battlefield showed that a few others had also gotten the idea, but most hadn't, fighting with bloody desperation to hack at limbs, muscles, skin, missing the bulbs entirely. A couple of people already lay on the ground, covered in

wounds, lifeless. One boy. One girl.

Thomas changed his whole method. Instead of charging recklessly, he jumped in and took a jab at one of the bulbs on the monster's chest. He missed, slicing into the wrinkled, yellowish skin. The creature swiped at him, but he pulled back just as the very tips of the blades ripped jagged holes in his shirt. Then he thrust again, poking once more at the same bulb. He connected this time, bursting it and sending out a spray of sparks. The creature halted for a full second, then snapped back to battle mode.

Thomas circled the creature, jumping in and back again, poking, jabbing, thrusting.

Pop, pop, pop.

One of the monster's blades sliced across his forearm, leaving a long line of bright red. Thomas went in again. And again. Again.

Pop, pop, pop. Sparks flying, the creature shuddering and jerking with each break.

The pause got a little bit longer with every successful stab. Thomas felt a few more scrapes and slices, but nothing serious. He kept at it, attacking those orange spheres.

Pop, pop, pop.

Every small victory sapped the creature's strength, and it gradually began to visibly slump, though it didn't stop trying to cut Thomas to pieces. Bulb by bulb, each one easier than the one before it, Thomas attacked relentlessly. If only he could quickly finish it off, make it die. Then he could run around and help others. End this thing once and for—

A blinding light flashed behind him, then a sound like the entire universe exploding ripped away his brief moment of exhilaration and hope. A wave of invisible power knocked him over and he fell flat onto his stomach, the sword clattering away from him. The creature fell, too, and a burnt smell singed the air. Thomas rolled onto his side to look, saw a massive black hole in the ground, charred and smoking. A bladed foot and hand from one of the monsters lay on the hole's edge. No sign of the rest of the body.

It'd been a lightning strike. Right behind him. The storm had finally broken.

Even as he had the thought, he looked up to see thick shards of white heat start falling from the black clouds above.

CHAPTER 60

The lightning exploded all around him with deafening cracks of thunder; plumes of dirt flew into the air from every direction. Several people screamed—one was cut off abruptly, a girl. And that burning smell. Overwhelming. The strikes of electricity subsided as quickly as they had begun. But light continued to flash in the clouds, and rain started to pour down in sheets.

Thomas hadn't moved during that first flurry of lightning. There was no reason to think he'd be any safer in another spot than where he lay. But after the onslaught, he scrambled to his feet to look around, see what he could do or where he could run before it happened again.

The creature he'd been fighting was dead, half of its body blackened, the other half gone. Teresa stood over her foe, slamming the butt of her spear down and smashing the last bulb; its sparks died with a hiss. Minho was on the ground, but slowly getting to his feet. Newt stood there, breathing in and out, deep heaving breaths. Frypan doubled over and threw up. Some were lying on the ground; others—like Brenda and Jorge—still fighting the monsters. Thunder boomed all around them and lightning glinted in the rain.

Thomas had to do something. Teresa wasn't too far away; she stood a couple of steps from her dead creature, bent over, hands on her knees.

We have to find shelter! he said in her mind.

How much time do we have left?

Thomas squinted at his watch closely. *Ten minutes.*

We should get inside the pods. She pointed at the closest one, which still lay open like a perfectly cut eggshell, its halves surely full of water by this point.

He liked the idea. *What if we can't close it?*

Got any better plans?

No. He grabbed her hand and started running.

We need to tell the others! she said as they approached the pod.

They'll figure it out. He knew they couldn't wait—more strikes could hit them at any second. They'd all be dead by the time he and Teresa tried to communicate with anyone. He had to trust his friends to save themselves. *Knew* he could trust them.

They reached the pod just as several bolts of electricity came zigzagging down from the sky, striking in blistering explosions all around them. Dirt and rain flew everywhere; Thomas's ears rang. He looked inside the left half of the container, saw nothing but a small pool of dirty water. A horrible smell wafted up from it.

"Hurry!" he yelled as he climbed in.

Teresa followed him. They didn't need to speak to know what to do next. They both got on their knees, then leaned forward to grab the far end of the other half—it had a rubbery lining, easy to grip. Thomas braced his midsection on the lip of the pod, then pulled up, straining with every bit of strength he had left. The other half lifted and swung toward them.

Just as Thomas was repositioning himself to sit, Brenda and Jorge ran up to them. Thomas felt a rush of relief at seeing them okay.

"Is there room for us?" Jorge screamed over the noise of the storm.

"Get in!" Teresa yelled back in answer.

The two of them slipped over the edge and splashed into the large container, a tight fit but manageable. Thomas scooted to the far end to give them more room, holding the cover just barely open—the rain drummed on its outer surface. Once everyone was settled, he and Teresa ducked their heads and let the pod close completely. Other than the hollow thrum of the rain and the distant explosions of lightning and the gasping of breaths, it grew relatively silent. Though Thomas still heard that same ringing in his ears.

He could only hope his other friends had made it safely to pods of their own.

"Thanks for letting us in, *muchacho*," Jorge said when everyone seemed to have caught their breath.

"Of course," Thomas replied. The darkness inside the container was absolute, but Brenda was right next to him, then Jorge, then Teresa on the far end.

Brenda spoke up. "Thought you might've had second thoughts about bringing us along. Would've been a good chance to get rid of us."

"Please," Thomas muttered. He was too tired to care how it sounded. Everyone had almost died, and they might not be out of the woods yet.

"So is this our safe haven?" Teresa asked.

Thomas clicked the little light button on his watch; they had seven minutes till the time was up. "Right now, I sure hope so. Maybe in a few minutes these shuck squares of land will spin around and drop us into some nice comfy room where we can all live happily ever after. Or not."

Crack!

Thomas yelped—something had slammed into the top of the pod and made the loudest sound he'd ever heard, an earsplitting crash. A small hole—just a sliver of gray light—had appeared in the ceiling of their shelter, beads of water forming and dropping quickly.

"Had to be lightning," Teresa said.

Thomas rubbed his ears, the ringing worse now. "Couple more of those and well be right back where we started." His voice sounded hollow.

Another check of the watch. Five minutes. The water *drip-drip-dripped* into the puddle; that horrible smell lingered; the bells in Thomas's head lessened.

"This isn't quite what I imagined, *hermano*," Jorge said. "Thought we'd show up here and you'd convince the big bosses to take us in. Give us that cure. Didn't think we'd be holed up in a stinking bathtub waiting to be electrocuted."

"How much longer?" Teresa asked.

Thomas looked. "Three minutes."

Outside, the storm raged, bursts of lightning slamming into the ground, the rain pounding.

Another boom and crack shook the pod, widened the split in the ceiling enough that water began rushing in, splashing all over Brenda and Jorge. Something hissed and steam seeped in as well, the lightning having heated up the outside material.

"We're not gonna last much longer no matter what happens!" Brenda shouted. "It's

almost worse sitting here and waiting for it!"

"There's only two minutes left!" Thomas yelled back at her. "Just hold on!"

A sound started up outside. Faint at first, barely discernible over the noises of the storm. A humming. Deep and low. It grew in volume, seemed to vibrate Thomas's whole body.

"What is that?" Teresa asked.

"No idea," Thomas answered. "But based on our day, I'm sure it's not good. We just have to last another minute or so."

The sound got louder and deeper. Overwhelming the thunder and rain now. The walls of the pod vibrated. Thomas heard a rushing wind outside, different somehow from what had been blowing all day. Powerful. Almost ... artificial.

"There's only thirty seconds left," Thomas announced, suddenly having a change of heart. "Maybe you guys are right. Maybe we're missing something important. I ... I think we should look."

"What?" Jorge responded.

"We need to see what's making that sound. Come on, help me open this back up."

"And if a nice big lightning bolt comes down and fries my butt?"

Thomas put the palms of his hands on the ceiling. "We gotta take a chance! Come on—push!"

"He's right," Teresa said, and she braced her hands to help.

Brenda copied her, and soon Jorge joined them.

"Just about halfway," Thomas said. "Ready?"

After getting a few positive grunts, he said, "One ... two ... three!"

They all pushed toward the sky, and their strength ended up being way too much. The lid flipped up and over and crashed to the ground, leaving the pod fully open. Rain pummeled them, flying horizontally, captured by a ferocious wind.

Thomas leaned on the edge of the pod and gaped at what hovered in the air just thirty feet off the ground, lowering rapidly to land. It was huge and round, with flickering lights and burning thrusters of blue flame. It was the same ship that had saved him after he was shot. The Berg.

Thomas glanced at his watch just in time to see the last second tick down. Looked back up.

The Berg touched down on clawlike landing gear and a huge cargo door in its metal belly began to open.

Thomas knew they couldn't waste any more time. No questions, no fear, no bickering. Only action.

"Come on!" he yelled, pulling Brenda's arm as he stepped out of the pod. He slipped and toppled over, landing with a wet *smush* in the mud. He pushed himself up, spitting the slimy stuff out of his mouth and rubbing it from his eyes, and scrambled back to his feet. The rain poured down, thunder cracked from all directions, lightning bolts lit the air in ominous flashes.

Jorge and Teresa had made it out, Brenda helping them. Thomas looked over at the Berg—maybe fifty feet away—its cargo door now fully open, a gaping maw of an entrance to warm light inside. Shadowy forms stood there, holding guns, waiting. They obviously didn't intend to come out and assist anybody onto the safe haven. The *real* safe haven.

"Run!" he screamed, already on the move. He held his knife in front of him, gripped tightly, in case any of those creatures were still alive and looking for a fight.

Teresa and the others kept pace next to him.

The rain-softened ground made it hard to get good traction; Thomas slipped twice, fell down once. Teresa grabbed his shirt and yanked until he was up and running again. Others were around them, making the same dash for the safety of the ship. The darkness of the storm and the veil of rain and brilliant flashes of lightning made it hard to see who was who. No time to worry about it.

From the right side, lumbering around the back end of the plane, a dozen of the bulb creatures appeared; they headed for a spot cutting off Thomas and his friends from the open cargo door. Their blades were slick with rain, some stained crimson. At least half of their creepy glowing bulbs had been busted, and their jerky movements showed it. But they looked as dangerous as ever. And still, the people in the Berg did nothing, only watched.

"Go right through 'em!" Thomas yelled. Minho appeared, along with Newt and a few other Gladers, joining the charge. Harriet and a few of the Group B girls, too. Everyone seemed to understand the plan, as slight as it was: fight off these last few monsters and get out of there.

Maybe for the first time since entering the Glade weeks earlier, Thomas felt no fear. He didn't know if he'd ever feel it again. He didn't know why, but something had changed. Lightning exploded around him, someone screamed, the rain intensified. Wind tore through the air, pelting him with small rocks and drops of water that hurt equally. The creatures swiped their blades through the air, screaming their disturbing roar as they waited for battle. Thomas ran on, knife held above his head.

No fear.

Three feet from the center creature he jumped into the air, kicking forward, both legs held tightly together. He slammed his feet into one of the orange bulbs protruding from the middle of the monster's chest. It burst and sizzled; the creature wailed something hideous and fell backward, slamming to the ground.

Thomas landed in the mud and rolled to the side. Immediately jumped up and danced around the creature, slashing and poking, bursting the glowing growths.

Pop, pop, pop.

Dodging and jumping away from the futile slashes of the creature's blades. Retaliating, stabbing. *Pop, pop, pop.* Only three bulbs were left; it could barely move. Thomas straddled the thing in a burst of confidence and quickly threw down the final vicious thrusts to end it.

The last bulb burst and fizzled out. Dead.

Thomas got up, spun around to see if someone else needed help. Teresa had finished off hers. Minho and Jorge as well. Newt was there, favoring his bad leg, Brenda helping him stab out the remaining bulbs on his foe.

A few seconds later it ended. No creature moved. No orange lights shone. It was over.

Thomas, breathing heavily, looked up at the entrance to the ship, only twenty feet away. Even as he did, its thrusters ignited and the ship started to lift off the ground.

"It's leaving!" Thomas screamed as loudly as he could, pointing frantically at their only means of escape. "Hurry!"

The word had barely escaped his mouth when Teresa grabbed him by the arm, pulling as she ran for the ship. Thomas stumbled, then righted himself, pounding his feet in the mud. He heard the crack of thunder behind them, saw a flash of lightning fill the sky. Another scream. Others beside him, around him, in front of him now, all running. Newt with his limp, Minho next to him, eyeing him to make sure he didn't fall.

The Berg had reached a point three feet off the ground, slowly rising and turning at the same time, ready at any second to shift those thrusters and zip away. A couple of Gladers and three girls reached it first, dove onto the platform of the open cargo door. Still it rose. Others reached it, climbed on, scrambled inside.

Then Thomas made it with Teresa. The open hatch was chest-high now. He jumped and pushed his hands down on the flat metal, arms stiff, stomach pressed against the thick edge. Swung his right leg up, got leverage, rolled his body fully onto the door. The ship, still rising. Others climbing on, reaching to pull others up. Teresa, halfway on, trying to find a handhold.

Thomas reached out and grabbed her hand, pulled her in. She collapsed on top of him, shared a brief look of victory. Then she was off, and both of them approached the edge of the door to see if anyone needed help.

The Berg was now six feet above the ground, starting to tilt. Three people still hung from the edge. Harriet and Newt were pulling a girl in. Minho was helping Aris. But Brenda held on only with her hands, her body dangling as she kicked her feet and tried to pull herself up.

Thomas dropped to his stomach and scooted closer, reached out and grabbed her right arm. Teresa got the other one. The metal of the cargo door was wet and slick; when Thomas pulled on Brenda he started sliding out, but then stopped abruptly. A quick look behind him revealed that Jorge had planted his butt and feet, holding tightly to both Thomas and Teresa.

Thomas looked back at Brenda, started pulling again. With Teresa's help, she finally came over the edge enough for her stomach to gain purchase; it was easy from there. As she crawled on and farther in, Thomas took another look outside at the ground, slowly

moving away. Nothing but those horrific creatures, lifeless and wet, full of saggy pockets of flesh that had once been full and brightly lit. A few dead human bodies, but not many, and no one Thomas was close to.

He scooted backward, away from the edge, feeling an immense amount of relief. They'd made it, most of them. They'd made it through Cranks and lightning and hideous monsters. They'd made it. He bumped into Teresa, turned toward her, pulled her in and hugged her tightly, forgetting what had happened for a second. They'd made it.

"Who are these two people?"

Thomas jerked away from Teresa to see who'd shouted—it was a man with short red hair, holding a black pistol pointed at Brenda and Jorge, who sat next to each other, shivering and wet and bruised.

"Somebody answer me!" the man yelled again.

Thomas spoke up before he could think about it. "They helped us get through the city—we wouldn't be here if it weren't for them."

The man snapped his head toward Thomas. "You ... *picked them up* along the way?"

Thomas nodded, not liking where this was going. "We made a deal with them. Promised they'd get the cure, too. We still have fewer people than we started with."

"Doesn't matter," the man said. "We didn't say you could bring citizens!"

The Berg continued to climb higher in the sky, but the gaping door didn't close. Wind whipped through the wide hole; any one of them could go tumbling to their death if they hit turbulence.

Thomas got to his feet anyway, determined to defend the pact he'd made. "Well, you told us to come here, and we did what we had to do!"

Their gun-toting host paused, seemed to consider this line of reasoning. "Sometimes I forget how little you people understand what's going on. Fine, you can keep one of 'em. The other goes."

Thomas tried not to show the jolt this gave him. "What do you mean ... the other goes?"

The man clicked something on the gun, then held its end closer to Brenda's head. "We don't have time for this! You have five seconds to choose the one who stays. Don't choose and they both die. One."

"Wait!" Thomas looked at Brenda, at Jorge. They both stared at the floor, said nothing. Their faces pale with fear.

"Two."

Thomas suppressed the rising panic, closed his eyes. There was nothing new here. No, he understood things now. Knew what he had to do.

"Three."

No more fear. No more shock. No more questioning. Take what comes. Play along. Pass the tests. Pass the Trials.

"Four!" The man's face reddened. "Choose right now or they both die!"

Thomas opened his eyes and stepped forward. Then he pointed at Brenda and said the two most foul words to ever pass through his lips.

"Kill her."

Because of the odd pronouncement that only one could stay, Thomas thought he understood, thought he knew what would happen. That it was yet another Variable and

they'd take whomever he *didn't* choose. But he was wrong.

The man jammed his gun into the waistband of his pants, then reached down and grabbed Brenda's shirt with two hands, yanking the girl to her feet. Without a word, he moved toward open air, taking her with him.

Brenda looked at Thomas with panicked eyes, her face full of pain as the stranger dragged her across the metal floor of the Berg. Toward the hatch and certain death.

When he was halfway there, Thomas acted.

He jumped forward and slammed into the man's knees, tackling him to the floor; the gun clattered on the ground next to him. Brenda fell to the side, but Teresa was there to catch her, pull her back from the dangerous edge of the door. Thomas put his left forearm against the man's throat and reached for the gun with his other hand. His fingers found it, gripped it, pulled it close to him. He jumped up and away and held the pistol with both hands, pointing it at the stranger sprawled on his back.

"No one else dies," Thomas said, breathing heavily, somewhat shocked at himself. "If we haven't done enough to pass your stupid tests, then we fail. The tests are over." As he said it, he wondered if this was *supposed* to happen. But even that didn't matter—he meant every word he'd said. The senseless killing and dying had to end.

The stranger's face softened into the slightest hint of a smile and he sat up and scooted backward until he bumped into the wall. As he did so, the large cargo door began closing, the squeak of its hinges like squealing pigs. No one said anything until it clanked shut, one last rush of wind surging through before it did.

"My name's David," the man said, his voice loud in the new silence, broken only by the low hum of the ship's engines and thrusters. "And don't worry, you're right. It's over. It's all over."

Thomas nodded mockingly. "Yeah, we've heard that before. This time we mean it. We're not going to sit back and let you treat us like rats anymore. We're done."

David took a moment to scan the large cargo hold, maybe seeing whether the others agreed with what Thomas had just said. Thomas didn't dare break his gaze, though. He had to believe that they were all behind him.

Finally, David looked back at Thomas, then slowly got to his feet, raising a hand in conciliation as he did so. Once he was standing, he put both hands in his pockets. "What you don't understand is that everything has gone and will continue to go as planned. But you're right, the Trials are complete. We're taking you to a place of safety—a *real* place of safety. No more tests, no more lies, no more setups. No more pretending."

He paused. "I can only promise one thing. When you hear why we've put you through this, and why it's so important that so many of you survived, you'll understand. I promise you'll understand."

Minho snorted. "That's the biggest bunch of klunk I've ever heard in my life."

Thomas couldn't help but feel a little relief that his friend hadn't lost his fire. "And what about the cure? We were promised. For us and the two who helped us get here. How can we believe anything you tell us?"

"Think what you want for now," David said. "Things will change from here out, and you'll get the cure, just like you were told. As soon as we get back to headquarters. You can

keep that gun, by the way—we'll even give you some more, if you'd like. There'll be nothing else for you to fight against, no tests or trials to ignore or refuse. Our Berg will land, you'll see that you're safe and cured, and then you can do what you want. The only thing we'll ever ask you to do again is to listen. Only to listen. I'm sure you're at least intrigued by what's behind all this?"

Thomas wanted to scream at the man but knew it'd serve no point. Instead he answered in as calm a voice as possible. "No more games."

"First sign of trouble," Minho added, "we start fighting. If that means we die, then so be it."

David smiled fully this time. "You know, that's exactly what we predicted you'd do at this point." He motioned with an arm toward a small door at the back of the cargo hold. "Shall we?"

Newt spoke up this time. "What's next on the bloody agenda?"

"Just thought you'd like to eat something, maybe take a shower. Sleep." He started walking around the crowd of Gladers and girls. "It's a very long flight."

Thomas and the others spent a few seconds exchanging glances. But in the end they followed. They really had no other option.

CHAPTER 63

Thomas tried hard not to think about things as the next couple of hours passed.

He'd made a stand, but then all that tension and courage and victory kind of trickled away as the group went through the motions of the most ordinary of activities. Hot food. Cold drinks. Medical attention. Wonderfully long showers. Fresh clothes.

Through it all, Thomas recognized the chance that it was all happening again. That he and the others were being pacified, slowly being led to another shock like the one they'd had when they awakened in the dormitory after being rescued from the Maze. But really, what else was there to do? David and the others on his staff made no threats, did nothing to raise alarm.

Refreshed and full of food, Thomas ended up sitting on a couch that ran along the narrow middle section of the Berg, a vast room full of mismatched drab-colored furniture. He'd been avoiding Teresa, but she came over and sat next to him. He still had a hard time being near her, a hard time talking to her or anyone else. His insides burned with turmoil.

But he put it all away because there was nothing else to do. He didn't know how to fly a Berg and wouldn't know where to go even if he could take it over. They'd go wherever WICKED took them, they'd listen, they'd make their decision.

"What're you thinkin' about?" Teresa finally asked.

Thomas was glad she'd spoken aloud—he wasn't sure he wanted to communicate telepathically with her anymore. "What am I thinking about? Mostly trying not to."

"Yeah. Maybe we should just enjoy the peace and quiet for a while."

Thomas looked at Teresa. She sat next to him as if nothing had changed between them at all. As if they were still best friends. And he couldn't stand it anymore.

"I hate that you're acting like nothing happened."

Teresa looked down. "I'm trying to forget just as much as you probably are. Look, I'm not stupid. I know that we can never be the same. But I still wouldn't change anything. It was the plan and it worked. You're not dead and that's worth it to me. Maybe you'll forgive me someday."

Thomas almost hated her for sounding so reasonable. "Well, all I care about right now is stopping these people. It's not right what they've done to us. It doesn't matter how much I was a part of it. It's wrong."

Teresa stretched out a little so she could rest her head against the arm of the couch. "Come on, Tom. They might've erased our memories, but they didn't remove our brains. We were both part of this, and when they tell us everything—when we remember why we put ourselves through this—we're going to do whatever they tell us to."

Thomas thought about that for a second and realized he couldn't possibly have disagreed more. Maybe at one time he'd felt that way, but not now. Though discussing it with Teresa was the last thing he wanted to do. "Maybe you're right," he murmured.

"When's the last time we slept?" she asked. "I swear I can't remember."

Again with the act that all was well. "I do. For me, anyway. It had something to do with

a gas chamber and you whacking me over the head with a big spear."

Teresa stretched. "I can only say sorry so many times. At least you got some rest. I didn't sleep for one second while you were out. I think I've been awake for two full days."

"Poor baby." Thomas yawned. He couldn't help himself—he was tired, too.

"Mmmm?"

He looked over to see her eyes closed, her breathing slowed. She'd fallen asleep just like that. He glanced around at the other Gladers and Group Bs. Most of them were zonked out, also. Except Minho—he was trying to talk to some cute girl, but her eyes were closed. Jorge and Brenda were nowhere to be found—something that struck Thomas as strange, not to mention at least a bit worrisome.

It was then that he realized he missed Brenda terribly, but his own eyelids began to droop, and weariness and fatigue crept in. As he sank deeper into the couch, he decided he'd have time to look for her later. Then he finally gave in and allowed the sweet darkness of unconsciousness to take him.

He awoke, blinked, wiped his eyes and saw nothing but pure white. No shapes, no shadows, no variation, nothing. Just white.

A flicker of panic until he realized he must be dreaming. Strange, but a dream for sure. He could feel his body, feel his fingers against his skin. Feel himself breathing. *Hear* himself breathing. Yet he was surrounded by a complete and seamless world of bright nothing.

Tom.

A voice. *Her* voice. Could she talk to him while he was dreaming? Had she done it before? Yes.

Hey, he responded.

Are you ... okay? She sounded troubled. No, *felt* troubled.

Huh? Yeah, I'm fine. Why?

Just thought you'd be a little surprised right now.

He felt a stab of confusion. *What are you talking about?*

You're about to understand more. Very soon now.

For the first time, Thomas realized the voice wasn't quite right. There was something off about it.

Tom?

He didn't answer. Fear had crept into his gut. A horrible, sickening, toxic fear.

Tom?

Who ... who are you? he finally asked, terrified of the answer.

A pause before she answered.

It's me, Tom. It's Brenda. Things are about to get bad for you.

Thomas screamed before he knew what he was doing. He screamed and screamed and screamed until it finally woke him up.

He sat straight up, covered in sweat. Even before he could fully compute his surroundings, before all the information traveled through the nerve wires and cognitive functions of his brain, he knew that everything was wrong. That everything had been taken from him all over again.

He lay on the ground, alone, in a room. The walls, the ceiling, the floor—everything was white. The floor beneath him was spongy, hard and smooth but with enough give to be comfortable. He looked at the walls—they were padded, with large buttoned indentations across them, about four feet apart. Bright light shone down from a rectangle in the ceiling, too high for him to reach. The place had a clean smell to it, like ammonia and soap. Thomas looked down to see that even his clothes had no color: a T-shirt, cotton pants, socks.

A brown desk sat about a dozen feet in front of him. It was the only thing in the entire room that wasn't white. Old and battered and scratched, it had a bare wooden chair pushed into the sitting well on the other side. Behind that was the door, padded like the walls.

Thomas felt a strange calm. Instinct told him he should be on his feet, screaming for help. He should be banging on the door. But he knew that door wouldn't open. He knew no one would listen.

He was in the Box all over again, should've known better than to get his hopes up.

I'm not going to panic, he told himself. It had to be another phase of the Trials, and this time he'd fight to change things—to end it all. It was strange, but just knowing he had a plan, that he'd do whatever it took to find freedom, caused a surprising calm to pass over him.

Teresa? he called out. He knew that at this point she and Aris were his only hope for communication with the outside. *Can you hear me? Aris? You there?*

No one responded. Not Teresa. Not Aris. Not ... Brenda.

But that had only been a dream. It had to have been. Brenda couldn't be working with WICKED, couldn't be speaking in his mind.

Teresa? he said again, throwing hard mental effort into it. *Aris?*

Nothing.

He stood and walked over to the desk, but two feet in front of it he ran into an invisible wall. A barrier, just like back in the dormitory.

Thomas didn't let the panic rise. Didn't let fear overcome him. He took a deep breath, walked back toward the corner of the room, then sat down and leaned into it. Closed his eyes and relaxed.

Waited. Fell asleep.

Tom? Tom!

He didn't know how many times she said it before he finally responded. *Teresa?* He woke with a jolt, looked around and remembered the white room. *Where are you?*

They put us in another dormitory after the Berg landed. We've been here a few days, just sitting around doing nothing. Tom, what happened to you?

Teresa was worried—scared, even. That much he knew for sure. As for himself, he mostly felt confused. *A few days? What—*

They took you away as soon the Berg landed. They keep telling us it was too late—that the Flare is too rooted in you. They said you've gotten crazy and violent.

Thomas tried to hold it together, tried not to think about how WICKED could wipe memories. *Teresa ... it's just another part of the Trials. They've got me locked up in this white room. But ... you've been there for days? How many?*

Tom, it's been almost a week.

Thomas couldn't respond. Almost wanted to pretend he hadn't heard what Teresa had just said. The fear he'd been holding back began to slowly seep into his chest. Could he trust her? She'd lied to him so much already. And how did he even know this was really her? It was high time to cut off ties with Teresa.

Tom? Teresa called to him again. What's going on here? I'm really confused.

Thomas felt a rush of emotion, a burning inside him that almost brought tears to his eyes. He had once considered Teresa his best friend. But it could never be like that again. Now all he felt when he thought of her was anger.

Tom! Why aren't you—

Teresa, listen to me.

Hello? That's what I'm trying to—

No, just ... listen. Don't say anything else, okay? Just listen to me.

She paused. Okay. A quiet, scared voice in his mind.

Thomas couldn't control it anymore. Rage pulsed inside of him. Luckily, he only had to think the words, because he could never have spoken them aloud.

Teresa. Go away.

Tom—

No. Don't say another word. Just ... leave me alone. And you can tell WICKED that I'm done playing their games. Tell them I'm done!

She waited a few seconds before responding. Okay. Another pause. Okay. *Then I just have one thing left to say to you.*

Thomas sighed. *I can't wait.*

She didn't say it right away, and he would've thought she'd left him except that he still felt her presence. Finally, she spoke again.

Tom?

What?

WICKED is good.

And then she was gone.

EPILOGUE

WICKED Memorandum, Date 232.2.13, Time 21:13

TO: My Associates

FROM: Ava Paige, Chancellor

RE: SCORCH TRIALS, Groups A and B

This is not a time to let emotions interfere with the task at hand. Yes, some events have gone in a direction we didn't foresee. Not all is ideal—things have gone wrong—but we've made tremendous progress and have collected many of the needed patterns. I feel a great amount of hope.

I expect all of us to maintain our professional demeanor and remember our purpose. The lives of so many people rest in the hands of so few. This is why it's an especially important time for vigilance and focus.

The days to come are fundamental to this study, and I have every confidence that when we restore their memories, every one of our subjects will be ready for what we plan to ask of them. We still have the Candidates we need. The final pieces will be found and put into place.

The future of the human race outweighs all. Every death and every sacrifice are well worth the ultimate outcome. The end of this monumental effort is coming, and I believe that the process will work. That we'll have our patterns. That we'll have our blueprint. That we'll have our cure.

The Psychs are deliberating even now. When they say the time is right, we'll remove the Swipe and tell our remaining subjects if they are—or are not—immune to the Flare.

That's all for now.

END OF BOOK TWO

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I can't really say it better than I did in Book One. To all the same people, especially Lynette, Krista, Michael and Lauren, thank you. You've changed my life forever. Thanks also to all the people at Random House who have worked so hard to make this series a success, including my publicists, Noreen Herits and Emily Pourciau, and all the amazing sales reps out there. I seriously can't believe how incredibly lucky and blessed I am. Thank you. And finally, to my readers: you rock and I love you.

JAMES DASHNER

THE
DEATH
CURE

THE
MAZE
RUNNER
SERIES

BOOK 3 IN THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

THE
DEATH
CURE
JAMES
DASHNER

Delacorte Press

This book is for my mom—
the best human to ever live.

Contents

Master - Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)
[Chapter 40](#)
[Chapter 41](#)
[Chapter 42](#)
[Chapter 43](#)
[Chapter 44](#)
[Chapter 45](#)
[Chapter 46](#)
[Chapter 47](#)
[Chapter 48](#)
[Chapter 49](#)
[Chapter 50](#)
[Chapter 51](#)
[Chapter 52](#)
[Chapter 53](#)
[Chapter 54](#)
[Chapter 55](#)
[Chapter 56](#)
[Chapter 57](#)
[Chapter 58](#)
[Chapter 59](#)
[Chapter 60](#)
[Chapter 61](#)
[Chapter 62](#)
[Chapter 63](#)
[Chapter 64](#)
[Chapter 65](#)
[Chapter 66](#)
[Chapter 67](#)
[Chapter 68](#)
[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)
[Chapter 71](#)
[Chapter 72](#)
[Chapter 73](#)
[Epilogue](#)

Acknowledgments

It was the smell that began to drive Thomas slightly mad.

Not being alone for over three weeks. Not the white walls, ceiling and floor. Not the lack of windows or the fact that they never turned off the lights. None of that. They'd taken his watch; they fed him the exact same meal three times a day—slab of ham, mashed potatoes, raw carrots, slice of bread, water—never spoke to him, never allowed anyone else in the room. No books, no movies, no games.

Complete isolation. For over three weeks now, though he'd begun to doubt his tracking of time—which was based purely on instinct. He tried to best guess when night had fallen, made sure he only slept what felt like normal hours. The meals helped, though they didn't seem to come regularly. As if he was meant to feel disoriented.

Alone. In a padded room devoid of color—the only exceptions a small, almost-hidden stainless-steel toilet in the corner and an old wooden desk that Thomas had no use for. Alone in an unbearable silence, with unlimited time to think about the disease rooted inside him: the Flare, that silent, creeping virus that slowly took away everything that made a person human.

None of this drove him crazy.

But he stank, and for some reason that set his nerves on a sharp wire, cutting into the solid block of his sanity. They didn't let him shower or bathe, hadn't provided him with a change of clothes since he'd arrived or anything to clean his body with. A simple rag would've helped; he could dip it in the water they gave him to drink and clean his face at least. But he had nothing, only the dirty clothes he'd been wearing when they locked him away. Not even bedding—he slept all curled up, his butt wedged in the corner of the room, arms folded, trying to hug some warmth into himself, often shivering.

He didn't know why the stench of his own body was the thing that scared him the most. Perhaps that in itself was a sign that he'd lost it. But for some reason his deteriorating hygiene pushed against his mind, causing horrific thoughts. Like he was rotting, decomposing, his insides turning as rancid as his outside felt.

That was what worried him, as irrational as it seemed. He had plenty of food and just enough water to quench his thirst; he got plenty of rest, and he exercised as best he could in the small room, often running in place for hours. Logic told him that being filthy had nothing to do with the strength of your heart or the functioning of your lungs. All the same, his mind was beginning to believe that his unceasing stench represented death rushing in, about to swallow him whole.

Those dark thoughts, in turn, were starting to make him wonder if Teresa hadn't been lying after all that last time they'd spoken, when she'd said it was too late for Thomas and insisted that he'd succumbed to the Flare rapidly, had become crazy and violent. That he'd *already* lost his sanity before coming to this awful place. Even Brenda had warned him that things were about to get bad. Maybe they'd both been right.

And underneath all that was the worry for his friends. What had happened to them? Where were they? What was the Flare doing to their minds? After everything they'd been subjected to, was this how it was all going to end?

The rage crept in. Like a shivering rat looking for a spot of warmth, a crumb of food. And with every passing day came an increasing anger so intense that Thomas sometimes caught himself shaking uncontrollably before he reeled the fury back in and pocketed it. He didn't want it to go away for good; he only wanted to store it and let it build. Wait for the right time, the right place, to unleash it. WICKED had done all this to him. WICKED had taken his life and those of his friends and were using them for whatever purposes they deemed necessary. No matter the consequences.

And for that, they would pay. Thomas swore this to himself a thousand times a day.

All these things went through his mind as he sat, back against the wall, facing the door—and the ugly wooden desk in front of it—in what he guessed was the late morning of his twenty-second day as a captive in the white room. He always did this—after eating breakfast, after exercising. Hoping against hope that the door would open—actually *open*, all the way—the whole door, not just the little slot on the bottom through which they slid his meals.

He'd already tried countless times to get the door open himself. And the desk drawers were empty, nothing there but the smell of mildew and cedar. He looked every morning, just in case something might've magically appeared while he slept. Those things happened sometimes when you were dealing with WICKED.

And so he sat, staring at that door. Waiting. White walls and silence. The smell of his own body. Left to think about his friends—Minho, Newt, Frypan, the other few Gladers still alive. Brenda and Jorge, who'd vanished from sight after their rescue on the giant Berg. Harriet and Sonya, the other girls from Group B, Aris. About Brenda and her warning to him after he'd woken up in the white room the first time. How had she spoken in his mind? Was she on his side or not?

But most of all, he thought about Teresa. He couldn't get her out of his head, even though he hated her a little more with every passing moment. Her last words to him had been *WICKED is good*, and right or wrong, to Thomas she'd come to represent all the terrible things that had happened. Every time he thought of her, rage boiled inside him.

Maybe all that anger was the last string tethering him to sanity as he waited.

Eat. Sleep. Exercise. Thirst for revenge. That was what he did for three more days. Alone. On the twenty-sixth day, the door opened.

Thomas had imagined it happening, countless times. What he would do, what he would say. How he'd rush forward and tackle anyone who came in, make a run for it, flee, escape. But those thoughts were almost for amusement more than anything. He knew that WICKED wouldn't let something like that happen. No, he'd need to plan out every detail before he made his move.

When it *did* happen—when that door popped open with a slight puffing sound and began to swing wide—Thomas was surprised at his own reaction: he did nothing. Something told him an invisible barrier had appeared between him and the desk—like back in the dorms after the Maze. The time for action hadn't arrived. Not yet.

He felt only the slightest hint of surprise when the Rat Man walked in—the guy who'd told the Gladers about the last trial they'd been forced on, through the Scorch. Same long nose, same weasel-like eyes; that greasy hair, combed over an obvious bald spot that took up half his head. Same ridiculous white suit. He looked paler than the last time Thomas had seen him, though, and he was holding a thick folder filled with dozens of crinkled and messily stacked papers in the crook of one elbow and dragging a straight-backed chair.

"Good morning, Thomas," he said with a stiff nod. Without waiting for a response, he pulled the door shut, set the chair behind the desk and took a seat. He placed the folder in front of him, opened it and started flipping through the pages. When he found what he'd been looking for he stopped and rested his hands on top. Then he flashed a pathetic grin, his eyes settling on Thomas.

When Thomas finally spoke, he realized that he hadn't done so in weeks, and his voice came out like a croak. "It'll only be a good morning if you let me out."

Not even a flicker of change passed over the man's expression. "Yes, yes, I know. No need to worry—you're going to be hearing plenty of positive news today. Trust me."

Thomas thought about that, ashamed that he let it lift his hopes, even for a second. He should know better by now. "*Positive* news? Didn't you choose us because you thought we were intelligent?"

Rat Man remained silent for several seconds before he responded. "Intelligent, yes. Among more important reasons." He paused and studied Thomas before continuing. "Do you think we *enjoy* all this? You think we *enjoy* watching you suffer? It's all been for a purpose, and very soon it will make sense to you." The intensity of his voice had built until he'd practically shouted that last word, his face now red.

"Whoa," Thomas said, feeling bolder by the minute. "Slim it nice and calm there, old fella. You look three steps away from a heart attack." It felt good to let such words flow out of him.

The man stood from his chair and leaned forward on the desk. The veins in his neck bulged in taut cords. He slowly sat back down, took several deep breaths. "You would think that almost four weeks in this white box might humble a boy. But you seem more arrogant than ever."

"So are you going to tell me that I'm not crazy, then? Don't have the Flare, never did?" Thomas couldn't help himself. The anger was rising in him until he felt like he was going to

explode. But he forced a calmness into his voice. “That’s what kept me sane through all this—deep down I know you lied to Teresa, that this is just another one of your tests. So where do I go next? Gonna send me to the shuck moon? Make me swim across the ocean in my undies?” He smiled for effect.

The Rat Man had been staring at Thomas with blank eyes throughout his rant. “Are you finished?”

“No, I’m not finished.” He’d been waiting for an opportunity to speak for days and days, but now that it had finally come, his mind went empty. He’d forgotten all the scenarios he’d played out in his mind. “I … want you to tell me everything. Now.”

“Oh, Thomas.” The Rat Man said it quietly, as if delivering sad news to a small child. “We didn’t lie to you. You *do* have the Flare.”

Thomas was taken aback; a chill cut through the heat of his rage. Was Rat Man lying even now? he wondered. But he shrugged, as if the news were something he’d suspected all along. “Well, I haven’t started going crazy yet.” At a certain point—after all that time crossing the Scorch, being with Brenda, surrounded by Cranks—he’d come to terms with the fact that he’d catch the virus eventually. But he told himself that for now he was still okay. Still sane. And that was all that mattered at the moment.

Rat Man sighed. “You don’t understand. You don’t understand what I came in here to tell you.”

“Why would I believe a word that comes out of your mouth? How could you possibly expect me to?”

Thomas realized that he’d stood up, though he had no memory of doing so. His chest lurched with heavy breaths. He had to get control of himself. Rat Man’s stare was cold, his eyes black pits. Regardless of whether this man was lying to him, Thomas knew he was going to have to hear him out if he ever wanted to leave this white room. He forced his breathing to slow. He waited.

After several seconds of silence, his visitor continued. “I know we’ve lied to you. Often. We’ve done some awful things to you and your friends. But it was all part of a plan that you not only agreed to, but helped set in place. We’ve had to take it all a little farther than we’d hoped in the beginning—there’s no doubt about that. However, everything has stayed true to the spirit of what the Creators envisioned—what *you* envisioned in their place after they were … purged.”

Thomas slowly shook his head; he knew he’d been involved with these people once, somehow, but the concept of putting anyone through what he’d gone through was incomprehensible. “You didn’t answer me. How can you possibly expect me to believe anything you say?” He recalled more than he let on, of course. Though the window to his past was caked with grime, revealing little more than splotchy glimpses, he knew he’d worked with WICKED. He knew Teresa had, too, and that they’d helped create the Maze. There’d been other flashes of memory.

“Because, Thomas, there’s no value in keeping you in the dark,” Rat Man said. “Not anymore.”

Thomas felt a sudden weariness, as if all the strength had seeped out of him, leaving him with nothing. He sank to the floor with a heavy sigh. He shook his head. “I don’t even know what that means.” What was the point of even having a conversation when words

couldn't be trusted?

Rat Man kept talking, but his tone changed; it became less detached and clinical and more professorial. "You are obviously well aware that we have a horrible disease eating the minds of humans worldwide. Everything we've done up till now has been calculated for one purpose and one purpose only: to analyze your brain patterns and build a blueprint from them. The goal is to use this blueprint to develop a cure for the Flare. The lives lost, the pain and suffering—you knew the stakes when this began. We all did. It was all done to ensure the survival of the human race. And we're very close. Very, very close."

Memories had come back to Thomas on several occasions. The Changing, the dreams he'd had since, fleeting glimpses here and there, like quick lightning strikes in his mind. And right now, listening to the white-suited man talk, it felt as if he were standing on a cliff and all the answers were just about to float up from the depths for him to see in their entirety. The urge to grasp those answers was almost too strong to keep at bay.

But he was still wary. He knew he'd been a part of it all, had helped design the Maze, had taken over after the original Creators died and kept the program going with new recruits. "I remember enough to be ashamed of myself," he admitted. "But living through this kind of abuse is a lot different than planning it. It's just not right."

Rat Man scratched his nose, shifted in his seat. Something Thomas said had gotten to him. "We'll see what you think at the end of today, Thomas. We shall see. But let me ask you this—are you telling me that the lives of a few aren't worth losing to save countless more?" Again, the man spoke with passion, leaning forward. "It's a very old axiom, but do you believe the end can justify the means? When there's no choice left?"

Thomas only stared. It was a question that had no good response.

The Rat Man might have smiled, but it looked more like he was sneering. "Just remember that at one time you believed it did, Thomas." He started to collect his papers as if to go but didn't move. "I'm here to tell you that everything is set and our data is almost complete. We're on the cusp of something great. Once we have the blueprint, you can go boo-hoo with your friends all you want about how *unfair* we've been."

Thomas wanted to cut the man with harsh words. But he held back. "How does torturing us lead to this blueprint you're talking about? What could sending a bunch of unwilling teenagers to terrible places, watching some of them die—what could that possibly have to do with finding a cure for some disease?"

"It has everything in the *world* to do with it." Rat Man sighed heavily. "Boy, soon you'll remember everything, and I have a feeling you're going to regret a lot. In the meantime, there's something you need to know—it might even bring you back to your senses."

"And what's that?" Thomas really had no idea what the man would say.

His visitor stood up, smoothed the wrinkles out of his pants and adjusted his coat. Then he clasped his hands behind his back. "The Flare virus lives in every part of your body, yet it has no effect on you, nor will it ever. You're a member of an extremely rare group of people. You're *immune* to the Flare."

Thomas swallowed, speechless.

"On the outside, in the streets, they call people like you Munies," Rat Man continued. "And they really, really hate you."

Thomas couldn't find any words. Despite all the lies he'd been told, he knew that what he'd just heard was the truth. When placed alongside his recent experiences, it just made too much sense. He, and probably the other Gladers and everyone in Group B, was immune to the Flare. Which was why they'd been chosen for the Trials. Everything done to them—every cruel trick played, every deceit, every monster placed in their paths—it all had been part of an elaborate experiment. And somehow it was leading WICKED to a cure.

It all fit together. And more—this revelation pricked his memories. It felt familiar.

"I can see that you believe me," Rat Man finally said, breaking the long silence. "Once we'd discovered there were people like you—with the virus rooted inside, yet showing no symptoms—we sought out the best and the brightest among you. This is how WICKED was born. Of course, some in your trial group are *not* immune, and were chosen as control subjects. When running an experiment you need a control group, Thomas. It keeps all the data in context."

That last part made Thomas's heart sink. "Who isn't ..." The question wouldn't come out. He was too scared to hear the answer.

"Who isn't immune?" Rat Man asked, eyebrows raised. "Oh, I think they should find out before you, don't you? But first things first. You smell like a week-old corpse—let's get you to the showers and find some fresh clothes." With that he picked up his file and turned to the door. He was just about to step out when Thomas's mind focused.

"Wait!" he shouted.

His visitor looked back at him. "Yes?"

"Back in the Scorch—why did you lie that there'd be a cure at the safe haven?"

Rat Man shrugged. "I don't think it was a lie at all. By completing the Trials, by arriving at the safe haven, you helped us collect more data. And because of that there *will* be a cure. Eventually. For everyone."

"And why are you telling me all this? Why now? Why did you stick me in here for four weeks?" Thomas motioned around the room, at the padded ceiling and walls, at the pathetic toilet in the corner. His sparse memories weren't solid enough to make any sense of the bizarre things that had been done to him. "Why did you lie to Teresa about me being crazy and violent and keep me in here all this time? What could possibly be the point?"

"Variables," Rat Man answered. "Everything we've done to you has been carefully calculated by our Psychs and doctors. Done to stimulate responses in the killzone, where the Flare does its damage. To study the patterns of different emotions and reactions and thoughts. See how they work within the confines of the virus that's inside you. We've been trying to understand why in you, there's no debilitating effect. It's all about the killzone patterns, Thomas. Mapping your cognitive and physiological responses to build a blueprint for the potential cure. It's about the cure."

"What is the killzone?" Thomas asked, trying to remember but drawing a blank. "Just tell me that and I'll go with you."

"Why, Thomas," the man replied. "I'm surprised being stung by the Griever didn't make you recall at least that much. The killzone is your brain. It's where the virus settles and

takes hold. The more infected the killzone, the more paranoid and violent the behavior of the infected. WICKED is using your brain and those of a few others to help us fix the problem. If you recall, our organization states its purpose right in its name: World in Catastrophe, Killzone Experiment Department." Rat Man looked pleased with himself. Almost happy. "Now come on, let's get you cleaned up. And just so you know, we're being watched. Try anything and there'll be consequences."

Thomas sat, attempting to process everything he'd just heard. Again, everything rang true, made sense. Fit in with the memories that had come back to him in recent weeks. And yet his distrust of Rat Man and WICKED still sprinkled it all with doubt.

He finally stood, letting his mind work through the new revelations, hoping they'd sort themselves into nice little stacks for later analysis. Without another word, he walked across the room and followed the Rat Man through the door, leaving his white-walled cell behind.

Nothing stood out about the building in which he found himself. A long hallway, a tiled floor, beige walls with framed pictures of nature—waves crashing on a beach, a hummingbird hovering beside a red flower, rain and mist clouding a forest. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead. Rat Man led him through several turns and finally stopped at a door. He opened it and gestured for Thomas to go in. It was a large bathroom lined with lockers and showers. And one of the lockers was open to show fresh clothes and a pair of shoes. Even a watch.

"You have about thirty minutes," Rat Man said. "When you're done, just sit tight—I'll come back for you. Then you'll be reunited with your friends."

For some reason, at the words *friends*, Teresa popped into Thomas's mind. He tried calling out to her again with his thoughts, but there was still nothing. Despite his ever-growing disdain for her, the emptiness of her being gone still floated like an unbreakable bubble within him. She was a link to his past and, he knew without any doubt, had once been his best friend. It was one of the only things in his world that he was sure of, and he had a hard time letting go of that completely.

Rat Man nodded. "See you in a half hour," he said. Then he pulled the door open and closed it behind him, leaving Thomas alone once more.

Thomas still didn't have a plan other than finding his friends, but at least he was one step closer to that. And even though he had no idea what to expect, at least he was out of that room. Finally. For now, a hot shower. A chance to scrub himself clean. Nothing had ever sounded so good. Letting his cares slip away for the moment, Thomas took off his nasty clothes and got to work making himself human again.

T-shirt and jeans. Running shoes—just like the ones he'd worn in the Maze. Fresh, soft socks. After washing himself from top to bottom at least five times, he felt reborn. He couldn't help but think that from here on things would improve. That he was going to take control of his own life now. If only the mirror hadn't reminded him of his tattoo—the one given to him before the Scorch. It was a permanent symbol of what he'd been through, and he wished he could forget it all.

He stood outside the door to the bathroom, leaning against the wall, arms folded, waiting. He wondered if the Rat Man would come back—or had he left Thomas to wander the place, begin yet another Trial? He'd barely begun the line of thinking before he heard footsteps, then saw the weaselly man's white form turn the corner.

"Well, aren't you looking spiffy?" the Rat Man commented, the edges of his mouth crawling up his cheeks in an uncomfortable-looking smile.

Thomas's mind raced with a hundred sarcastic answers, but he knew he had to play it straight. All that mattered at the moment was gathering as much information as he could and then finding his friends. "I feel fine, actually. So ... thanks." He plastered a casual smile on his own face. "When do I get to see the other Gladers?"

"Right now." Rat Man was all business again. He nodded back toward the way he'd come and gestured for Thomas to follow him. "All of you went through different types of tests for Phase Three of the Trials. We'd hoped to have the killzone patterns mapped out by the end of the second phase, but we had to improvise in order to push further. Like I said, though, we're very close. You'll all be full partners in the study now, helping us fine-tune and dig deeper until we solve this puzzle."

Thomas squinted. He guessed his Phase Three had been the white room—but what about the others? As much as he'd hated his trial, he could only imagine how much worse WICKED could have made it. He almost hoped he never found out what they had devised for his friends.

Finally Rat Man arrived at a door. He opened it without hesitating and stepped through.

They entered a small auditorium and relief washed over Thomas. Sitting scattered among a dozen or so rows of seats were his friends, safe and healthy-looking. The Gladers and girls of Group B. Minho. Frypan. Newt. Aris. Sonya. Harriet. Everyone seemed happy—talking, smiling and laughing—though maybe they were faking, to some extent. Thomas assumed they'd also been told things were almost over, but he doubted anyone believed it. He certainly didn't. Not yet.

He looked around the room for Jorge and Brenda—he really wanted to see Brenda. He'd been anxious about her ever since she'd vanished after the Berg picked them up, worried that WICKED had sent her and Jorge back to the Scorch like they'd threatened to—but there was no sign of either one. Before he could ask Rat Man about them, however, a voice broke through the din, and Thomas couldn't stop a smile from spreading across his face.

"Well, I've been shucked and gone to heaven. It's Thomas!" Minho called out. His announcement was followed by hoots and cheers and catcalls. A swell of relief mixed with the worry clawing in Thomas's stomach and he continued to search the faces in the room.

Too overcome to speak, he just kept grinning until his eyes found Teresa.

She'd stood up, turned from her chair on the end of the row to face him. Black hair, clean and brushed and shiny, draped over her shoulders and framed her pale face. Her red lips parted into a huge smile, lighting up her features, making her blue eyes glow. Thomas almost went to her but stopped himself, his mind clouded with vivid memories of what she'd done to him, of what she'd said about WICKED being good even after everything that had happened.

Can you hear me? he called out with his mind, just to see if their ability had come back.

But she didn't respond, and he still didn't feel her presence inside him. They just stood there, staring at each other, eyes locked for what seemed like a minute but could only have been a few seconds. And then Minho and Newt were by his side, slapping him on the back, shaking his hand, pulling him into the room.

"Well, at least you didn't bloody roll over and die, Tommy," Newt said, squeezing his hand tightly. His tone sounded grumpier than usual, especially considering they hadn't seen each other in weeks, but he was in one piece. Which was something to be thankful for.

Minho had a smirk on his face, but a hard glint in his eyes showed that he'd been through an awful time. That he wasn't quite himself yet, just trying his hardest to act like it. "The mighty Gladers, back together again. Good to see ya alive, shuck-face—I've imagined you dead in about a hundred different ways. I bet you cried every night, missing me."

"Yeah," Thomas muttered, thrilled to see everybody but still struggling to find words. He broke away from the reunion and made his way to Teresa. He had an overwhelming urge to face her and come to some kind of peace until he could decide what to do. "Hey."

"Hey," she replied. "You okay?"

Thomas nodded. "I guess. Kind of a rough few weeks. Could—" He stopped himself. He'd almost asked if she'd been able to hear him trying to reach out to her with his mind, but he didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing he'd done it.

"I tried, Tom. Every day I tried to talk to you. They cut us off, but I think it's all been worth it." She reached out and took his hand, which set off a chorus of mocking jabs from the Gladers.

Thomas quickly pulled his hand from her grasp, felt his face flush red. For some reason, her words had made him suddenly angry, but the others mistook his action for mere embarrassment.

"Awwww," Minho said. "That's almost as sweet as that time she slammed the end of a spear into your shuck face."

"True love indeed." This from Frypan, followed by his deep bellow of a laugh. "I'd hate to see what happens when these two have their first *real* fight."

Thomas didn't care what they thought, but he was determined to show Teresa that she couldn't get away with everything she'd done to him. Whatever trust they'd shared before the trials—whatever relationship they'd had—meant nothing now. He might find a sort of peace with her, but he resolved right then and there that he would only trust Minho and Newt. No one else.

He was just about to respond when Rat Man came marching down the aisle clapping his hands. "Everybody take a seat. We've got a few things to cover before we remove the

Swipe."

He'd said it so casually, Thomas almost didn't catch it. The words registered—*remove the Swipe*—and he froze.

The room stilled and the Rat Man stepped up onto the stage at the front of the room and approached the lectern. He gripped the edges and repeated the same forced smile from earlier, then spoke. "That's right, ladies and gents. You're about to get all your memories back. Every last one of them."

Thomas was stunned. Mind spinning, he went to sit by Minho.

After struggling for so long to remember his life, his family and childhood—even what he'd done the day before he woke up in the Maze—the idea of having it all back was almost too much to comprehend. But as it sank in, he realized that something had shifted. Remembering everything didn't sound good anymore. And his gut confirmed what he'd been feeling since the Rat Man had said it was all over—it just seemed too easy.

Rat Man cleared his throat. "As you were informed in your one-on-ones, the Trials as you've known them are over. Once your memories are restored, I think you'll believe me and we can move on. You've all been briefed on the Flare and the reasons for the Trials. We are extremely close to completing our blueprint of the killzone. The things we need—to further refine what we have—will be better served by your full cooperation and unaltered minds. So, congratulations."

"I ought to come up there and break your shuck nose," Minho said. His voice was terrifyingly calm considering the threat in his words. "I'm sick of you acting like everything is peachy—like more than half of our friends didn't die."

"I'd love to see that rat nose smashed!" Newt snapped.

The anger in his voice startled Thomas, and he had to wonder what awful thing Newt had been through during Phase Three.

Rat Man rolled his eyes and sighed. "First of all, each of you has been warned of the consequences should you try to harm me. And rest assured, you're all still being watched. Second, I'm sorry for those you've lost—but in the end it'll have been worth it. What concerns me, though, is that it seems that nothing I say is going to wake you people up to the stakes here. We're talking about the survival of the human race."

Minho sucked in a breath as if to begin a rant, but he stopped short, closed his mouth.

Thomas knew that no matter how sincere Rat Man sounded, it had to be a trick. Everything was a trick. Yet nothing good could come of their fighting him at this point—with words or with fists. The thing they needed most for the time being was patience.

"Let's all just slim it," Thomas spoke evenly. "Let's hear him out."

Frypan spoke up just as Rat Man was about to continue. "Why should we trust you people to ... What was it called? The Swipe? After everything you've done to us, to our friends—you want to remove the Swipe? I don't think so. I'd rather stay stupid about my past, thank you very kindly."

"WICKED is good," Teresa said out of the blue, as if talking to herself.

"What?" Frypan asked. Everyone turned to look at her.

"WICKED is good," she repeated, much louder, turning in her seat to meet the others' gazes. "Of all the things I could've written on my arm when I first woke up from my coma, I chose those three words. I keep thinking about it, and there has to be a reason for that. I say we just shut up and do what the man says. We can only understand this with our memories back."

"I agree!" Aris shouted, much louder than seemed necessary.

Thomas was quiet as the room broke into arguments. Mostly between the Gladers, who

sided with Frypan, and the members of Group B, who sided with Teresa. There couldn't possibly be a worse time for a battle of wills.

"Silence!" Rat Man roared, pounding his fist on the lectern. He waited for everyone to quiet down before he continued. "Look, no one's going to blame you for the mistrust you feel. You've been pushed to your physical limits, watched people die, experienced terror in its purest form. But I promise you, when all is said and done, none of you will look back—"

"What if we don't want to?" Frypan called out. "What if we don't want our memories back?"

Thomas turned to look at his friend, relieved. It was exactly what he'd been thinking himself.

Rat Man sighed. "Is it because you really have no interest in remembering, or is it because you don't trust us?"

"Oh, I can't *imagine* why we wouldn't trust you," Frypan replied.

"Don't you realize by now that if we wanted to do something to harm you, we'd just do it?" The man looked down at the lectern, then back up again. "If you don't want to remove the Swipe, don't do it. You can stand by and watch the others."

A choice or a bluff? Thomas couldn't tell by the man's tone but nonetheless was surprised by his response.

Again the room was silent, and before anyone else could speak, Rat Man had stepped away off the stage and was walking toward the door at the back of the room. When he reached it, he turned to face them again. "You really want to spend the rest of your lives having no memory of your parents? Your family and friends? You really want to lose the chance to hold on to at least the few good memories you may have had before all this began? Fine with me. But you might never have this opportunity again."

Thomas considered his decision. It was true that he longed to remember his family. He'd thought about it so many times. But he *did* know WICKED. And he wasn't going to let himself fall into another trap. He'd fight to the death before letting those people tinker with his brain again. How could he believe any memory they replaced anyway?

And there was something else bothering him—the flash he'd felt when the Rat Man had first announced that WICKED would remove the Swipe. Besides knowing that he couldn't just accept anything WICKED called his memories, he was scared. If everything they'd been insisting was true was in fact true, he didn't want to face his past even if he could. He didn't understand the person they said he was before. And more, he didn't like him.

He watched as the Rat Man opened the door and left the room. As soon as he was gone, Thomas leaned in close to Minho and Newt so only his friends could hear him. "There's no way we do this. No way."

Minho squeezed Thomas's shoulder. "Amen. Even if I did trust those shanks, why would I want to remember? Look what it did to Ben and Alby."

Newt nodded. "We need to make a bloody move soon. And when we do, I'm going to knock a few heads to make myself feel better."

Thomas agreed but knew they had to be careful. "Not *too* soon, though," he said. "We can't screw this up—we need to look for our best chance." It had been so long since Thomas had felt it, he was surprised when a sense of strength began to trickle through him. He was reunited with his friends and this was the end of the Trials—for good. One way or another,

they were done doing what WICKED wanted.

They stood up and, as a group, made their way to the door. But as Thomas put his hand on the knob to pull it open, he stopped. What he was hearing made his heart sink. The rest of the group was still talking, and most of the others had decided to get their memories back.

* * *

Rat Man was waiting outside the auditorium. He led them down several turns of the windowless hallway until they finally reached a large steel door. It was heavily bolted and looked to be sealed against outside air. Their white-clad leader placed a key card next to a square recess in the steel, and after a few clicks, the large slab of metal slid open with a grinding sound that reminded Thomas of the Doors in the Glade.

Then there was another door; once the group had filed into a small vestibule, the Rat Man closed the first door and, with the same card, unlocked the second. On the other side was a big room that looked like nothing special—same tile floors and beige walls as the hallway. Lots of cabinets and counters. And several beds lined the back wall, each with a menacing, foreign-looking contraption of shiny metal and plastic tubes in the shape of a mask hanging over it. Thomas couldn't imagine letting someone place that thing on his face.

Rat Man gestured toward the beds. "This is how we're going to remove the Swipe from your brains," Rat Man announced. "Don't worry, I know these devices look frightening, but the procedure won't hurt nearly as much as you might think."

"*Nearly as much?*" Frypan repeated. "I don't like the sound of that. So it *does* hurt, is what you're really saying."

"Of course you'll experience minor discomfort—it is a surgery," Rat Man said as he walked over to a large machine to the left of the beds. It had dozens of blinking lights and buttons and screens. "We'll be removing a small device from the part of your brain devoted to long-term memory. But it's not as bad as it might sound, I promise." He started pressing buttons and a buzzing hum filled the room.

"Wait a second," Teresa said. "Is this going to take away whatever's in there that lets you control us, too?"

The image of Teresa inside that shed in the Scorch came to Thomas. And of Alby writhing in bed back at the Homestead. Of Gally killing Chuck. They were all under WICKED's control. For the slightest moment Thomas doubted his decision—could he really allow himself to remain at their mercy? Should he just let them do the operation? But then the doubt vanished—this was about mistrust. He refused to give in.

Teresa continued. "And what about ..." She faltered, looked at Thomas.

He knew what she was thinking. Their ability to talk telepathically. Not to mention what came with it—that odd sense of each other when things were working, almost as if they were sharing brains somehow. Thomas suddenly loved the idea of losing that forever. Maybe the emptiness of having Teresa not there would disappear too.

Teresa recovered and continued. "Is everything going to be out of there? *Everything?*"

Rat Man nodded. "Everything except the tiny device that allows us to map your killzone patterns. And you didn't have to say what you're thinking because I can see it in your eyes

—no, you and Thomas and Aris won’t be able to do your little trick anymore. We did turn it off temporarily, but now it’ll be gone forever. However, you’ll have your long-term memory restored, and we won’t be able to manipulate your minds. It’s a package deal, I’m afraid. Take it or leave it.”

The others in the room shuffled about, whispered questions to each other. A million things had to be flying through everyone’s heads. There was so much to think about; there were so many implications. So many reasons to be angry at WICKED. But the fight seemed to have drained from the group, replaced by an eagerness to get it all over with.

“That’s a no-brainer,” Frypan said. “Get it? No-brainer?” The only response he got was a groan or two.

“Okay, I think we’re just about ready,” Rat Man announced. “One last thing, though. Something I need to tell you before you regain your memories. It’ll be better to hear it from me than to ... remember the testing.”

“What’re you talking about?” Harriett asked.

Rat Man clasped his hands behind his back, his expression suddenly grave. “Some of you are immune to the Flare. But ... some of you aren’t. I’m going to go through the list—please do your best to take it calmly.”

The room lapsed into silence, broken only by the hum of machinery and a very faint beeping sound. Thomas knew he was immune—at least, he'd been told he was—but he didn't know about anyone else, had actually forgotten about it. The sickening fear he'd felt when he'd first found out came flooding back.

"For an experiment to provide accurate results," the Rat Man explained, "one needs a control group. We did our best to keep the virus from you as long as we could. But it's airborne and highly contagious."

He paused, taking in everyone's gazes.

"Just bloody get on with it," Newt said. "We all figured we had the buggin' disease anyway. You're not breaking our hearts."

"Yeah," Sonya added. "Cut the drama and tell us already."

Thomas noticed Teresa fidgeting next to him. Had she already been told something, also? He figured that she had to be immune like him—that WICKED wouldn't have chosen them for their special roles otherwise.

Rat Man cleared his throat. "Okay, then. Most of you are immune and have helped us gather invaluable data. Only two of you are considered Candidates now, but we'll go into that later. Let's get to the list. The following people are *not* immune. Newt..."

Something like a jolt hit Thomas in the chest. He doubled over and stared at the floor. Rat Man called out a few more names, but none Thomas knew—he barely heard them over the dizzying buzz that seemed to fill his ears and fog his mind. He was surprised at his own reaction, hadn't realized just how much Newt meant to him until he heard the declaration. A thought occurred to him—earlier the Rat Man had said that the control subjects were like the glue that kept the project's data together, made it all coherent and relevant.

The Glue. That was the title given to Newt—the tattoo that was etched in his skin even now, like a black scar.

"Tommy, slim yourself."

Thomas looked up to see Newt standing there with his arms folded and a forced grin on his face. Thomas straightened back up. "Slim myself? That old shank just said you're not immune to the Flare. How can you—"

"I'm not worried about the bloody Flare, man. I never thought I'd still be alive at this buggin' point—and living hasn't exactly been so great anyway."

Thomas couldn't tell if his friend was serious or just trying to seem tough. But the creepy grin still hadn't left Newt's face, so Thomas forced a smile onto his own. "If you're cool with slowly going crazy and wanting to eat small children, then I guess we won't cry for you." Words had never felt so empty before.

"Good that," Newt responded; the smile disappeared, though.

Thomas finally turned his attention to the rest of the people in the room, his head still dizzy with thoughts. One of the Gladers—a kid named Jackson who he'd never gotten to know very well—was staring into space with blank eyes, and another was trying to hide his tears. One of the girls of Group B had red, puffy eyes—a couple of her friends were huddled around her, trying to console her.

"I wanted to get that out of the way," Rat Man said. "Mainly so I could tell you myself and *remind* you that the whole point of this operation has been to build toward a cure. Most of you not immune are in the early stages of the Flare, and I have every confidence that you'll be taken care of before it goes too far. But the Trials required your participation."

"And what if you don't figure things out?" Minho asked.

Rat Man ignored him. He walked over to the closest bed, then reached up and put a hand on the odd metallic device hanging from the ceiling. "This is something we're very proud of here—a feat of scientific and medical engineering. It's called a Retractor, and it will be performing this procedure. It'll be placed on your face—and I promise you'll still look just as pretty when everything is done. Small wires within the device will descend and enter your ear canals. From there they will remove the machinery in your brain. Our doctors and nurses will give you a sedative to calm your nerves and something to dull the discomfort."

He paused to glance around the room. "You will fall into a trancelike state as the nerves repair themselves and your memories return, similar to what some of you went through during what you called the Changing back in the Maze. But not nearly as bad, I promise. Much of that was for the purpose of stimulating brain patterns. We have several more rooms like this one, and a whole team of doctors waiting to get started. Now, I'm sure you have a *million* questions, but most of them will be answered by your own memories, so I'm going to wait until after the procedure for any more Q and A."

The Rat Man paused, then finished, "Give me just a few moments to make sure the medical teams are ready. You can take this time to make your decisions."

He crossed the room, the swish-swishing of his white pants the only sound cutting the silence, and disappeared through the first steel door, closing it behind him. Then the room erupted with noise as everyone started talking at once.

Teresa came over to Thomas, and Minho was right behind her. He leaned in close to be heard over the buzz of frantic conversations. "You shanks know more and remember more than anybody else. Teresa, I've never made a secret of it—I don't like you. But I want to hear what you think anyway."

Thomas was just as curious to hear Teresa's opinion. He nodded at his former friend and waited for her to speak. There was still a small part of him that foolishly expected her to finally speak out against doing what WICKED wanted.

"We should do it," Teresa said, and it didn't surprise Thomas at all. The hope inside him died for good. "It feels like the right thing to me. We need our memories back so we can be smart about things. Decide what to do next."

Thomas's mind was spinning, trying to put it all together. "Teresa, I know you're not stupid. But I also know you're in love with WICKED. I'm not sure what you're up to, but I'm not buying it."

"Me neither," Minho said. "They can manipulate us, play with our shuck brains, dude! How would we even know if they're giving us back our own memories or shoving new ones inside us?"

Teresa let out a sigh. "You guys are missing the whole point! If they can control us, if they can do whatever they want with us, *make* us do anything, then why would they even bother with this whole charade of giving us a choice? Plus, he said they'd also be taking out

the part that *lets* them control us. It feels legit to me.”

“Well, I never trusted you anyway,” Minho said, shaking his head slowly. “And certainly not them. I’m with Thomas.”

“What about Aris?” Newt had been so quiet, Thomas hadn’t even noticed that he’d walked up behind him with Frypan. “Didn’t you say he was with you guys before you came to the Maze? What does he think?”

Thomas scanned the room until he found Aris talking to some of his friends from Group B. He’d been hanging out with them since Thomas had arrived, which Thomas figured made sense—Aris had gone through his own Maze experience with that group. But Thomas could never forgive the boy for the part he’d played in helping Teresa back in the Scorch, luring him to the chamber in the mountains and forcing him inside.

“I’ll go ask him,” Teresa said.

Thomas and his friends watched as she walked over, and she and her group started whispering furiously to each other.

“I hate that chick,” Minho finally said.

“Come on, she’s not so bad,” Frypan offered.

Minho rolled his eyes. “If she’s doing it, I’m not.”

“Me neither,” Newt agreed. “And I’m the one who supposedly has the bloody Flare, so I have more stake in it than anybody. But I’m not falling for one more trick.”

Thomas had already settled on that. “Let’s just hear what she says. Here she comes.”

Her talk with Aris had been short. “He sounded even more sure than us. They’re all for it.”

“Well, that settles it for me,” Minho answered. “If Aris and Teresa are for it, I’m against it.”

Thomas couldn’t have said it better himself. Every instinct he had told him Minho was right, but he didn’t voice his opinion aloud. He watched Teresa’s face instead. She turned and looked at Thomas. It was a look he knew so well—she expected him to side with her. But the difference was that now he was suspicious about why she wanted it so badly.

He stared at her, forcing his own expression to remain blank—and Teresa’s face fell.

“Suit yourselves.” She shook her head, then turned and walked away.

Despite everything that had happened, Thomas’s heart lurched in his chest as she retreated across the room.

“Ah, man,” Frypan’s voice cut in, jarring Thomas back. “We can’t let them put those things on our face, can we? I’d just be happy back in my kitchen in the Homestead, I swear I would.”

“You forgot about the Grievers?” Newt asked.

Frypan paused a second, then said, “They never messed with me in the kitchen, now, did they?”

“Yeah, well, we’ll just have to find you a new place to cook.” Newt grabbed Thomas and Minho by the arms and led them away from the group. “I’ve heard enough bloody arguments. I’m not getting on one of those beds.”

Minho reached over and squeezed Newt’s shoulder. “Me neither.”

“Same here,” Thomas said. Then he finally voiced what had been building inside him for weeks. “We’ll stick around, play along and act nice,” he whispered. “But as soon as we get

a chance, we're going to fight our way out of this place."

Rat Man returned before Newt or Minho could respond. But judging by the looks on their faces, Thomas was sure they were on board. One hundred percent.

More people were piling into the room, and Thomas turned his attention to what was going on. Everyone who'd joined them was dressed in a one-piece, somewhat loose-fitting green suit with WICKED written across the chest. It struck Thomas suddenly how thoroughly every detail of this game—this *experiment*—had been thought out. Could it be that the very name they'd used for their organization had been one of the Variables from the beginning? A word with obvious menace, yet an entity they were told was good? It was probably just another poke to see how their brains reacted, what they felt.

It was all a guessing game. Had been from the very beginning.

Each doctor—Thomas assumed they were doctors, like Rat Man had said—took a place next to one of the beds. They fidgeted with the masks that hung from the ceiling, adjusting the tubes, tinkering with knobs and switches Thomas couldn't see.

"We've already assigned each of you a bed," Rat Man said, looking down at papers on a clipboard he'd brought back with him. "Those staying in this room are ..." He rattled off a few names, including Sonya and Aris, but not Thomas or any of the Gladers. "If I didn't call your name, please follow me."

The whole situation had taken on a bizarre taint, too casual and run-of-the-mill for the seriousness of what was going on. Like gangsters yelling out roll call before they slaughtered a group of weeping traitors. Thomas didn't know what to do but go along until the right moment presented itself.

He and the others silently followed Rat Man out of the room and down another long, windowless hallway before stopping at another door. Their guide read from his list again, and Frypan and Newt were included this time.

"I'm not doing it," Newt announced. "You said we could choose and that's my bloody decision." He exchanged an angry look with Thomas that seemed to say they better do something soon or he'd go crazy.

"That's fine," Rat Man replied. "You'll change your mind soon enough. Stay with me until we've finished distributing everyone else."

"What about you, Frypan?" Thomas asked, trying to hide his surprise at how easily the Rat Man had relented with Newt.

The cook suddenly looked sheepish. "I ... think I'm going to let them do it."

Thomas was shocked.

"Are you crazy?" Minho asked.

Frypan shook his head, bearing himself up a little defensively. "I want to remember. Make your own choice; let me make mine."

"Let's move along," Rat Man said.

Frypan disappeared into the room, hurrying, probably to avoid any more arguments. Thomas knew he had to let it go—for now, he could only worry about himself and finding a way out. Hopefully he could rescue everyone else once he did.

Rat Man didn't call for Minho, Teresa and Thomas until they were standing at the final

door, along with Harriet and two other girls from Group B. So far Newt had been the only one to say no to the procedure.

"No thanks," Minho said when Rat Man gestured for everyone to enter the room. "But I appreciate the invitation. You guys have a good time in there." He gave a mock wave.

"I'm not doing it, either," Thomas announced. He was beginning to feel the rush of anticipation. They had to take a chance soon, try something.

Rat Man stared at Thomas for a long time, his face unreadable.

"You okay, there, Mr. Rat Man?" Minho asked.

"My name is Assistant Director Janson," he replied, his voice low and strained, as if it was hard work to stay calm. His eyes never left Thomas. "Learn to show respect for your elders."

"You quit treating people like animals and maybe I'll consider it," Minho said. "And why are you goggling at Thomas?"

Rat Man—Janson—finally turned his gaze to Minho. "Because there are many things to consider." He paused, stood straighter. "But very well. We said you could choose for yourselves, and we'll stand by that. Everyone come inside and we'll get things started with those willing to participate."

Again, Thomas felt a shiver pass through his body. Their moment was coming. He knew it. And by the expression on Minho's face, he knew it, too. They gave each other a slight nod and followed Rat Man into the room.

It looked exactly like the first one, with six beds, the hanging masks, all of it. The machine that evidently ran everything was already humming and chirping. A person dressed in the same green clothes as the doctors in the first room stood next to each bed.

Thomas looked around and sucked in a breath. Standing next to a bed at the very end of the row, dressed in green, was Brenda. She looked way younger than everyone else, her brown hair and face cleaner than he'd ever seen them back in the Scorch. She gave him a quick shake of her head and shifted her gaze to Rat Man; then, before Thomas knew what was happening, she was running across the room. She grabbed Thomas and pulled him into a hug. He squeezed back, completely in shock, but he didn't want to let go.

"Brenda, what are you doing!" Janson yelled at her. "Get back to your post!"

She pressed her lips against Thomas's ear, and then she was whispering, so quietly he could barely hear her, "Don't trust them. Do *not* trust them. Only me and Chancellor Paige, Thomas. Ever. No one else."

"Brenda!" the Rat Man practically screamed.

Then she was letting go, stepping away. "Sorry," she mumbled. "I'm just glad to see he made it through Phase Three. I forgot myself." She walked back to her post and turned to face them once again, her face blank.

Janson scolded her. "We hardly have time for such things."

Thomas couldn't look away from her, didn't know what to think or feel. He already didn't trust WICKED, so her words put them on the same side. But why was she working with them, then? Wasn't she sick? And who was this Chancellor Paige? Was this just another test? Another Variable?

Something powerful had swum through his body when they'd hugged. He thought back to how Brenda had spoken in his mind after he'd been put into the white room. She'd

warned him things were going to get bad. He still didn't understand how she'd been able to do that—was she really on his side?

Teresa, who'd been quiet since they left the first room, stepped up to him, interrupting his thoughts.

"What's she doing here?" she whispered, the spite evident in her voice. Every little thing she did or said now bothered him. "I thought she was a Crank."

"I don't know," Thomas muttered. Flashes of all that time he'd spent with Brenda in the broken city filled his head. In a strange way, he missed that place. Missed being alone with her. "Maybe she's ... just throwing me a Variable."

"You think she was part of the show, sent to the Scorch to help run things?"

"Probably." Thomas hurt inside. It made sense that Brenda could've been part of WICKED from the beginning. But that meant she'd lied to him, over and over. He wanted so badly for something to be different about her.

"I don't like her," Teresa said. "She seems ... devious."

Thomas had to force himself not to scream at Teresa. Or laugh at her. Instead, he spoke to her calmly. "Go let them play with your brain." Maybe her distrust of Brenda was the best indication that he *should* trust Brenda.

Teresa gave him a sharp look. "Judge me all you want. I'm just doing what feels right." Then she stepped away, awaiting the Rat Man's instructions.

Janson assigned the willing patients to beds while Thomas, Newt, and Minho hung back and observed. Thomas glanced at the door, wondered if they should make a run for it. He was just about to nudge Minho when the Rat Man spoke up as if he'd read Thomas's mind.

"You three rebels are being watched. Don't even think about trying anything. Armed guards are on their way as we speak."

Thomas had the unsettling idea that maybe someone *had* read his mind. Could they interpret his actual *thoughts* from the brain patterns they were so studiously collecting?

"That's a bunch of klunk," Minho whispered when Janson returned his attention to getting people settled on the beds. "I think we should take our chances, see what happens."

Thomas didn't answer, looked over at Brenda instead. She was staring at the floor, seemingly deep in thought. He found himself missing her terribly, feeling a connection he didn't quite understand. All he wanted was to talk to her alone. And not just because of what she'd said to him.

The sound of rushed footsteps came from the hallway. Three men and two women burst into the room, all of them dressed in black, with gear strapped to their backs—ropes, tools, ammunition. They were all holding some sort of bulky weapon. Thomas couldn't stop staring at the weapons—they tugged at some lost memory he could just barely put his finger on, but at the same time it was like seeing them for the first time. The devices shimmered with blue light—a clear tube in the middle was filled with shiny metallic grenades that crackled and fizzed with electricity—and the guards were pointing them at Thomas and his two friends.

"We waited too bloody long," Newt snapped in a low, harsh whisper.

Thomas knew an opportunity would present itself soon. "They would've caught us out there anyway," he answered quietly, his lips barely moving. "Just be patient."

Janson walked over to stand beside the guards. He pointed at one of the weapons. "These

are called Launchers. These guards will not hesitate to fire them if any of you cause trouble. The weapons won't kill you, but trust me when I say that they'll give you the most uncomfortable five minutes of your life."

"What's going on?" Thomas asked, surprised at how little fear he felt. "You just told us we could make this choice ourselves. Why the sudden army?"

"Because I don't trust you." Janson paused, seeming to choose his words carefully. "We hoped you would do things voluntarily once your memories were back. It would just make things easier. But I never said we don't still need you."

"What a surprise," Minho said. "You lied again."

"I haven't lied about a thing. You made your decision, now live with the consequences." Janson pointed at the door. "Guards, escort Thomas and the others to their rooms, where they can dwell on their mistakes until tomorrow morning's tests. Use whatever force is necessary."

The two female guards lifted their weapons even higher, the wide, round muzzles pointed at the three boys.

"Don't make us use these," one of the women said. "You have zero room for error. One false move and we pull the trigger."

The three men swung the straps of their Launchers over their shoulders, then moved toward the defiant Gladers, one per boy. Thomas still felt an odd calmness—coming in part from the deep determination to fight until he couldn't anymore—and a sense of satisfaction that WICKED needed five armed guards to watch three teenagers.

The guy who grabbed Thomas's arm was twice as thick as he was, powerfully built. He walked briskly through the door and into the hallway, pulling Thomas along after him. Thomas looked back to see another guard half drag Minho across the floor to follow, and Newt was right behind them, struggling to no avail.

The boys were hauled down corridor after corridor, the only sounds coming from Minho—grunts and shouts and curses. Thomas tried to tell him to stop—that he was only making it worse, that he was probably going to get shot—but Minho ignored him, fighting tooth and nail until the group finally stopped in front of a door.

One of the armed guards used a key card to unlock the door. She pushed it open to reveal a small bedroom with two sets of bunk beds and a kitchenette with a table and chairs in the far corner. It certainly wasn't what Thomas had been expecting—he'd pictured the Slammer back in the Glade, with its dirt floor and one half-broken chair.

"In you go," she said. "We'll have some food brought to you. Be glad we don't starve you for a few days after the way you've been acting. Tests tomorrow, so you better get some sleep tonight."

The three men pushed the Gladers into the room and swung the door closed; the click of the lock engaging echoed through the air.

Immediately all the feelings of captivity Thomas had endured in the white-walled prison came flooding back. He crossed the floor to the door and twisted the knob, pulled and pushed with all his weight. He pounded on it with both fists, screaming as loudly as he could for someone to let them out.

"Slim it," Newt said from behind him. "No one's coming to bloody tuck you in."

Thomas whirled around, but when he saw his friend standing in front of him, he stopped. Minho spoke before he could put words together.

"I guess we missed our chance." He plopped down on one of the bottom bunks. "We'll be old men or dead before your magical moment comes rolling along, Thomas. It's not like they're going to make a big announcement: 'Now would be an excellent time to escape, because we'll be busy for the next ten minutes.' We've gotta take some chances."

Thomas hated to admit that his friends were right, but they were. They all should've made a run for it before those guards showed up. "Sorry. It just didn't feel right yet. And once they had all those weapons in our faces, it seemed kind of pointless to waste the effort trying anything."

"Yeah, well" was all Minho said. Then, "You and Brenda had a nice little reunion."

Thomas took a deep breath. “She said something.”

Minho sat up straighter on the bed. “What do you mean she said something?”

“She told me not to trust them—to only trust her and someone named Chancellor Paige.”

“Well, what’s her buggin’ deal anyway?” Newt asked. “She works for WICKED? What, was she just a bloody actress down in the Scorch?”

“Yeah, sounds like she’s no better than the rest of them,” Minho added.

Thomas just didn’t agree. He couldn’t even explain it to himself, much less to his friends. “Look, I used to work for them, too, but you trust me, right? It doesn’t mean anything. Maybe she had no choice, maybe she’s changed. I don’t know.”

Minho squinted as if he was thinking but didn’t respond. Newt just sat down on the floor and folded his arms, pouting like a little kid.

Thomas shook his head. He was sick of puzzling everything out. He walked over and opened the small fridge—his stomach was rumbling with hunger. He found some cheese sticks and grapes and divvied them up, then practically shoved his portion down his throat before drinking a full bottle of juice. The other two gobbled theirs as well, no one saying a word.

A woman showed up soon after with plates of pork chops and potatoes, and they ate that, too. It was early evening, according to Thomas’s watch, but he couldn’t imagine being able to fall asleep. He sat down in a chair, facing his friends, wondering what they should do. He was still feeling a little chagrined, like it was his fault that they’d yet to try anything, but he didn’t offer any ideas.

Minho was the first one to speak since the food had come. “Maybe we should just give in to those shuck-faces. Do what they want. One day we’ll all sit around, fat and happy.”

Thomas knew he didn’t mean a word of it. “Yeah, maybe you can find a nice pretty girl who works here, settle down, get married and have kids. Just in time for the world to end in a sea of lunatics.”

Minho kept at it. “WICKED’s going to figure out this blueprint business and we’ll all live happily ever after.”

“That’s not even funny,” Newt said grumpily. “Even if they did find a cure, you saw it out there in the Scorch. It’s gonna be a buggin’ long time before the world can ever get back to normal. Even if it can—we’ll never see it.”

Thomas realized he was just sitting there, staring at a spot on the floor. “After everything they’ve done to us, I just don’t believe any of it.” He couldn’t get past the news about Newt—his friend, who’d do anything for someone else. They’d given him a death sentence—an incurable disease—just to watch what would happen.

“That Janson guy thinks he has it all figured out,” Thomas continued. “He thinks it all comes down to some sort of greater good. Let the human race kick the bucket, or do awful things and save it. Even the few who are immune probably wouldn’t last long in a world where ninety-nine-point-nine percent of people turn into psycho monsters.”

“What’s your point?” Minho muttered.

“My point is that before they swiped my memory, I think I used to buy all that junk. But not anymore.” And the one thing that terrified him now was that any returning memories might make him change his mind about that.

“Then let’s not waste our next chance, Tommy,” Newt said.

“Tomorrow,” Minho added. “Somehow, some way.”

Thomas gave each of them a long look. “Okay. Somehow, some way.”

Newt yawned, making the other two do the same. “Then we better quit yapping and get some buggin’ sleep.”

It took over an hour of staring into the dark, but Thomas eventually fell asleep. And when he did, his dreams were a slew of scattered images and memories.

A woman, sitting at a table, smiling as she stares across the wood surface, directly into his eyes. As he watches her she picks up a cup of steaming liquid and takes a tentative sip. Another smile. Then she says, "Eat your cereal, now. That's a good boy." It's his mom, with her kind face, her love for him evident in every crease of her skin as she grins. She doesn't stop watching over him until he eats the last bite, and she takes his bowl over to the sink after tousling his hair.

Then he's on the carpeted floor of a small room, playing with silvery blocks that seem to fuse together as he builds a huge castle. His mom is sitting on a chair in the corner, crying. Thomas knows instantly why. His dad has been diagnosed with the Flare, is already showing signs of it. This leaves no doubt that his mom also has the disease, or will soon. The dreaming Thomas knows that it won't be long before doctors realize his younger self has the virus but is immune to its effects. By then they'd developed the test that recognizes it.

Next he's riding his bike on a hot day. Heat's rising from the pavement, just weeds on both sides of the street, where there used to be grass. He has a smile on his sweaty face. His mom watches nearby, and he can see that she's savoring every moment. They head to a nearby pond. The water is stagnant and foul-smelling. She gathers rocks for him to toss into the murky depths. At first he throws them as far as possible; then he tries to skip them the way his dad showed him last summer. He still can't do it. Tired, their strength sapped from the stifling weather, he and his mother finally head home.

Then things in the dream—the memories—turn darker.

He's back inside and a man in a dark suit is sitting on a couch. Papers in his hand, a grave look on his face. Thomas standing next to his mom, holding her hand. WICKED has been formed, a joint venture of the world's governments—those that survived the sun flares, an event that took place long before Thomas was born. WICKED's purpose is to study what is now known as the killzone, where the Flare does its damage. The brain.

The man is saying that Thomas is immune. Others are immune. Less than one percent of the population, most of them under the age of twenty. And the world is dangerous for them. They're hated for their immunity to the terrible virus, are mockingly called Munies. People do terrible things to them. WICKED says they can protect Thomas, and Thomas can help them work to find a cure. They say he's smart—one of the smartest who have been tested. His mom has no choice but to let him go. She certainly doesn't want her boy to watch as she slowly goes insane.

Later she tells Thomas that she loves him and is so glad that he'll never go through what they witnessed happen to his dad. The madness took away every ounce of what made him who he was—what made him human.

And after that the dream faded, and Thomas fell into a deep void of sleep.

* * *

A loud knocking woke him early the next morning. He'd barely gotten up on his elbows when the door opened and the same five guards from the day before came in with Launchers raised. Janson stepped into the room right after them.

"Rise and shine, boys," the Rat Man said. "We've decided to give you your memories back after all. Like it or not."

Thomas was still groggy from sleep. The dreams he'd had—the memories of his childhood—clouded his mind. He almost didn't catch what the man had said.

"Like hell you are," Newt responded. He was out of his bed, fists clenched at his sides, glaring at Janson.

Thomas couldn't remember ever seeing such fire in his friend's eyes. And then the full force of the Rat Man's words snapped Thomas out of his fog.

He swung his legs around to the floor. "You told us we didn't have to."

"I'm afraid we don't have much of a choice," Janson replied. "The time for lies is over. Nothing's going to work with you three still in the dark. I'm sorry. We need to do this. Newt, of everyone, you will benefit the most from a cure, after all."

"I don't care about myself anymore," Newt responded in a low growl.

Thomas's instincts took over then. He knew that this was the moment he'd been waiting for. It was the final straw.

Thomas watched Janson carefully. The man's face softened and he took a deep breath, as if he sensed the growing danger in the room and wanted to neutralize it. "Look, Newt, Minho, Thomas. I understand how you must feel. You've seen some awful things. But the worst part is over. We can't change the past, can't take back what has happened to you and your friends. But wouldn't it be a waste to not complete the blueprint at this point?"

"Can't take it back?" Newt shouted. "That's all you have to say?"

"Watch yourself," one of the guards warned, pointing a Launcher at Newt's chest.

The room fell silent. Thomas had never seen Newt like this. So angry—so unwilling to put on a calm front, even.

Janson continued. "We're running out of time. Now let's go or we'll have a repeat of yesterday. My guards are willing, I assure you."

Minho jumped down from the bunk above Newt's. "He's right," he said matter-of-factly. "If we can save you, Newt—and who knows how many others—we'd be shuck idiots to stay in this room a second longer." Minho shot Thomas a glance and nodded toward the door. "Come on, let's go." He walked past Rat Man and the guards into the hallway without looking back.

Janson raised his eyebrows at Thomas, who was struggling to hide his surprise. Minho's announcement was so strange—he had to have some sort of plan. Pretending to go along with things would buy them time.

Thomas turned away from the guards and Rat Man and gave Newt a quick wink that only he could see. "Let's just listen to what they want us to do." He tried to sound casual, sincere, but it was one of the hardest things he'd done yet. "I worked for these people before the Maze. I couldn't have been totally wrong, right?"

"Oh, please." Newt rolled his eyes, but he moved toward the door, and Thomas smiled inwardly at his small victory.

"You'll all be heroes when this is over," Janson said as Thomas followed Newt out of the room.

"Oh, shut up," Thomas replied.

Thomas and his friends followed the Rat Man down the mazelike corridors once again. As they walked, Janson narrated the journey as if he were a tour guide. He explained that the facility didn't have many windows because of the often fierce weather outside, and the attacks from roaming gangs of infected people. He mentioned the severe rainstorm the night the Gladers been taken from the Maze, and how the group of Cranks had broken through the outer perimeter to watch them board the bus.

Thomas remembered that night all too well. He could still feel the bump of the tires running over the woman who'd accosted him before he boarded the bus, how the driver didn't even slow down. He could hardly believe that had happened only weeks ago—it felt like it'd been years.

"I really wish you'd just shut your mouth," Newt finally spat. And the Rat Man *did*, but he never wiped the slight grin off his face.

When they reached the area they'd been in the day before, the Rat Man stopped and turned to address them. "I hope you will all cooperate today. I'm expecting nothing less."

"Where is everybody else?" Thomas asked.

"The other subjects have been recovering—"

Before he could finish Newt had pounced, grabbing the Rat Man by the lapels of his white suit coat and slamming him against the nearest door. "Call them subjects again and I'll break your bloody neck!"

Two guards were on Newt in an instant; they pulled him away from Janson and threw him to the floor, aiming their Launchers at his face.

"Wait!" Janson yelled. "Wait." He composed himself and straightened his wrinkled shirt and jacket. "Don't disable him. Let's just get this over with."

Newt slowly got to his feet, arms raised. "Don't call us subjects. We're not mice trying to find the cheese. And tell your shuck friends to calm down—I wasn't gonna hurt you. Much." His eyes fell on Thomas, questioning.

WICKED is good.

For some inexplicable reason, those words popped into Thomas's mind. It was almost as if his former self—the one who'd believed that WICKED's objective was worth any depraved action—was trying to convince him that it was true. That no matter how horrible it seemed, they must do whatever it took to find a cure for the Flare.

But something was different now. He couldn't understand who he'd been before. How he could have thought any of this was okay. He'd changed forever ... but he had to give them the old Thomas one last time.

"Newt, Minho," he said quietly, before the Rat Man could speak again. "I think he's right. I think it's time we did what we're *supposed* to do. We all agreed to it just last night."

Minho broke into a nervous smile. Newt's hands balled into fists.

It was now or never.

Thomas didn't hesitate. He swung his elbow backward into the face of the guard behind him just as he kicked the knee of the one in front. Both fell to the floor, stunned, but recovered quickly. Out of the corner of his eye Thomas saw Newt tackle a guard to the ground; Minho was punching another. But the fifth—a woman—hadn't been touched, and she was raising her Launcher.

Thomas dove for her, knocked the end of the weapon toward the ceiling before she could press the trigger, but she brought it around and smashed it into the side of his head. Pain exploded in his cheeks and jaw. He was already off balance, and crumpled to his knees, then flat onto his stomach. He put his hands under him to get up, but a crushing weight fell on his back, slamming him to the hard tile and knocking the breath from his lungs. A knee dug into his spine and he felt hard metal press against his skull.

"Give me the word!" the woman yelled. "A.D. Janson, give me the word! I'll fry his brain."

Thomas couldn't see the others, but the sounds of scuffling had already stopped. He knew that meant their mutiny had been short-lived, all three of them subdued in less than a minute. His heart ached with despair.

"What are you people thinking!" Janson roared from behind Thomas. He could only imagine how enraged the man's weaselly face must look. "You really think three ... *children* can overpower five armed guards? You kids are supposed to be geniuses, not idiotic ... delusional *rebels*. Maybe the Flare has taken your minds after all!"

"Shut up!" Thomas heard Newt scream. "Just shut your—"

Something muffled the rest of his words. Imagining one of the guards hurting Newt made Thomas tremble with rage. The woman pressed her weapon even harder against his head.

"Don't ... even ... think about it," she whispered in his ear.

"Get them up!" Janson barked. "Get them up!"

The guard pulled Thomas to his feet by the back of his shirt, keeping the business end of the Launcher pressed against his head. Newt and Minho were being held at Launcher-point as well, and the two free guards were training their weapons on the three Gladers.

Janson's face burned red. "Completely ridiculous! We absolutely *will not* allow this to happen again." He spun on Thomas.

"I was just a kid," Thomas said, surprising himself.

"Excuse me?" Janson asked.

Thomas glared at the Rat Man. "I was a *kid*. They brainwashed me into doing those things—into helping." That was what had been eating away at him since the memories had started coming back. Since he'd been able to start connecting the dots.

"I wasn't there in the beginning," Janson said in a level voice. "But you yourself approved me for this job after the original founders were purged. And you should know, I've never seen someone, child or adult, as driven as you were." He smiled and Thomas wanted to rip his face off.

"I don't care what you—"

"Enough!" Janson yelled. "We'll do him first." He gestured at one of the guards. "Get a

nurse down here. Brenda's inside—she's been insisting that she wants to help. Maybe he'll be easier to deal with if she's the technician working with him. Take the others to the waiting room—I'd like to do them one at a time. I need to go check on another matter, so I'll meet you there."

Thomas was so upset that he didn't even register Brenda's name. Another guard joined the one behind him and they each took hold of an arm.

"I won't let you do it!" Thomas screamed, a hysteria rising up in him. The thought of learning who he'd been terrified him. "There's no way you're putting that thing on my face!"

Janson ignored him and spoke directly to the guards. "Make sure she sedates him." Then he started walking away.

The two guards pulled Thomas toward the door, his feet dragging behind him. He struggled, tried to free his arms, but their hands were like iron manacles, and he finally gave up to conserve his strength. The realization hit him that he might have lost the fight. His only hope was Brenda.

Brenda stood next to a bed inside the room. Her face was stony. Thomas searched her eyes, but she was impossible to read.

His captives yanked him farther into the room. He couldn't understand why Brenda was there, helping WICKED do this. "Why are you working for them?" His voice sounded weak to his ears.

The guards spun him around.

"Better to just keep your mouth shut," Brenda answered. "I need you to trust me like you did back in the Scorch. This is for the best."

He couldn't see her, but there was something in her voice. Despite what she'd said, she sounded warm. Could she be on his side?

The guards pulled Thomas to the last bed in the row. Then the female guard released him and aimed her Launcher at him while the man held Thomas against the edge of the mattress.

"Lie down," the guard said.

"No," Thomas growled.

The guard swung back and slapped Thomas across the cheek. "Lie down! Now!"

"No."

The man lifted Thomas by the shoulders and slammed him onto the mattress. "This is going to happen, so you might as well not fight it." The metallic mask with its wires and tubes hung above him like a giant spider waiting to smother him.

"You're not putting that thing on my face." Thomas's heart raced dangerously now, the fear he'd been holding at bay rushing in, beginning to take away any calm that could help him figure a way out of this.

The male guard took both of Thomas's wrists and pressed them to the mattress as he leaned forward with all his weight to make sure Thomas didn't go anywhere. "Sedate him."

Thomas forced himself to calm down, save his energy for one last effort to escape. He almost hurt at seeing Brenda; he'd grown closer to her than he'd realized. If she helped force him to do this, it would mean she was the enemy as well. It was too heartbreaking to

even consider.

"Please, Brenda," he said. "Don't do it. Don't let them do this."

She stepped close to him and gently touched his shoulder. "Everything's going to be okay. Not everyone is out to make your life miserable—you'll thank me later for what I'm about to do. Now quit your whining and relax."

He still couldn't read her for the life of him. "That's it? After everything back in the Scorch? How many times did we almost die in that city? All we went through, and you're just gonna abandon me?"

"Thomas ..." She trailed off, not bothering to hide her frustration. "It was my job."

"I heard your voice in my head. You warned me that things were about to get bad. Please tell me you're not really *with* them."

"When we made it back to HQ after the Scorch, I got into the telepathy system because I wanted to warn you. Prepare you. I never expected us to become friends in that hell."

On some level, just hearing that she'd felt that way, too, made things more manageable, and now he really couldn't stop himself. "Do you have the Flare?" he asked.

She answered in quick, short bursts. "I was acting. Jorge and I are immune—we've known it for a long time. It's why they used us. Now be quiet." Her eyes flickered over to the guard.

"Get on with it!" the male guard suddenly shouted.

Brenda gave the man a stern look but didn't say anything. Then she gazed at Thomas and surprised him with a slight wink. "Once I inject the sedative, you'll be asleep in seconds. Do you *understand?*" She stressed that last word, then subtly winked again. Luckily the two guards were focused on their prisoner and not her.

Thomas was confused, but hope ran through his body. She was up to something.

Brenda moved to the counter behind her and started preparing what she needed, and the guard continued to lean all of his weight on Thomas's wrists, cutting off the circulation. Sweat beaded on the man's forehead, but it was clear he wasn't letting go until Thomas was unconscious. The female guard stood just beside him, her Launcher aimed at Thomas's face.

Brenda turned back around, a syringe in her left hand, its nozzle pointing up, her thumb on the trigger. A yellowish liquid showed in the small window on the side. "Okay, Thomas. We're going to do this really fast. Are you ready?"

He nodded at her, not sure what she meant but determined to be prepared.

"Good," she replied. "You better be."

Brenda smiled and moved toward Thomas, then tripped on something and stumbled forward. She caught the bed with her right hand, but she fell in such a way that the syringe's nozzle landed on the forearm of the guard gripping Thomas's wrist. She instantly pushed the trigger with her thumb, releasing a quick, sharp hiss, before he jerked himself away.

"What the hell!" the man shouted, but his eyes were already glazed.

Thomas acted instantly. Now free from those iron fists, he pushed down on the bed and swung his legs in an arc toward the female guard, who was just coming to her senses after a brief moment of frozen shock. One foot connected with her Launcher and the other with her shoulder. She let out a yell, which was closely followed by the smack of her head hitting the floor.

Thomas scrambled after the Launcher, grabbed it before it slid out of reach and aimed it at the woman, who was holding her head in her hands. Brenda had run around the bed and grabbed the man's weapon, and she pointed it at his limp body.

Thomas gasped for air, his chest heaving as adrenaline throbbed through his body. He hadn't felt so good in weeks. "I knew you—"

Before he could finish, Brenda fired her Launcher.

A high-pitched sound pierced the air, increasing in volume for a split second before the gun discharged and kicked, making Brenda jerk backward. One of the shiny grenades shot out, slammed into the woman's chest and exploded, sending tendrils of lightning arcing across her body. She began to twitch uncontrollably.

Thomas stared, stunned at what the Launcher did to a person and amazed that Brenda had shot it without hesitation. If he had needed further proof that Brenda wasn't totally committed to WICKED, he'd just seen it. He looked at her.

She returned his gaze, the slightest of smiles on her face. "I've been wanting to do something like that for a long time. Good thing I convinced Janson to assign me to you for this procedure." She bent over and took the unconscious man's key card, slipped it into her pocket. "This'll get us in anywhere."

Thomas had to resist the urge to pull her into a hug.

"Come on," he said. "We have to get Newt and Minho. Then everybody else."

They sprinted through a couple of twists and turns in the hallways, Brenda leading. It reminded Thomas of the time she'd led him through the underground tunnels in the Scorch. He urged her to hurry—he knew that more guards could show up at any second.

They reached a door, and Brenda swiped the key card to open it; a brief hiss sounded, and then the slab of metal swung open. Thomas burst through with Brenda close on his heels.

The Rat Man was sitting in a chair but sprang to his feet, his expression quickly twisting to a look of horror. "What in God's name are you doing?"

Brenda had already fired two grenades at the guards. A man and a woman dropped to

the ground, convulsing in a cloud of smoke and tiny lightning bolts. Newt and Minho tackled the third guard; Minho grabbed his weapon.

Thomas trained his Launcher on Janson and put his finger on the trigger. “Give me your key card, then get on the ground, hands on your head.” His voice was steady but his heart was racing.

“This is complete lunacy,” Janson said. He handed his card to Thomas. He spoke quietly, seeming amazingly calm under the circumstances. “You have zero chance of getting out of this complex. More guards are already on their way.”

Thomas knew their odds were bad, but it was all they had. “After what we’ve been through, this is nothing.” He smiled as he realized it was true. “Thanks for the training. Now, another word and you’ll get to experience—how did you put it? ‘The worst five minutes of your life?’”

“How can—”

Thomas pulled the trigger. The high-pitched sound filled the room, followed by the launch of a grenade. It hit the man’s chest and exploded in a brilliant display of electricity. He screamed as he fell to the ground, convulsing, smoke streaming off his hair and clothing. The room filled with an awful smell—a stench that reminded Thomas of the Scorch, when Minho was struck by lightning.

“That can’t feel good,” Thomas said to his friends. He sounded so calm to his own ears that it disturbed him. As he watched their nemesis twitch, he was almost ashamed for feeling no guilt. Almost.

“It supposedly won’t kill him,” Brenda said.

“That’s a shame,” Minho replied. He stood after tying up the uninjured guard with his belt. “The world would’ve been better off.”

Thomas turned his attention from the twitching man at his feet. “We’re leaving. Now.”

“I’ll bloody drink to that,” Newt said.

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” Minho added.

They all turned to look at Brenda. She lifted her Launcher in her arms and nodded. She looked ready for a fight.

“I hate these people just as much as you,” she said. “I’m in.”

For the second time in the last few days, Thomas was filled with that foreign feeling of happiness. Brenda was back. He glanced at Janson. The crackling static was beginning to die. The man’s eyes were closed and he’d finally stopped moving, but he was still breathing.

“I don’t know how long a blast from one of these lasts,” Brenda said, “and he’s definitely going to wake up angry. We better get out of here.”

“What’s the plan?” Newt asked.

Thomas didn’t have a clue. “We’ll make it up as we go.”

“Jorge’s a pilot,” Brenda offered. “If we can somehow make it to the hangar, to his Berg ...”

Before anyone could respond, shouts and footsteps sounded in the hall.

“They’re coming,” Thomas said. The reality of their situation hit him again—no one was going to let them just waltz out of the building. Who knew how many guards they’d have to get past.

Minho ran to the door and took a stance right next to it. "They'll all have to come through right here."

The sounds from the hallway were getting louder—the guards were close.

"Newt," Thomas said. "You get on the other side of the doorway. Brenda and I'll shoot the first couple who come through. You guys catch the rest from the sides, then get out into the hallway. We'll be right behind you."

They took their positions.

Brenda's expression was a strange mixture of anger and excitement. Thomas readied himself next to her, gripping the Launcher tightly in his hands. He knew it was a gamble to trust Brenda. He'd been tricked by nearly everyone in this organization; he couldn't underestimate WICKED. But she was the only reason they'd gotten this far. And if he was going to bring her along, he couldn't doubt her anymore.

The first guard arrived, a man dressed in the same black gear as all the others, but with a different type of weapon—smaller and sleeker—held tightly in front of him. Thomas fired, watched the grenade connect with the man's chest; it sent him reeling backward, twitching and convulsing in a web of lightning.

Two more people—a man and a woman—were right behind him with Launchers raised.

Minho acted before Thomas could. He grabbed the woman by the shirt and yanked her toward him, then swung her across his body and slammed her into the wall. She got off a shot, but the silvery grenade shattered harmlessly on the ground and sent a short burst of crackling energy along the tiled floor.

Brenda fired at the man, hitting him in the legs; tiny jagged bolts of electricity shot up his body and he screamed, falling back into the hallway. His weapon fell to the floor.

Minho had disarmed the woman and forced her to kneel. He now held a Launcher aimed at her head.

A fourth man came through the door, but Newt knocked his weapon away and punched him in the face. He collapsed to his knees, holding a hand up to his bloodied mouth. The guard looked up as if to say something, but Newt stepped back and shot him in the chest. At such close range the ball made a terrible popping sound as it exploded against the man. A wretched squeal escaped his throat as he fell to the floor, writhing in a web of pure electricity.

"That beetle blade's watchin' every bloody thing we do," Newt said. He nodded toward something at the back of the room. "We've got to get out of here—they're just going to keep coming."

Thomas turned to see the little robotic lizard crouched in place, red light beaming. Then he looked back at the doorway, which was empty. He faced the woman. The muzzle end of Minho's weapon hovered just inches from her head.

"How many of you are there?" Thomas asked her. "Are there more coming?"

She didn't respond at first, but Minho leaned forward until his gun was actually touching her cheek.

"There're at least fifty on duty," she said quickly.

"Then where are they?" Minho asked.

"I don't know."

"Don't lie to me!" Minho shouted.

"We ... Something else is going on. I don't know what. I swear."

Thomas looked at her closely and saw more than just fear in her expression. Was it frustration? She seemed to be telling the truth. "Something else? Like what?"

She shook her head. "I just know that a group of us were called to a different section,

that's all."

"And you have no idea why?" Thomas threw as much doubt into his voice as possible. "I have a hard time believing that."

"I swear it."

Minho grabbed her by the back of the shirt and pulled her to her feet. "We'll just take the nice lady here as a hostage, then. Let's go."

Thomas stepped in front of him. "Brenda needs to lead—she knows the way around this place. Then me, then you and your new friend, then Newt in the rear."

Brenda hurried to stand beside Thomas. "I still don't hear anybody, but we can't have long. Come on." She peeked into the hallway, then slipped out of the room.

Thomas took a second to wipe his sweaty hands on his pants, then gripped the Launcher and followed her. She turned right. He heard the others fall in behind him; a quick glance showed that Minho's captor was running along, too, looking none too happy with the threat of an electric bath just inches away.

They reached the end of the initial hallway and made a right without stopping. Their new path looked exactly the same as the last, a beige alley stretching before them for at least fifty feet before it ended in a set of double doors. Somehow the scene made him think of that last stretch of the Maze right before the Cliff, when he, Teresa, and Chuck had run for the exit while everyone else battled the Grievers to keep them safe.

As they neared the doors, Thomas pulled the Rat Man's key card out of his pocket.

Their hostage yelled to him. "I wouldn't do that! I bet there're twenty guns waiting to burn you alive on the other side." But something about her tone sounded desperate. Could it be that WICKED had become overconfident and lax in their security? With only twenty or thirty teenagers left, surely they didn't have more than one security person for each of their subjects—if even that many.

Thomas and his friends had to find Jorge and the Berg, but they also had to find everyone else. He thought of Frypan and Teresa. He wasn't going to leave them behind just because they'd chosen to get their memories back.

He skidded to a stop in front of the doors and turned to face Minho and Newt. "We've only got four Launchers, and we better believe that there are more guards on the other side of those doors waiting for us. Are we up for this?"

Minho stepped up to the key card panel, dragging the guard with him by the shirt. "You're going to open this for us so we can focus on your buddies. Stand right there and don't do anything until we say. Don't mess with me." He swiveled toward Thomas. "Start shooting as soon as the doors crack."

Thomas nodded. "I'll crouch. Minho, you lean over my shoulder. Brenda to the left and Newt to the right."

Thomas got down and stuck the point of his weapon right where the doors met in the center. Minho hovered above him, doing the same. Newt and Brenda got in position.

"Open on three," Minho said. "And guard lady, you try anything or run away, I guarantee one of us will get you. Thomas, you count off."

The woman pulled out her key card but said nothing.

"One," Thomas began. "Two."

He paused, allowed himself a moment to suck in a breath, but before he could yell the

last number an alarm started blaring and the lights went out.

Thomas blinked rapidly, trying to adjust to the darkness. The alarm rang in shrill, deafening bursts.

He sensed Minho stand up, then heard him shuffling about. “The guard’s gone!” his friend shouted. “I can’t find her!”

As soon as he said the last word, that sound of power charging filled the gaps between the whines of the alarm, followed by the pop of a grenade exploding against the ground. The bolts of electricity lit up the room; Thomas saw a shadowy figure running away from them back down the hall, gradually disappearing in the gloom.

“My fault,” Minho muttered, barely audible.

“Get back in position,” Thomas said, fearing what the alarm might mean. “Feel for the crack where the doors open. I’ll use the Rat Man’s key card. Be ready!”

He felt around on the wall until he found the right place, then swiped the card; there was an audible click, and one of the doors began to swing inward.

“Start shooting!” Minho shouted.

Newt, Brenda and Minho began to launch grenades through the doorway into the darkness. Thomas carefully got into position and followed suit, shooting into the fray of dancing electricity that now crackled on the far side of the doors. It took a few seconds between rounds, but soon they had created a blinding display of light and explosions. There was no sign of people anywhere, no answering fire.

Thomas let his gun drop to his side. “Stop!” he yelled. “Don’t waste any more ammunition!”

Minho let one last grenade fly, but then they all stood and waited for some of the energy to die down so they could safely enter the room.

Thomas turned to Brenda, speaking loudly to be heard over the noise. “We’re a little short on memories. Do you know anything that’ll help us? Where is everyone? Why the alarm?”

She shook her head. “I have to be honest—something definitely feels off.”

“I bet this is another one of their bloody tests!” Newt yelled. “All of this is meant to happen and we’re being analyzed all over again.”

Thomas could barely hear himself think, and Newt wasn’t helping.

He held his Launcher up and walked through the doorway. He wanted to get somewhere safer before the light from the grenade blasts disappeared entirely. From the shallow pool of his few returned memories, he knew he’d grown up in this place—he just wished he could remember the layout. He realized again how important Brenda was to their freedom. Jorge, too—if he was willing to fly them out of there.

The alarm stopped.

“What—” Thomas had started too loud, and quieted himself. “What now?”

“They probably got sick of their ears bleeding from the noise,” Minho answered. “Just because they turned it off doesn’t mean anything.”

The glow from the electric bolts had disappeared, but the room on this side of the doorway had emergency lights that cast everything in a red haze. They stood in a large

reception area with couches and chairs and a couple of desks. Nobody was in sight.

"I've never seen one person in these waiting rooms," Thomas said, the space suddenly familiar. "The whole place is empty and creepy."

"It's been a long time since they allowed visitors here, I'm sure," Brenda responded.

"What's next, Tommy?" Newt asked. "We can't just stand here all day."

Thomas thought for a second. They had to find their friends, but ensuring that they had a way out seemed the first priority.

"Okay," he said. "Brenda, we really need your help. We need to get to the hangar and find Jorge, get him prepping a Berg. Newt and Minho—you guys can stay with him for backup and Brenda and I will search the place for our friends. Brenda—do you know where we can stock up on weapons?"

"Weapons depot's on the way to the hangar," Brenda said. "But it's probably guarded."

"We've seen worse," Minho offered. "We'll start firing till they drop or we drop."

"We'll cut through 'em all," Newt added, almost with a growl. "Every last one of those buggers."

Brenda pointed down one of two hallways that branched off the reception room. "It's that way."

Brenda led Thomas and his friends through turn after turn, the dull red emergency beacons lighting the way. They met no resistance, though every so often a beetle blade skittered by, click-clacking across the floor as it scurried along. Minho tried firing a shot at one of them, missing badly and almost scorching Newt, who yelped and wanted to fire back, judging by the look on his face.

After a good fifteen minutes of jogging, they reached the weapons depot. Thomas stopped in the hallway, surprised to find the door swung wide open. From what he could see, the shelves inside seemed fully stocked.

"That does it," Minho said. "No more doubt."

Thomas knew exactly what he meant. He'd been through too much not to. "Someone's setting us up," he muttered.

"Has to be," Minho added. "Everyone suddenly disappears, doors are unlocked, weapons sitting here for us. And they're obviously observing us through those shuck beetle blades."

"Definitely fishy," Brenda added.

At her voice, Minho turned on her. "How do we know *you're* not in on it?" he demanded.

She answered in a weary voice. "All I can say is that I swear I'm not. I have no idea what's happening."

Thomas hated to admit it, but what Newt had hinted at earlier—that this whole escape so far might be nothing but an orchestrated exercise—was looking more and more likely. They'd been reduced once again to mice, scuttling about in a different kind of maze. Thomas hoped so badly that it wasn't true.

Newt had already wandered into the weapons room. "Look at this," he called.

When Thomas entered the room Newt was pointing to a section of empty wall space and shelves. "Look at the dust patterns. It's pretty obvious that a bunch of stuff was taken recently. Maybe even within the last hour or so."

Thomas inspected the area. The room was pretty dusty—enough to make you sneeze if

you moved around too much—but the spots Newt pointed out were completely clean. He was dead on.

“Why is that so important?” Minho asked from behind them.

Newt turned on him. “Can’t you figure something out yourself for once, you bloody shank!”

Minho winced. He looked more shocked than angry.

“Whoa, Newt,” Thomas said. “Things suck, yeah, but slim it. What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell ya what’s bloody wrong. You go all tough-guy without a plan, leading us around like a bunch of chickens lookin’ for feed. And Minho can’t take a bloody step without askin’ which foot he should use.”

Minho had finally recovered enough to get ticked. “Look, shuck-face. You’re the one acting like a genius because you figured out some guards took weapons from the *weapons* room. I thought I’d give you the benefit of the doubt, act like maybe you’d discovered something deeper than that. Next time I’ll pat you on the freaking back for stating the obvious.”

Thomas looked back at Newt in time to see his friend’s expression change. He seemed stricken, almost teary.

“I’m sorry,” Newt murmured, then turned and walked out of the room.

“What was *that*?” Minho whispered.

Thomas didn’t want to say what he was thinking: that Newt’s sanity was slowly being eaten away. And luckily he didn’t have to—Brenda spoke up. “You guys *were* missing his point.”

“Which was?” Minho asked.

“There had to have been two or three dozen guns and Launchers in this section, and now they’re all gone. Very recently. In the last hour or so, like Newt said.”

“Yeah?” Minho prodded, just as it clicked for Thomas.

Brenda held her hands out as though the answer should be obvious. “Guards only come here when they need a replacement or want to use something besides a Launcher. Why would they *all* need to do that at the same time? Today? And Launchers are so heavy, you can’t fire them if you’re carrying another weapon, too. Where are the weapons they would have left behind?”

Minho was the first to offer an explanation. “Maybe they knew something like this might happen, and they didn’t want to kill us. From the looks of it, unless you get it right in the head, those Launcher things just stun you for a while. So they all came and got those to use with their regular guns.”

Brenda was shaking her head before he even finished. “No. It’s standard for them to carry Launchers at all times—so it doesn’t make sense that they’d all come at once to get a new one. Whatever you think about WICKED, it’s not their goal to kill as many people as possible. Even when Cranks break in.”

“Crank have *broken in* here before?” Thomas asked.

Brenda nodded. “The more infected there are, the more past the Gone, the more desperate they get. I really doubt the guards—”

Minho interrupted her. “Maybe *that’s* what happened. With all those alarms going off, maybe some Cranks broke in and took whatever weapons were here, stunned people, then started eatin’ their shuck bodies. Maybe we’ve only seen a few guards because the rest of ‘em are dead!”

Thomas had seen Cranks past the Gone, and the memories haunted him. Cranks who had lived with the Flare infection so long that it had eaten away at their brains until they were completely insane. Almost like animals in human form.

Brenda sighed. “I hate to say it, but you might be right.” She thought a moment. “Seriously. That would explain it. *Someone* came in here and took a bunch of weapons.”

An icy chill filled Thomas. “If that’s it, our problems are a whole lot worse than we thought.”

“Glad to see the guy not immune to the Flare isn’t the only one with a brain that still works.”

Thomas turned to see Newt at the door.

“Next time just explain yourself instead of getting all snippy,” Minho said, his voice empty of compassion. “I didn’t think you’d lose it so fast, but glad you’re back. We might need a Crank to sniff out these other Cranks if they really broke in.”

Thomas winced at the cutting remark, looked at Newt for his reaction.

The older boy wasn’t happy—that was clear by his expression. “You never have known when to shut your hole, have ya, Minho? Always gotta have the bloody last word.”

“Shut your shuck face,” Minho replied. His voice was so calm for a second that Thomas could have sworn Minho was losing it himself. The tension in the room was almost palpable.

Newt slowly walked over to Minho and stopped in front of him. Then, quick as a striking snake, he punched him in the face. Minho staggered back and slammed into the empty weapons rack. Then he rushed forward and tackled Newt to the ground.

It all happened so fast, Thomas couldn’t believe it. He ran over and started pulling at Minho’s shirt. “Stop!” he screamed, but the two Gladers continued flailing at each other, arms and legs everywhere.

Brenda stepped up to help and she and Thomas eventually got solid-enough grips to yank

Minho to his feet, his fists still swinging wildly. A stray elbow smacked Thomas in the chin, sending a burst of rage through him.

"How stupid can you get?" Thomas yelled, pinning Minho's arms behind his back. "We're running from at least one enemy, maybe two, and you guys are gonna brawl?"

"He started it!" Minho snapped, spit spraying on Brenda.

She wiped her face. "What are you, eight years old?" she asked.

Minho didn't answer. He struggled to free himself for a few more seconds before giving up. Thomas was sickened by the whole thing. He didn't know which was worse: that Newt seemed to be slipping already or that Minho—the one who should have been able to control himself—was acting like such a slinthead.

Newt got to his feet, gingerly touching a red spot on his cheek where Minho must've connected. "It's my fault. Everything's just tickin' me off. You guys figure out what we should do—I need a buggin' break." And at that he turned and walked out of the room again.

Thomas blew out a breath of frustration; he let go of Minho and adjusted his own shirt. They didn't have time to dwell on petty arguments. If they were going to get out of there, they had to pull together and work as a team. "Minho—find a few more Launchers for us to bring, and then get a couple of the pistols on that shelf over there. Brenda, can you fill up a box with as much ammo as possible? I'll go get Newt."

"Sounds good," she replied, already looking around. Minho didn't say a word, just started searching the racks.

Thomas went out into the hall; Newt had taken a seat on the ground about twenty feet away and was leaning back against the wall.

"Don't say a bloody word," he grumbled when Thomas joined him.

Great start, Thomas thought. "Listen, something weird's going on—either WICKED is testing us or we've got Cranks running around this place killing people left and right. Whatever it is, we need to find our friends and get out of here."

"I know." That was it. Nothing else.

"Then get up and come back in there to help us. You were the one all frustrated, acting like we didn't have time to mess around. And now you want to sit out here in the hall and pout?"

"I know." The same response.

Thomas had never seen Newt like this. The guy looked utterly hopeless, and the sight of it hit Thomas with a wave of despair. "We're all going a little craz—" He stopped; he couldn't possibly say anything worse. "I mean ..."

"Just shut it," Newt said. "I know something's started in my head. I don't feel right. But you don't need to worry your buggin' panties off. Give me a second and I'll be fine. We'll get you guys out of here and then I can deal."

"What do you mean, get you guys out?"

"Get us out, whatever. Just give me a bloody minute."

The world of the Glade seemed like eons ago. Back there, Newt had always been the calm, collected one—and now here he was pulling the group apart at the seams. He seemed to be saying that it didn't matter if he escaped himself as long as everyone else did.

"Fine," Thomas answered. He realized the only thing he could do was treat Newt the

same as he always had. “But you know we can’t waste any more time. Brenda’s gathering ammo. You’ll need to help her carry it to the Berg hangar.”

“Will do.” Newt quickly stood from his spot on the ground. “But first I have to go get something—it won’t take me long.” He started walking away, back toward the reception room.

“Newt!” Thomas shouted, wondering what on earth his friend was up to. “Don’t be stupid—we have to move. And we need to stick together.”

But Newt kept going. He didn’t even turn to look at Thomas. “Just go get the stuff! This’ll only take a couple of minutes.”

Thomas shook his head. There was nothing he could do or say to bring back that reasonable guy he knew. He spun and headed for the weapons room.

Thomas, Minho and Brenda gathered everything they could possibly carry between the three of them. Thomas had one Launcher strapped to each shoulder in addition to the one in his hands. He’d stuck two loaded pistols in his front pockets and several ammo clips in each back pocket. Minho had done the same, and Brenda held a cardboard box full of the bluish grenades and more bullets, her Launcher resting on top.

“That looks heavy,” Thomas said, gesturing to the box. “You wanna—”

Brenda cut him off. “I can manage until Newt gets back in here.”

“Who knows what that guy is up to,” Minho said. “He’s never acted like this before. Flare’s eatin’ his brain already.”

“He said he’d be back soon.” Thomas was tired of Minho’s attitude—he was only making it worse. “And watch what you say around him. The last thing we need is you setting him off again.”

“Do you remember what I told you in the truck, back in the city?” Brenda asked Thomas.

The sudden change in conversation surprised him, and her bringing up the Scorch surprised him even more. It only called attention to the fact that she’d lied to him.

“What?” he asked. “You mean some of the things you said were true?” He’d felt so close to her that night. He realized he was hoping she’d say yes.

“I’m sorry I lied about why I was there, Thomas. And about how I told you I could feel the Flare working on my mind. But the rest was true. I swear it.” She paused, looking at him, pleading in her eyes. “Anyway, we talked about how increased levels of brain activity actually quicken the pace of destruction—it’s called cognitive destruction. That’s why that drug—the Bliss—is so popular with the people who can afford it. The Bliss slows brain function. It lengthens the time before you go bat crazy. But it’s really expensive.”

The idea of people living in the world who were not part of an experiment or holing up in abandoned buildings like he’d seen in the Scorch seemed unreal to him. “Do people still function—live their lives, go to work, whatever—when they’re drugged out?”

“They do what they need to do, but they’re much more ... relaxed about it. You could be a fireman rescuing thirty children from an inferno, but you won’t stress if you happen to drop a few of them into the flames along the way.”

The thought of such a world terrified Thomas. “That’s just ... sick.”

“I gotta get me some of that stuff,” Minho muttered.

“You’re missing the point,” Brenda said. “Think of the hell Newt has been through—all

the decisions he's had to make. No wonder the Flare is moving so fast in him. He's been stimulated too much—way more than the average person living their life day to day."

Thomas sighed, that sadness he'd felt earlier gripping his heart again. "Well, there's nothing we can do about it until we get somewhere safer."

"Do about what?"

Thomas turned to see Newt in the doorway again, then closed his eyes for a moment, pulled himself together. "Nothing, never mind—where'd you go?"

"I need to talk to you, Tommy. Just you. It'll only take a second."

What now? Thomas wondered.

"What's this crap?" Minho asked.

"Just cut me some slack. I need to give something to Tommy here. Tommy and no one else."

"Whatever, go for it." Minho adjusted the straps of the Launchers on his shoulders. "But we need to hurry."

Thomas stepped into the hall with Newt, scared to death of what his friend might say and how crazy it might sound. The seconds were ticking away.

They walked a few feet from the door before Newt stopped and faced him, then held out a small sealed envelope. "Stuff this in your pocket."

"What is it?" Thomas took it and turned it over; it was blank on the outside.

"Just put the bloody thing in your pocket."

Thomas did as he was told, confused but curious.

"Now look me in the eyes." Newt snapped his fingers.

Thomas's stomach sank at the anguish he saw there. "What is it?"

"You don't need to know right now. You *can't* know. But you have to make me a promise—and I'm not messing around here."

"What?"

"You swear to me that you won't read what's inside that bloody envelope until the time is right."

Thomas couldn't imagine waiting to read it—he started to pull the envelope out of his pocket, but Newt grabbed his arm to stop him.

"When the time is right?" Thomas asked. "How will I—"

"You'll bloody know!" Newt answered before Thomas could ask. "Now swear to me. Swear it!" The boy's whole body seemed to tremble with every word.

"Fine!" Thomas was beyond worried about his friend now. "I swear I won't read it until the time is right. I swear. But why—"

"Okay, then," Newt interrupted. "Break your promise and I'll never forgive you."

Thomas wanted to reach out and shake his friend—to pound the wall in frustration. But he didn't. He stood unmoving as Newt turned away from him and walked back toward the weapons room.

Thomas had to trust Newt. He had to do this for his friend, but curiosity burned inside him like a brushfire. He knew, though, that he had no time to waste. They had to get everyone out of the WICKED complex. He could talk to Newt more in the Berg—if they could get to the hangar and convince Jorge to help them.

Newt came back out of the weapons room hefting the box of ammo by himself, followed by Minho, then Brenda, carrying another couple of Launchers with pistols stuffed in her pockets.

“Let’s go find our friends,” Thomas said. Then he headed back the way they’d come, and the others fell in line behind him.

They searched for an hour, but their friends seemed to have disappeared. Rat Man and the guards they’d left behind were gone, and the cafeteria and all the dorms, bathrooms and meeting rooms were empty. Not a person or a Crank in sight. Thomas was terrified that something horrible had happened and they had yet to come across the aftermath.

Finally, after seemingly having searched every nook and cranny of the building, something occurred to him. “Were you guys allowed to move around while they had me locked in the white room?” he asked. “Are you sure we haven’t missed anywhere?”

“Not that I know of,” Minho responded. “But I’d be shocked if there weren’t some hidden rooms.”

Thomas agreed but didn’t think they could afford to spend any more time searching. Their only choice was to move on.

Thomas nodded. “Okay. Let’s zigzag our way to the hangar, keep looking for them as we go.”

They’d been walking for quite some time when Minho abruptly froze. He pointed to his ear. It was hard to see because the hallway was only dimly lit by red emergency lights.

Thomas stopped along with the others, tried to slow his breathing and listen. He heard it immediately. A low moaning sound, something that made Thomas shiver. It was coming from a few yards ahead of them, through a rare window in the hallway that looked into a large room. From where Thomas stood, the room seemed completely dark. The glass from the window had been shattered from the inside—shards littered the tiled floor below it.

The moan sounded again.

Minho held a finger to his lips, then slowly and carefully set down his two extra Launchers. Thomas and Brenda followed suit while Newt placed his box of ammo on the ground. The four of them gripped their weapons, and Minho took the lead as they crept slowly toward the noise. It sounded like a man trying to wake up from a horrible nightmare. Thomas’s apprehension grew with every step. He was scared of what he was about to discover.

Minho stopped, his back against the wall, right at the edge of the window frame. The door to the room was on the other side of the window, closed.

"Ready," Minho whispered. "Now."

He pivoted and aimed his Launcher into the dark room just as Thomas moved to his left side and Brenda to his right, weapons held ready. Newt kept watch at their backs.

Thomas's finger hovered above the trigger, ready to squeeze it at an instant's notice, but there was no movement. He puzzled over what he was seeing inside the room. The red glow from the emergency lights didn't reveal much, but the whole floor appeared to be covered in dark mounds. Something that was slowly moving. Gradually his eyes adjusted and he began to make out the shapes of bodies and black clothing. And he caught sight of ropes.

"They're guards!" Brenda said, her voice cutting through the silence.

Muffled gasps escaped from the room, and finally Thomas could see faces, several of them. Mouths gagged and eyes open wide in panic. The guards were tied up and laid out on the floor from head to toe, side by side, filling up the entire room. Some of them were still, but most were struggling in their restraints. Thomas found himself staring, his mind searching for an explanation.

"So this is where they all are," Minho breathed.

Newt leaned in to get a look. "At least they're not all hangin' from the bloody ceiling with their tongues sticking out like last time."

Thomas couldn't agree more—he remembered that scene all too vividly, whether it had been real or not.

"We need to question them and find out what happened," Brenda said, already moving for the door.

Thomas grabbed her before he had time to think. "No."

"What do you mean no? Why not—they can tell us everything!" She wrenched her arm out of his grip but waited to see what he had to say.

"It might be a trap, or whoever did this could come back soon. We just need to get out of this place."

"Yeah," Minho said. "This isn't up for debate. I don't care if we have Cranks or rebels or gorillas running around this place—these shuck guards aren't our worry right now."

Brenda shrugged. "Fine. Just thought we could get some information." She paused, then pointed. "Hangar's that way."

After gathering up their weapons and ammunition, Thomas and the others jogged down hallway after hallway, all the while on the lookout for whoever had overpowered all those guards. Finally Brenda stopped at another set of double doors. One of them stood slightly ajar, and a breeze flowed through, ruffling her scrubs.

Without being told, Minho and Newt took up position on either side of the doorway, Launchers at the ready. Brenda grabbed the handle of the door, pistol aimed into the opening. There were no sounds coming from the other side.

Thomas gripped his Launcher tighter, the back end pressed against his shoulder, muzzle aimed forward. "Open it," he said, his heart racing.

Brenda swung the door wide and Thomas charged through. He swept his Launcher left and right, turning in a circle as he moved forward.

The massive hangar looked like it was built to hold three of the enormous Bergs, but only

two stood in their loading spots. They loomed like giant squatting frogs, all scorched metal and worn edges, as if they'd flown soldiers into a hundred fiery battles. Other than a few cargo crates and what looked like mechanics' stations, the rest of the area was nothing but open space.

Thomas pushed on, searching the hangar as the other three spread out around him. Not one thing stirred.

"Hey!" Minho shouted. "Over here. Someone's on the ..." He didn't finish, but he had stopped next to a large crate and had his weapon trained on something behind it.

Thomas was the first one at Minho's side and was surprised to see a man lying hidden from view on the other side of the wooden box, groaning as he rubbed his head. There was no blood showing through his dark hair, but judging from the way he struggled to sit up, Thomas bet he'd been hit pretty hard.

"Careful there, buddy," Minho warned. "Nice and easy, no sudden movements or you'll smell like burnt bacon before you know it."

The man leaned on an elbow, and when he dropped his hand from his face, Brenda let out a small cry and rushed forward to him, pulling him into a hug.

Jorge. Thomas felt a rush of relief—they'd found their pilot and he was okay, if a little banged up.

Brenda didn't seem to quite see it that way. She searched Jorge for injuries as her questions poured out. "What happened? How'd you get hurt? Who took the Berg? Where is everyone?"

Jorge groaned again and gently pushed her away. "Calm your pants, *hermana*. My head feels like it's been stomped by dancin' Cranks. Just give me a sec while I get my wits back together."

Brenda gave him some space and sat down, her face flushed, her expression anxious. Thomas had a million questions of his own, but he understood well what it felt like to be knocked in the head. He watched Jorge as he slowly got his bearings, and remembered how he'd once been scared of this guy—been terrified of him. The images of Jorge fighting Minho inside that wreck of a building in the Scorch would never leave his mind. But eventually, like Brenda, Jorge had realized that he and the Gladers were on the same side.

Jorge squeezed his eyes shut and opened them a few more times, then started talking. "I don't know how they did it, but they took over the compound, got rid of the guards, stole a Berg, flew out of here with another pilot. I was an idiot and tried to get them to wait until I could find out more about what's going on. Now my head's paying for it."

"Who?" Brenda asked. "Who are you talking about? Who left?"

For some reason Jorge looked up at Thomas when he answered. "That Teresa chick. Her and the rest of the subjects. Well, all of them except you *muchachos*."

Thomas staggered a step or two to his left and caught himself on the heavy crate for support. He'd been thinking that maybe Cranks had attacked after all, or that some other group had infiltrated WICKED, taken Teresa and the others. Rescued them, even.

But Teresa had led an *escape*? They'd fought their way out, subdued the guards, flown away in a Berg? Without him and the others? There were so many elements to the scenario, and none of them would come together in his mind.

"Shut your traps!" Jorge shouted over the din of questions from Minho and Newt, and Thomas jolted back to the present. "You're driving nails through my head—just ... quit talking for a minute. Somebody help me get up."

Newt grabbed the man's hand and pulled him to his feet. "You better start explaining what bloody happened. From the beginning."

"And be quick about it," Minho added.

Jorge leaned back onto the wooden box and folded his arms, still wincing with every movement. "Look, *hermano*, I already told you I don't know much. What I said happened is what happened. My head feels like—"

"Yeah, we get it," Minho snapped. "You have a headache. Just tell us what you know and I'll find you some shuck aspirin."

Jorge let out a little laugh. "Brave words, boy. If I remember right, you're the one who had to apologize and beg for your life back in the Scorch."

Minho's face scrunched up and reddened. "Well, it's easy to be tough when you have a bunch of lunatics with knives protecting you. Things are a little different now."

"Would you stop!" Brenda said to both of them. "We're all on the same side."

"Just get on with it," Newt said. "Talk so we buggin' know what we need to do."

Thomas was still in shock. He stood listening to Jorge and Newt and Minho, but it felt like he was watching something on a screen, like it wasn't happening in front of him. He'd thought Teresa couldn't be more of a mystery to him. Now this.

"Look," Jorge said. "I spend most of my time in this hangar, okay? I started hearing all kinds of shouts and warnings over the com, then the silent-alarm lights started blinking. I went out to investigate and just about had my head blown off."

"At least it wouldn't hurt anymore," Minho muttered.

Jorge either didn't hear the comment or just ignored it. "Then the lights went out and I ran back in here to find my gun. Next thing I know, Teresa and a bunch of your hooligan friends come running in here like the world's about to end, hauling old Tony along to fly a Berg. I dropped my lousy pistol when seven or eight Launchers were aimed at my chest, then I begged them to wait, explain things to me. But some chick with blond hair whacked me in the forehead with the butt of her gun. I passed out, woke up to see your ugly faces staring down at me and a Berg gone. That's all I know."

Thomas took it all in but realized none of the details mattered. Only one thing about the whole affair stood out, and not only did it confuse him, it hurt him to face it.

"They left us behind," he almost whispered. "I can't believe it."

"Huh?" Minho asked.

"Speak up, Tommy," Newt added.

Thomas exchanged long glances with both of them. "They left us behind. At least we went back and looked for them. They left us here for WICKED to do whatever they want with us."

They didn't respond, but their eyes revealed that they'd been thinking the same thing.

"Maybe they *did* search for you," Brenda offered. "And couldn't find you. Or maybe the firefight got too nasty and they had to leave."

Minho scoffed at that. "All the guards are freaking tied up in that room back there! They had plenty of time to come look for us. No way. They left us."

"On purpose," Newt said in a low voice.

None of it sat right with Thomas. "Something's off. Teresa's been acting like WICKED's number one fan lately. Why would she escape? It has to be some kind of trick. Come on, Brenda—you told me not to trust them. You have to know something. Talk."

Brenda was shaking her head. "I don't know anything about this. But why is it so hard to believe that the other subjects would have the same idea we did? To escape? They just did a better job of it."

Minho made a noise that sounded like a wolf growling. "Insulting us is something I wouldn't do right now. And use the word *subjects* again and I'll smack you, girl or no girl."

"You just try it," Jorge warned. "Smack her and it'll be the last thing you do in this life."

"Could we stop the macho games for a bit?" Brenda rolled her eyes. "We need to figure out what comes next."

Thomas couldn't shake how much it bothered him that Teresa and the others—Frypan, even!—had left without them. If his group had been the ones to tie all the guards up, wouldn't they have searched until they found their other friends? And why had Teresa wanted to leave? Had her memories brought back something she hadn't expected?

"There's nothing to bloody figure out," Newt said. "We get out of here." He pointed at a Berg.

Thomas couldn't have agreed more. He turned to Jorge. "You're really a pilot?"

The man grinned. "Damn straight, *muchacho*. One of the best."

"Why'd they send you to the Scorch, then? Aren't you valuable?"

Jorge looked at Brenda. "Where Brenda goes, I go. And I hate to say it, but heading for the Scorch sounded better than staying here. I looked at it like a vacation. Turned out a little rougher than I—"

An alarm started blaring, the same whining scream as before. Thomas's heart jumped—the noise seemed even louder in the hangar than it had been in the hall, echoing off the high walls and ceiling.

Brenda looked with wide eyes at the doors they'd come through, and Thomas turned to see what had caught her attention.

At least a dozen of the black-clad guards were pouring through the opening, weapons raised. They started firing.

Someone grabbed the back of Thomas's shirt and yanked him hard to the left; he stumbled and fell behind the cargo box just as the sounds of glass shattering and electricity crackling filled the hangar. Several arcs of lightning threaded around and over the crate, singeing the air. They'd barely winked out before a round of bullets thudded against the wood.

"Who let 'em loose?" Minho yelled.

"Hardly think it bloody matters right now!" Newt shouted back.

The group crouched low, their bodies pressed against each other tightly. It seemed impossible that they could fight back from such a position.

"They'll flank us any second," Jorge called out. "We need to start shooting back!"

Despite the wild attack going on around them, the statement struck Thomas. "I guess you're with us, then?"

The pilot looked at Brenda, then shrugged. "If she's helping you, then so am I. And if you haven't noticed—they're trying to kill me, too!"

A surge of relief edged through Thomas's terror. Now they just had to make it onto one of those Bergs.

The onslaught had paused momentarily, and Thomas could hear shuffling footsteps and short barked commands. If they were going to gain an advantage, they needed to act quickly.

"How do we do this?" he asked Minho. "You're in charge this time."

His friend gave him a sharp look but nodded curtly. "Okay, I'll fire right, Newt fires left. Thomas and Brenda, you fire over the box. Jorge, you scout a way for us to get to your shuck Berg. Shoot anything that moves or wears black. Get ready."

Thomas knelt facing the box, ready to jump to his feet on Minho's signal. Brenda was right next to him, with two pistols instead of a Launcher. Her eyes were on fire.

"Planning to kill somebody?" Thomas asked.

"Nah. I'll aim for their legs. But ya never know, maybe I'll hit high by accident."

She flashed him a smile; Thomas was liking her more and more.

"Okay!" Minho shouted. "Now!"

They made their moves. Thomas stood, lifting his Launcher up and over the box. He fired without risking a good look, and once he heard the grenade explode he popped up to search for a specific target. A man was creeping toward them from across the room, and Thomas aimed, fired. The grenade burst into lightning as it hit the man's chest, throwing him to the ground in a fit of spasms.

Gunfire and screams filled the air of the hangar, along with the staticky sound of electricity. Guard after guard fell, clutching their wounds—mostly in their legs, as Brenda had promised. Others bolted for cover.

"We've got them running!" Minho yelled. "But it won't last long—they probably didn't realize we had weapons. Jorge, which Berg is yours?"

"That one." Jorge pointed toward the far left corner of the hangar. "That's my baby. It won't take long to get her ready to fly."

Thomas turned to where Jorge had indicated. The Berg's large hatch door, which he

remembered from the group's escape out of the Scorch, lay open and rested on the ground, waiting for passengers to run up its metal slope. Nothing had ever looked so inviting.

Minho shot another grenade. "Okay. First everyone reload. Then Newt and I'll cover while Thomas, Jorge and Brenda run to the Berg. Jorge, you get her fired up while Thomas and Brenda cover for us from behind that hatch door. Sound like a plan?"

"Can the Launchers hurt the Berg?" Thomas asked. Everyone was jamming additional ammo into their weapons and pockets.

Jorge shook his head. "Not much. Those beasts are tougher than a Scorch camel. If they miss us and hit my ship, all the better. Let's do this, *muchachos!*"

"Then go go go!" Minho yelled without giving any warning. He and Newt started launching grenades like crazy, volleying them all along the open area in front of their waiting Berg.

Thomas felt a mad rush of adrenaline. He and Brenda took up position on the left and right of Jorge and they sprinted away from the protection of the cargo box. A flurry of firing weapons filled the air, but there was so much electricity and smoke that it was impossible to aim at anyone. Thomas shot his weapon as best he could while running, as did Brenda. He swore he could feel bullets blowing past him, barely missing. Launcher grenades exploded in a crash of glass and light to their right and left.

"Run!" Jorge shouted.

Thomas pushed himself to go faster, his legs burning. Daggers of lightning shot across the floor from all directions; bullets pinged against the metal walls of the hangar; smoke twirled like fingers of fog in odd places. It all became a blur as he focused on the Berg, now only a few dozen feet away.

They'd almost made it when a Launcher grenade smashed against Brenda's back; she screamed and fell, her face smacking the concrete floor as electricity spiderwebbed over her body.

Thomas skidded to a stop as he cried out her name, then dropped to the ground to make himself a smaller target. Tendrils of lightning-like electricity snaked across Brenda's body, then dwindled to smoky wisps as they raced out along the floor. Thomas lay on his stomach several feet away, dodging the errant streaks of white heat as he searched for a way to get closer.

Newt and Minho had obviously seen the disastrous turn of events and given up on the plan. They were running toward him as they continued firing. Jorge had made it to the Berg and disappeared up the hatch, but he came out again, shooting a different kind of Launcher; its grenades exploded into spouts of raging fire when they made contact. Several of the guards screamed as they erupted in flames, and the others pulled back a little because of the new threat.

Thomas waited anxiously on the ground next to Brenda, cursing his inability to help. He knew he had to wait for the electricity to die down before he could grab her and start dragging her to the Berg, but he didn't know if there was time. Her face had gone completely white; blood dripped from her nose and drool trickled from her mouth as her limbs spasmed and her torso seemed to bounce in place. Her eyes were frozen wide with shock and terror.

Newt and Minho reached him, dropped to the ground.

"No!" Thomas shouted. "Keep going to the Berg. Take cover behind the hatch door. Wait until we start moving, then cover us. Fire like crazy till we get there."

"Just come on already!" Minho yelled back. He grabbed Brenda by the shoulders, and Thomas's breath caught as his friend winced—several jagged bolts of lightning arced up his arms. But the energy had weakened considerably and Minho was able to stand and begin pulling her along behind him.

Thomas hooked his arms under Brenda's shoulders, and Newt picked up her legs. They backed their way toward the Berg. The hangar was a world of noise and smoke and flashing light. A bullet grazed Thomas's leg: a hot score of pain, then oozing blood. An inch difference and he might've been hobbled for life or bled to death. He let out a furious scream and imagined everyone in black as the one who'd shot him.

He stole a glance at Minho; the boy's face was strained with the effort of dragging Brenda. Thomas harnessed his furious surge of adrenaline and took a risk, lifted his Launcher up from beneath him with one hand, firing in random directions as he used the other to help pull Brenda across the floor.

They reached the foot of the hatch door. Jorge immediately dropped his huge weapon and slid down the ramp to grab one of Brenda's arms. Thomas released his hold on her shirt and let Minho and Jorge yank her up into the ship, her heels thumping against the raised traction molding.

Newt started firing his weapon again, releasing grenades left and right until he ran out of ammunition. Thomas shot once more and his Launcher emptied as well.

The guards in the hangar clearly knew that their time was about to run out, and a horde of them sprinted for the ship and opened fire once again.

"Forget reloading!" Thomas shouted. "Let's go!"

Newt turned and scrambled up the ramp. Thomas was right behind him. His head had just crossed the threshold when something thumped and cracked against his back. In an instant he felt the burning power of a thousand bolts of lightning strike him at once; he fell backward and tumbled end over end until he landed on the floor of the hangar, his whole body convulsing and his vision going dark.

Thomas's eyes were open, but he couldn't see anything. No, that wasn't it. Brilliant lights arced in lines across his field of vision, blinding him. He couldn't blink, couldn't close his eyelids to block it. Pain washed over his body; his skin felt like it was melting right off his muscle and bones. He tried to scream, but it was as if he'd lost all control of his functions—his arms and legs and torso shook no matter how hard he strained to stop them.

The crackle and pop of electricity filled his ears, but soon another noise took over. A deep, thrumming hum that pounded his ears and rattled his head. He was barely on the edge of consciousness, felt himself slipping in and out of an abyss that wanted to swallow him. But something in him knew what that sound was. The engines of the Berg had started up, the thrusters burning their blue flames.

He immediately thought they were leaving him. First Teresa and the others, now his closest friends and Jorge. He couldn't take any more betrayal. It hurt too much. He wanted to scream, all while needles of pain bit every inch of his body and the burning smell overwhelmed him. No, they wouldn't leave him behind. He knew it.

Gradually his vision started to clear, and the white-hot charges of heat diminished in strength and number. He blinked. Two, then three figures dressed in black stood over him, weapons pointed at his face. Guards. Would they kill him? Drag him back to the Rat Man for more tests? One of them spoke, but Thomas couldn't hear the words; static buzzed in his ears.

All of a sudden the guards were gone, tackled by two figures that seemingly flew through the air. His friends, had to be his friends. Through a haze of smoke Thomas could see the ceiling of the hangar far above him. The pain had mostly gone away, replaced by a numbness that made him wonder if he could move. He shifted to his right, then rolled to his left, then leaned up on an elbow, woozy and weak. A last few trickles of electricity skittered over his body and disappeared into the cement. The worst was over. He hoped.

He shifted again, looked back over his shoulder. Minho and Newt were each straddling a guard, beating the living klunk out of them. Jorge stood in between the Gladers, shooting his fiery Launcher in all directions. Most of the guards must've given up or been disabled—otherwise Thomas and the others wouldn't have made it even this far. Or maybe, Thomas thought, the guards were pretending, putting on an act, like everyone else in the Trials.

He didn't care. He just wanted out of this place. And escape was right in front of him.

With a groan he shifted to his belly, then pushed himself up onto his hands and knees. Breaking glass, the crackle of lightning, the booms of weapons firing and pings of bullets hitting metal filled the air around him. If someone shot him now, there was nothing he could do about it. He could only drag himself toward the Berg. The ship's thrusters hummed as they charged; the whole thing vibrated, shaking the ground underneath him as well. The hatch door was only a few feet away. They needed to get on the ship.

He tried to yell something back at Minho and the others, but only a gurgling groan came out. On his hands and knees like a wounded dog, he started crawling forward as quickly as his body would allow—he had to fight for every ounce of strength within. He reached the lip of the ramp, pulled himself over it, inched up the slope. His muscles ached and nausea

climbed out of his stomach. The noises of battle pounded his ears, put his nerves on edge; something could hit him at any second.

He made it halfway. Turned to look at his friends. They were backing toward him, all three now firing. Minho had to stop and reload, and Thomas just knew he'd get shot or blasted with a grenade. But his friend finished and started up again. The three of them reached the bottom of the hatch door, so close now.

Thomas tried to speak again; now he sounded like a wounded dog.

"That's it!" Jorge yelled. "Grab his butt and drag him in!"

Jorge ran up the ramp past Thomas and disappeared inside. Something clicked loudly, and then the ramp started to swing upward, its hinges groaning. Thomas realized he'd collapsed, his face resting against the raised metal traction pads beneath him, yet he couldn't remember when it had happened. He felt hands pull at his shirt, felt himself lifted through the air. Then he slammed back down just inside the hatch door as it sealed shut and the locks engaged.

"Sorry, Tommy," Newt muttered in his ear. "Could've been a bit more gentle, I 'spect."

Though he was close to unconsciousness, an indescribable joy lifted Thomas's heart—they were escaping WICKED. He let out a weak grunt in an attempt to share that with his friend. Then he closed his eyes and passed out.

Thomas woke to see Brenda's face staring down at him. She looked worried. Her skin was pale and marked with streaks of dried blood, and there was black soot on her forehead and a bruise forming on her cheek. As if her wounds reminded him, he suddenly felt the sting of his own across his whole body. He had no idea how those Launcher grenades worked, but he was happy he'd only been hit once.

"I just got up myself," Brenda said. "How do you feel?"

Thomas shifted to lean on his elbow and winced at the sharp pain in his leg where he'd been grazed by the bullet. "Like a bucket of klunk."

He lay on a low cot inside a large cargo hold that currently held nothing but a bunch of mismatched furniture. Minho and Newt were taking well-deserved naps on a couple of ugly couches, blankets covering their bodies and tucked in under their chins. Thomas had a sneaking suspicion that Brenda had done that—they looked like little kids, all snuggly and warm.

Brenda had been kneeling next to his cot; she now stood up and took a seat on a frumpy armchair a few feet away. "We slept for almost ten hours."

"Serious?" Thomas couldn't believe it—it seemed like he'd just dozed off. Or *passed out* was probably more accurate.

Brenda nodded.

"We've been flying that long? Where are we going, the moon?" Thomas swung his legs out and sat on the edge of the cot.

"No. Jorge got us a hundred or so miles away, then landed in a big clearing. He's actually snoozing, too. Can't have a tired pilot."

"I can't believe we both got shot by Launchers. I liked it a lot better being the one who pulled the trigger." Thomas rubbed his face and let out a big yawn. Then he examined some of the burns on his arms. "Do you think these will leave scars?"

Brenda laughed. "Of all the things to worry about."

He couldn't help but smile. She was right. "So," he started, then continued, slowly. "It sounded great to escape from WICKED when we were back there, but ... I don't even know what the real world ... It's not all like the Scorch, is it?"

"No," she replied. "Only the regions between the Tropics are a wasteland—everywhere else has extreme swings of climate. There are a few safe cities we could go to. Especially being immune—we could probably find jobs pretty easily."

"Jobs," Thomas repeated, as if the word were the most foreign thing he'd ever heard. "You're already thinking about getting a job?"

"You do plan to eat, don't you?"

Thomas didn't answer, felt the heavy weight of reality. If they were truly going to escape into the real world, they had to start living like real people. But was that even possible in a world where the Flare existed? He thought of his friends.

"Teresa," he said.

Brenda pulled back a little in surprise. "What about her?"

"Is there a way to find out where she and the others went?"

"Jorge already did—checked the Berg tracking system. They went to a city called Denver."

Thomas felt a prick of alarm. "Does that mean WICKED'll be able to find us?"

"You don't know Jorge." She had a mischievous grin on her face. "He can manipulate the system like you wouldn't believe. We should be able to stay a step ahead of them for a little while, at least."

"Denver," Thomas said after a moment. The name sounded weird in his mouth. "Where's that?"

"Rocky Mountains. High elevation. One of the obvious choices for a quarantine zone because the weather's recovered pretty quickly there since the sun flares. As good a place as any to go."

Thomas didn't care so much about the location, he just knew that he had to find Teresa and the others, be reunited. He wasn't quite sure *why* yet, and he certainly wasn't ready to discuss it with Brenda. So he stalled for time.

"What's it like there?" he finally asked.

"Well, like most big cities, they're pretty ruthless about keeping the Cranks out, and the residents have to be tested for the Flare randomly and often. They actually have another town set up on the opposite side of the valley where they send the newly infected. Immunes get paid a lot of money to take care of them even though it's extremely dangerous. Both places are heavily guarded."

Even with some of his memories back, Thomas didn't know a whole lot about the population that was immune to the Flare. But he remembered something the Rat Man had told him. "Janson said that people really hate the Immunes—call them Munies. What did he mean by that?"

"When you have the Flare, you know you're going to go crazy and die. It's not a matter of *if* but *when*. And as hard as the world has tried, the virus always finds its way through the cracks of the quarantines. Imagine knowing that and then knowing that the Immunes are going to be okay. The Flare does nothing to them—they don't even transmit the virus. Wouldn't you hate the healthy?"

"Probably," Thomas said, glad he was on the immune side of things. Better to be hated than sick. "But wouldn't it seem valuable to have them around? I mean, knowing they can't catch the disease."

Brenda shrugged. "They're definitely used—especially in government and security roles—but the others treat them like trash. And there's way more people who aren't immune. That's why the Munies get paid so much to be guards—otherwise they wouldn't go through it. A lot of them even try to hide their immunity. Or go work for WICKED, like Jorge and I did."

"So did you guys meet before going there?"

"We met in Alaska, after we'd found out we were immune. There was a gathering place for people like us—kind of a hidden camp. Jorge became like an uncle to me, and he swore to be my guardian. My dad had already been killed, and my mom pushed me away once she caught the Flare."

Thomas leaned forward, elbows on knees. "You told me WICKED killed your dad. And yet you still went and volunteered to work for them?"

“Survival, Thomas.” A dark look passed over her face. “You don’t know how good you had it growing up under WICKED’s wing. Out in the real world, most people will do anything to survive one more day. Cranks and Immunes have different problems, yeah, but it’s still about surviving. Everybody wants to live.”

Thomas didn’t respond, didn’t know what to say. All he knew of life was the Maze and the Scorch and the splotchy memories of his childhood with WICKED. He felt empty and lost, like he didn’t really belong anywhere.

A sudden pain squeezed his heart. “I wonder what happened to my mom,” he said, surprising himself.

“Your mom?” Brenda asked. “You remember her?”

“I’ve had a few dreams about her. I think they were memories.”

“What came back? What was she like?”

“She was … a mom. You know, she loved me, cared about me, worried about me.” Thomas’s voice cracked. “I don’t think anyone’s done that since they took me away from her. It hurts to think of her going crazy, to think of what might’ve happened to her. What some crazy bloodthirsty Crank might’ve …”

“Stop it, Thomas. Just stop.” She took his hand and squeezed, which helped. “Think how happy she’d be, knowing you’re still alive, still fighting. She died knowing that you were immune, and that you’d have a chance to actually grow old, no matter how crappy the world is. Plus, you’re totally wrong.”

Thomas had been staring at the floor, but at that he looked up at Brenda. “Huh?”

“Minho. Newt. Frypan. All your friends care and worry about you. Even Teresa—she really did do all those things in the Scorch because she thought she had no choice.” Brenda paused, then added in a quiet voice, “Chuck.”

The pang Thomas was feeling in his chest tightened. “Chuck. He … he’s …” He had to stop a second to compose himself. When it came down to it, Chuck was the most vivid reason that he despised WICKED. How could any good come from killing a kid like Chuck?

He finally continued. “I watched as that kid died. In his last few seconds there was pure terror in his eyes. You can’t do that. You can’t do that to a person. I don’t care what anyone tells me, I don’t care how many people go crazy and die, I don’t care if the whole shuck human race ends. Even if that was the only thing that had to happen to find the cure, I’d still be against it.”

“Thomas, relax. You’re going to squeeze your own fingers off.”

He didn’t remember letting go of her hand—he looked down to see his own hands gripping each other tightly, the skin completely white. He eased off and felt the blood rush back to them.

Brenda nodded solemnly. “I changed for good back in the Scorch city. I’m sorry for everything.”

Thomas shook his head. “You don’t have a single reason more than I do to apologize. It’s all just one big screwed-up mess.” He groaned and lay back down on the cot, staring at the metal grid of the ceiling.

After a long pause, Brenda finally spoke again. “Ya know, maybe we can find Teresa and the others. Join up. They broke out, which means they’re on our side. I think we should give them the benefit of the doubt—maybe they had no choice but to leave without us. And

it's no surprise at all that they went where they did."

Thomas shifted to look at her, daring to hope she was right. "So you think we should go to..."

"Denver."

Thomas nodded, suddenly certain and loving the feel of it. "Yeah, Denver."

"But your friends aren't the only reason." Brenda smiled. "There's something even more important there."

Thomas stared at Brenda, eager to hear what she had to say.

"You know what's in your brain," she said. "So what's our biggest concern?"

Thomas thought about it. "WICKED tracking us or controlling us."

"Exactly," Brenda said.

"And?" Again, impatience filled his gut.

She sat back down across from him and leaned forward on her knees, rubbing her hands together in excitement. "I know a guy named Hans who moved to Denver—he's immune like us. He's a doctor. He worked at WICKED until he had a disagreement with the higher-ups about the protocols surrounding the brain implants. He thought what they were doing was too risky. That they were crossing lines, being inhumane. WICKED wouldn't let him leave, but he managed to escape."

"Those guys need to work on their security," Thomas muttered.

"Lucky for us." Brenda grinned. "Anyway, Hans is a genius. He knows every little detail about the implants you guys have in your heads. I know he went to Denver because he sent me a message over the Netblock right before I was dropped into the Scorch. If we can get to him, he'll be able to take those things out of your heads. Or at least disable them. I'm not sure how it works, but if anyone can do it, he can. And he'd do it gladly. The man hates WICKED as much as we do."

Thomas thought for a second. "And if they control us, we're in big trouble. I've seen it happen at least three times." Alby struggling against an unseen force in the Homestead, Gally being controlled with the knife that hit Chuck, and Teresa straining to speak to Thomas outside the shack in the Scorch. All three among his most disturbing memories.

"Exactly. They could manipulate you, make you do things. They can't see through your eyes or hear your voice or anything like that, but we need to get you fixed. If they're close enough to have you under observation and if they decide it's worth the risk, they'll try it. And that's the last thing we need."

It was a lot to sort out. "Well, it looks like we have plenty of reason to go to Denver. We'll see what Newt and Minho think when they wake up."

Brenda nodded. "Sounds good." She got to her feet and moved closer, then leaned in and kissed Thomas on the cheek. Goose bumps broke out down his chest and arms. "Ya know, most of what happened in those tunnels was *not* an act." She stood and looked at him for a moment, quietly. "I'm going to wake up Jorge—he's sleeping in the captain's quarters."

She turned and walked away, and Thomas sat there, hoping his face hadn't flushed bright red when he remembered her being close to him in the Underneath. He put his hands behind his head and lay back on the cot, trying to process everything he'd just heard. They finally had some direction. He felt a smile crack his face, and not just because he'd been kissed.

Minho called their meeting a Gathering, just for old time's sake.

By the end of it, Thomas had a headache, the pain throbbing so badly he thought his

eyeballs might pop out. Minho played devil's advocate on every single issue and for some reason gave Brenda dirty looks the entire time. Thomas knew that they needed to go over things from every possible angle, but he wished Minho would give Brenda a break.

In the end, after an hour of arguing and going back and forth and coming full circle a dozen times, they decided—unanimously—to go to Denver. They planned to land the Berg at a private airport with the story that they were Immunes looking for a government transport job. Luckily the Berg was unmarked—WICKED didn't advertise when it went out into the real world, apparently. They'd be tested and branded as immune to the Flare, which would allow them access to the city proper. All except Newt, who—because he was infected—would have to stay on the Berg until they figured something out.

They ate a quick meal; then Jorge went off to pilot the ship. He said he was well rested and he wanted everyone else to take a nap since it would take a few more hours to reach the city. After that, who knew how long it would be before they found a place to stay for the night.

Thomas just wanted to be alone, so he used his headache as an excuse. He found a little reclining chair in an out-of-the-way corner and curled up in it, his back to the open area behind him. He had a blanket, and he pulled it up and around him, feeling cozier than he had in a long time. And even though he was scared of what might come, he also felt a sense of peace. Maybe they were finally close to breaking the bonds of WICKED forever.

He thought about their escape and all that had happened along the way. The more he went through it, the more he doubted that any of it had been orchestrated by WICKED. Too much had been done on the spur of the moment, and those guards had fought furiously to keep them there.

Finally sleep took him from all of these thoughts, and he dreamed.

He's only twelve years old, sitting in a chair facing another man, who looks unhappy to be there. They're in a room with an observation window.

"Thomas," the sad man begins. "You've been a little ... distant lately. I need you to come back to what's important. You and Teresa are doing well with your telepathy, and things are moving forward nicely by all estimations. It's time to refocus."

Thomas feels shame, and then shame at being ashamed. It confuses him, makes him want to run away, back to his dorm. The man senses it.

"We won't leave this room until I'm satisfied with your commitment." The words are like a death sentence handed down by a heartless judge. "You'll answer my questions, and the sincerity better bleed from your pores. Do you understand?"

Thomas nods.

"Why are we here?" the man asks.

"Because of the Flare."

"I want more than that. Elaborate."

Thomas pauses. He has felt a sense of rebellion lately, but he knows that once he recounts all the things this man wants to hear, it will dissipate. He'll fall back into doing what they ask of him and learning what they set before him.

"Go on," the man pushes.

Thomas lets it all out in a rush—word for word, as he memorized it long ago. "The sun

flares pummeled the earth. Security in many government buildings was compromised. A man-made virus engineered for biological warfare leaked from a military center for disease control. That virus hit all the major population centers and spread rapidly. It became known as the Flare. The surviving governments put all their resources into WICKED, who found the best and the brightest of those who were immune. They began their plans to stimulate and map the brain patterns of all known human emotions and study how we operate despite having the Flare rooted inside our brains. The research will lead to ...”

He keeps going and he doesn't stop, breathing in and out with the words that he hates.

The dreaming Thomas turns and runs away, runs to the darkness.

Thomas decided he needed to tell everyone more about all the dreams he was having. About what he suspected were memories coming back to him.

As they sat down for the second Gathering of the day, he made them all swear to keep their mouths shut until he was finished. They'd grouped the chairs near the cockpit of the Berg so Jorge could hear it all. Thomas then began to tell them about each dream he'd had—memories of his life as a kid, being taken by WICKED when they found out he was immune, his training with Teresa, all of it. When he got out all that he could remember, he waited for a response.

"I don't see what that has to do with anything," Minho said. "Just makes me hate WICKED even more. Good thing we left, and I hope I never have to see Teresa's shuck face again."

Newt, who'd been irritable and distant, spoke for the first time since they'd sat down for the Gathering. "Brenda's a bloody princess compared to that know-it-all."

"Um ... thanks?" Brenda replied with an eye roll.

"When did you change?" Minho blurted out.

"Huh?" Brenda replied.

"When did you become so shuck crazy against WICKED? You've worked for them, you did all those things they wanted you to do in the Scorch. You were all ready to help them put that mask on our face and mess with us all over again. When and how did you come so strongly over to our side?"

Brenda sighed; she looked tired, but her words came out laced with some anger. "I have *never* been on their side. Never. I've always disagreed with how they operate—but what could I ever do on my own? Or even with Jorge? I've done what I needed to do to survive. But then I lived through the Scorch with you guys and it made me realize ... well, it made me realize that we have a chance."

Thomas wanted to change the subject. "Brenda, do you think WICKED'll start forcing us to do things? Start messing with us, manipulating us, whatever?"

"That's why we need to find Hans." She shrugged. "I can only guess what WICKED will do. Every other time I've seen them control someone with the device in their brain, that person has been close and under observation. Since you guys are running and they have no way of seeing exactly what you're doing, they might not want to risk it."

"Why not?" Newt asked. "Why don't they just make us stab ourselves in the leg or chain ourselves to a chair until they find us?"

"Like I said, they're not close enough," Brenda answered. "They obviously *need* you guys. They can't risk you getting hurt or dying. I bet they have all kinds of people coming after you. Once they get close enough to observe, then they might start doing things to mess with your head. And I have a pretty good feeling they will—which is why getting to Denver is a must."

Thomas's mind had already been made up. "We're going and that's that. And I say we wait a hundred years before we have another meeting to talk about stuff."

"Good that," Minho said. "I'm with you."

That was two out of three. Everyone looked at Newt.

"I'm a Crank," the older boy said. "Doesn't matter what I bloody think."

"We can get you into the city," Brenda said, ignoring him. "At least long enough to have Hans work on your head. We'll just be really careful to keep you away fr—"

Newt stood up in a blur of speed and punched the wall behind his chair. "First of all, it doesn't matter if I have the thing in my brain—I'm gonna be past the buggin' Gone before too long anyway. And I don't wanna die knowing I ran around a city of healthy people and infected them."

Thomas remembered the envelope in his pocket, a thing he'd almost forgotten about until now. His fingers twitched to pull it out and read it.

No one said anything.

Newt's expression darkened. "Well, don't hurt yourselves tryin' to talk me into it," he finally growled. "We all know WICKED's fancy cure is never gonna work, and I wouldn't want it to. Not much to live for on this piece-of-klunk planet. I'll stay on the Berg while you guys go into the city." He turned and stomped away, disappearing around the corner to the common area.

"That went well," Minho muttered. "Guess the Gathering is over." He got up and followed his friend.

Brenda frowned, then focused on Thomas. "You're—we're—doing the right thing."

"I don't think there is a right or wrong anymore," Thomas said, hearing the numbness in his own voice. He desperately wanted sleep. "Only horrible and not-quite-so-horrible."

He got up to join the other two Gladers, fingering the note in his pocket. What could it possibly say? he wondered as he walked out. And how would he ever know when the right time to open it had come?

Thomas hadn't had much time to think about what the world outside of WICKED's control would be like. But now that they were actually going to face it, his nerves lit up with anticipation and butterflies filled his stomach. He was about to enter uncharted territory.

"You guys ready for this?" Brenda asked. They stood outside the Berg, at the foot of the cargo door ramp, just a hundred feet or so in front of a cement wall with big iron doors.

Jorge let out a snort. "I forgot what an inviting place they have here."

"You sure you know what you're doing?" Thomas asked him.

"Just keep your mouth shut, *hermano*, and leave things to me. We're using our real first names with fake last names. All they'll really care about in the end is that we're immune—they'll love putting us on record. We won't have more than a day or two before they hunt us down to do something for the government. We're valuable. And I can't stress it enough—Thomas, you need to keep that yapper of yours closed."

"You too, Minho," Brenda added. "Got it? Jorge created fake documents for all of us, and he lies like a master thief."

"No kidding," Minho muttered.

Jorge and Brenda headed toward the doors with Minho close behind. Thomas hesitated. He looked up at the wall—it reminded him of the Maze, and a quick flash of the horrible memories of that place went through his mind, particularly the night when he'd tied Alby in the thick ivy and hidden from the Grievers. He was thankful that these walls were bare.

The walk to the exit seemed to take forever, the huge wall and doors growing taller and taller as the group approached them. When they finally made it to the foot of the immense doors, an electronic buzz sounded from somewhere, followed by a female voice.

"State your names and your business."

Jorge answered very loudly. "I'm Jorge Gallaraga, and these are my associates, Brenda Despain, Thomas Murphy and Minho Park. We're here for some information gathering and field testing. I'm a certified Berg pilot. I have all the necessary paperwork with me, but you can check it out." He pulled a few data cards from his back pocket and held them up to a camera in the wall.

"Hold, please," the voice directed. Thomas was sweating—he was sure the lady would sound an alarm any second now. Guards would come rushing out. They'd send him back to WICKED, to the white room, or worse.

He waited, mind racing, for what felt like several minutes before a series of clicks rattled the air, followed by a loud thunk. Then one of the iron doors swung outward, its hinges squealing. Thomas peered through the widening crack and was relieved to see that the narrow alley on the other side was empty. At the end stood another huge wall with another set of doors. Those doors looked more modern, though, and several screens and panels were set into the cement to their right.

"Come on," Jorge said. He walked through the open door as if he did it every day. Thomas, Minho and Brenda followed Jorge down the alley to the outer wall, where he stopped. The screens and panels Thomas had seen from the other side were complex up close. Jorge pressed a button on the largest and began to enter their fake names and

identification numbers. He typed in a few other pieces of information, then fed their data cards into a large slot.

The group waited quietly as a few minutes passed, Thomas's anxiety growing with every second. He tried not to show it, but he suddenly felt like this had been a huge mistake. They should've gone somewhere else less secure, or tried to break in to the city somehow. These people were going to see right through them. Maybe WICKED had already sent out calls to be on the lookout for fugitives.

Slim it, Thomas, he told himself, and for half a second he worried he'd said it out loud.

The lady's voice came back. "Papers are in order. Please move to the viral testing station."

Jorge stepped to the right and a panel on the wall opened. Thomas watched as a mechanical arm came out of it. It was a strange device with what looked like eye sockets. Jorge leaned forward and pressed his face to the machine. As soon as his eyes were lined up to the sockets a small wire snaked out and pricked his neck. There were several hisses and clicks; then the wire retracted back into the device and Jorge stepped away.

The entire panel rotated back into the wall and the device Jorge had used disappeared, replaced by a new one that looked just like it.

"Next," the lady announced.

Brenda exchanged an uneasy glance with Thomas, then stepped up to the machine and leaned into it. The wire pricked her neck, the device hissed and clicked and it was over. She moved away, taking a very noticeable breath of relief.

"It's been a long time since I've used one of those," she whispered to Thomas. "They make me nervous, like I'm suddenly not gonna be immune anymore."

Once again the lady said, "Next."

Minho went through the procedure. Finally it was Thomas's turn.

He walked over to the testing panel as it rotated again, and as soon as the new apparatus appeared and locked into place, he leaned forward and placed his eyes where they were supposed to go. He braced himself for the pain of the wire, but he hardly noticed the prick on his neck before it was gone. All he saw inside the machine were a few flashes of light and color. He felt a puff of air that made him squeeze his eyes shut; when he opened them again everything was dark.

After a few seconds, he stepped back and waited for whatever was supposed to happen next.

The lady finally spoke again. "You've all been cleared of VCT and confirmed immune. You do realize that the opportunities for your kind are vast here in Denver. But don't advertise it too much out on the streets. Everyone here is healthy and virus-free, but there are many who still don't take kindly to Immunes."

"We're here for a few simple tasks and then we'll be heading out again. Probably in a week or so," Jorge said. "Hopefully we can keep our little secret a ... secret."

"What's VCT?" Thomas whispered to Minho.

"You think I know?"

"Viral Contagion Threat," Brenda answered before Thomas could ask her. "But keep it down. Anyone who doesn't know that will seem suspicious here."

Thomas opened his mouth to say something but was startled by a loud beep as the doors

began to slide open. Another hallway was revealed, its walls made of metal. There was another set of closed doors at the end of it. Thomas wondered just how long this would go on.

"Enter the detector one at a time, please," the woman directed. Her voice seemed to follow them to this third hallway. "Mr. Gallaraga first."

Jorge entered the small space and the doors slid shut behind him.

"What's the detector?" Thomas asked.

"It detects stuff," Brenda replied curtly.

Thomas wrinkled his face at her. Faster than he expected, an alarm buzzed again and the doors opened. Jorge was no longer there.

"Ms. Despain is next," their now-bored-sounding announcer said.

Brenda nodded at Thomas and entered the detector. A minute or so later and it was Minho's turn.

Minho looked at Thomas, a serious expression on his face. "If I don't see you on the other side," he said in a sappy voice, "remember that I love you." Snickering at Thomas's eye roll, he went through the doors and they closed.

Soon the lady called for Thomas to enter.

He stepped inside and the doors closed behind him. A rush of air hit him as several low beeps sounded; then the doors in front of him slid open and there were people everywhere. His heartbeat picked up, but he spotted his waiting friends and relaxed. He was struck by all the activity around him as he joined them. A bustling crowd of men and women—many of whom clutched rags to their mouths—filled a huge atrium topped with a glass ceiling far above, letting in loads of sunshine. Through one corner he could see the tops of several skyscrapers—though these looked nothing like the ones they'd come across in the Scorch. They were brilliant in the sunlight. Thomas was so stunned by everything there was to look at, he almost forgot how nervous he'd been only a moment before.

"Wasn't so bad, was it, *muchacho*?" Jorge asked.

"I kinda liked it," Minho said.

Thomas was utterly wowed; he couldn't stop craning his neck to take in the large building they'd entered. "What is this place?" he finally got out. "Who are all these people?" He looked to his three partners, waiting for an answer—Jorge and Brenda looked embarrassed to be with him. But Brenda's expression changed abruptly, melting into something like sadness.

"I keep forgetting that you've lost your memories," she murmured, then opened her arms to gesture around herself. "It's called a mall—basically it runs along the entire wall surrounding the city. It's mainly shops and businesses."

"I've just never seen so many ..." His voice trailed off. A man in a dark blue jacket was approaching them, his gaze set on Thomas. And he didn't look very happy.

"Hey," Thomas whispered, nodding toward the stranger.

The man reached them before anyone could respond. He gave the group a curt nod and announced, "We know some people escaped from WICKED. And judging by the Berg you came in on, I'm guessing you're a part of that group. I highly recommend you accept the advice I'm about to give you. You have nothing to be afraid of—we're only asking for help and you'll be protected when you arrive."

He handed Thomas a slip of paper, spun on his heel and walked off without another word.

"What in the world was that all about?" Minho asked. "What does it say?"

Thomas looked down and read it. "It says, 'You need to come meet me immediately—I'm with a group called the Right Arm. Corner of Kenwood and Brookshire, Apartment 2792.' "

A lump formed in Thomas's throat when he saw the signature at the bottom of the slip of paper. He looked up at Minho, sure his face had gone pale. "It's from Gally."

It turned out that Thomas didn't need to do any explaining. Brenda and Jorge had started working for WICKED in plenty of time to know who Gally was, how he'd been an outcast of sorts in the Glade, how he and Thomas had become bitter rivals because of Gally's memories from the Changing. But all Thomas could think of was the angry boy throwing the knife that killed Chuck, that made the boy bleed to death on the ground as Thomas held him.

Then he had lost it—had beaten Gally until he thought he'd killed him. A surprising amount of relief filled him when he realized that maybe he hadn't—if this note was really from Gally. As much as he'd hated the guy, Thomas didn't want to be a murderer.

"It can't possibly be him," Brenda said.

"Why not?" Thomas asked; the relief began to wash away. "What happened to him after we were taken away? Did he ..."

"Die? No. He spent a week or so in the infirmary, recovering from a broken cheekbone. But that was nothing compared to the psychological damage. They *used* him to kill Chuck because the Psychs thought the patterns would be valuable. It was all planned. They forced Chuck to move in front of you."

Any anger Thomas had felt toward Gally shifted to WICKED, feeding his ever-growing hatred for the organization. The guy had been a complete slinthead, but if what Brenda said was true, he was only WICKED's instrument. It made Thomas even angrier at them to hear that it wasn't a mistake that Chuck had been killed instead of him.

Brenda continued. "I heard that one of the Psychs designed the interaction to be a Variable not just for you and the Gladers who witnessed it, but ... but also for Chuck during his last few moments."

For one short but frightening instant, Thomas thought rage would overcome him—that he'd grab some random stranger from the crowd and beat the klunk out of him like he'd beaten Gally.

He sucked in a breath and ran a shaking hand through his hair. "Nothing surprises me anymore," he forced out through clenched teeth.

"Gally's mind couldn't handle what he'd done," Brenda said. "He went completely nuts and they had to send him away. I'm sure they figured no one would ever believe his story."

"So why do you think this can't be him?" Thomas asked. "Maybe he got better, found his way here."

Brenda shook her head. "Look, anything's possible. But I saw the guy—it was like he had the Flare. He was trying to eat chairs and spitting and yelling and ripping his own hair out."

"I saw him, too," Jorge added. "He got past the guards one day. He ran through the halls naked, screaming at the top of his lungs about beetles in his veins."

Thomas tried to clear his mind. "I wonder what he means by the Right Arm."

Jorge answered. "There are rumors about them all over the place. It's supposed to be an underground group bent on taking down WICKED."

"Even more reason to do what the note says," Thomas said.

Brenda's face showed doubt. "I really think we should find Hans before anything else."

Thomas held up the piece of paper and shook it. "We're going to see Gally. We need someone who knows the city." More than that, though, his gut told him that it was where they should start.

"What if this is some kind of trap?"

"Yeah," Minho said. "Maybe we should think about this."

"No." Thomas shook his head. "We can't try to outguess them anymore. Sometimes they do things just to make me do the opposite of what they think I think they think I want to do."

"Huh?" the three of them asked at the same time, confusion transforming their faces.

"From now on I do what feels right," Thomas explained. "And something tells me we need to go to this place and see Gally—at least to find out if it's really him. He's a connection to the Glade, and he has every reason in the world to be on our side."

The others stared at him with blank faces, as if they were trying to come up with further arguments.

"Good that," Thomas said. "I'll take all those looks as yeses. I'm glad to see you all agree with me. Now, how're we gonna get there?"

Brenda let out an exaggerated sigh. "Ever heard of a cab?"

After a quick meal in the mall, they caught a cab to drive them into the city. When Jorge handed the driver a card to pay with, Thomas worried again about WICKED tracking them. As soon as they got settled in their seats, he asked Jorge about it in a whisper so the driver couldn't hear.

Jorge only gave him a troubled look.

"You're worried because Gally knew we were coming, right?" Thomas guessed.

Jorge nodded. "A little. But the way that man introduced himself, I'm just hoping that word of an escape leaked out and this Right Arm group's been looking for us since. I've heard they're based here."

"Or maybe it has something to do with Teresa's group coming here first," Brenda offered.

Thomas didn't feel very comforted. "You sure you know what you're doing?" he asked Jorge.

"We'll be fine, *muchacho*. Now that we're here, WICKED will have a hell of a time catching up to us. It's easier than you think to blend in, in a city. Just relax."

Thomas didn't know if there was much chance of that, but he did lean back in his seat to look out the window.

The ride through Denver completely took his breath away. He remembered the hovering vehicles from his childhood—unmanned, weaponized police vehicles everyone had called cop machines. But so much was like nothing he'd ever seen before—the huge skyscrapers, the brilliant displays of holographic advertising, the countless people—he really had a hard time believing it was real. Some small part of him wondered if his optic nerves were being manipulated by WICKED somehow, if it was all yet another simulation. He wondered if he'd lived in a city like this before, and if he had, how he could possibly have forgotten the splendor of it all.

As they drove through the crowded streets, it occurred to him that maybe the world

wasn't so bad off after all. Here was an entire community, thousands of people going about their everyday lives. But the drive continued, and gradually details he hadn't noticed began to come into focus. And the longer they drove, the more unsettled Thomas grew. Almost everyone he saw looked uneasy. They all seemed to be avoiding each other—and not just to be polite. They seemed to take obvious measures to stay clear of anyone else. Just like back at the mall, many of them wore masks or held rags that covered their mouth and nose as they walked.

Posters and signs littered the walls of the buildings, most torn or obscured with spray paint. Some warned of the Flare and spelled out precautions; others talked about the dangers of leaving the cities, or what to do if you came across an infected person. A few had terrifying pictures of Cranks way past the Gone. Thomas spotted one poster with a close-up of a tight-faced woman with her hair pulled back, with the slogan CHANCELLOR PAIGE LOVES YOU across the bottom.

Chancellor Paige. Thomas immediately recognized the name. She was the one Brenda had said they could trust—the only one. He turned to ask Brenda about it, but paused. Something told him to wait until they were alone. As they drove, he noticed posters showing her likeness, but most of them were covered with graffiti. It was hard to tell what the woman really looked like beneath the devil horns and silly mustaches.

Some type of security force patrolled every street in great numbers—there were hundreds of them, all wearing red shirts and gas masks, a weapon in one hand and in the other a smaller version of the viral testing device Thomas and his friends had looked into before entering the city. The farther they got from the outside barrier wall, the dirtier the streets became. Trash was everywhere, windows were broken and graffiti decorated almost every wall. And despite the sun glinting off windows high above, a darkness had settled over the place.

The cab turned in to an alley, and Thomas was surprised to see that it was deserted. The cab pulled up and stopped at a cement building that rose at least twenty stories high, and the driver popped Jorge's card out of the slot and handed it back to him, which Thomas took as his sign to exit the car.

Once they were all out and the cab had driven away, Jorge pointed to the closest staircase. "Number 2792 is right there, on the second floor."

Minho whistled, then said, "Looks real homey."

Thomas agreed. The place was far from inviting, and the drab gray bricks covered in graffiti made him nervous. He didn't want to walk up those steps and find out who was waiting inside.

Brenda gave him a push from behind. "Your idea, you lead."

He swallowed hard but didn't say anything, just walked over to the stairs and slowly climbed them, the other three falling in behind. The cracked and warped wooden door of apartment 2792 looked like it had been put there a thousand years ago, only a few scant remnants of faded green paint remaining.

"This is crazy," Jorge whispered. "This is completely crazy."

Minho snorted. "Thomas kicked the klunk out of him once, he can do it again."

"Unless he comes out with guns blazing," Jorge countered.

"Would you guys shut up?" Thomas said—his nerves were shot. Without another word he

reached out and knocked on the door. A few agonizing seconds later it opened.

Thomas could tell immediately that the black-haired kid who answered was Gally from the Glade. No doubt about it. But his face was badly scarred, covered in raised lines like thin white slugs. His right eye looked permanently swollen, and his nose, which had been big and slightly deformed *before* the Chuck incident, was markedly crooked.

"Glad you came," Gally said in his raspy voice. "Because the end of the world is upon us."

Gally stepped back and opened the door wider. “Come in.”

Thomas felt a rush of guilt at seeing what he’d done to Gally. He had no idea how to act or what to say. He just nodded and forced himself to enter the apartment.

It was a dark but tidy room with no furniture, and it smelled like bacon. A yellow blanket had been hung over the large window, giving the place an eerie glow.

“Have a seat,” Gally said.

All Thomas could think of was finding out how the Right Arm had known he was in Denver and what they wanted, but instinct told him he had to play by their rules before he could get answers. They sat down on the bare floor, he and his friends in a line with Gally facing them like a judge. Gally’s face looked awful in the dim light, and his swollen right eye was bloodshot.

“You know Minho,” Thomas said awkwardly. Minho and Gally gave each other a curt nod. “This is Brenda and Jorge. They’re from WICKED but—”

“I know who they are,” Gally interrupted. He didn’t sound mad, just kind of numb. “Those shucks at WICKED gave me my past back. Without asking, I might add.” His gaze focused on Minho. “Hey, you were real nice to me in our last Gathering. Thanks for that.” The sarcasm was thick.

Thomas shrank at the memory—Minho throwing Gally to the floor, threatening him. He’d forgotten about it.

“I’d had a bad day,” Minho responded, his expression making it impossible to tell if he was serious or even the tiniest bit sorry.

“Yeah, well,” Gally said. “Let bygones be bygones, right?” His snicker made it clear he meant anything but.

Minho might not have had regrets, but Thomas did. “I’m sorry about what I did, Gally.” He held the other boy’s gaze with his own as he said it. He wanted Gally to believe him, to know that he understood that WICKED was their shared enemy.

“You’re sorry? I killed Chuck. He’s dead. Because of me.”

Hearing him say that brought Thomas no relief, only sadness.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Brenda said, her tone soothing.

“That’s a bunch of klunk,” Gally said stiffly. “If I had any kind of guts I could’ve stopped them from controlling me. But I let them do it to me ’cause I thought I’d be killing Thomas, not Chuck. Not in a million years would I have let myself murder that poor kid.”

“How generous of you,” Minho said.

“So you wanted me dead?” Thomas asked, surprised at the boy’s honesty.

Gally scoffed. “Don’t get all whiny on me. I hated you more than I’d ever hated anybody in my life. But what happened in the past doesn’t matter one lick anymore. We need to talk about the future. About the end of the world.”

“Wait a second there, *muchacho*,” Jorge said. “First off, you’re going to tell us every little thing that’s happened since you got shipped out of WICKED till you ended up sitting right where you’re sitting.”

“I wanna know how you knew we were coming,” Minho added. “And when. And who

was that weird dude who delivered the message to us?"

Gally snickered again, which actually made his face look even scarier. "I guess being with WICKED doesn't exactly fill someone with trust, now, does it."

"They're right," Thomas said. "You've got to tell us what's going on. Especially if you want our help."

"Your *help*?" Gally asked. "I don't know if I'd put it that way. But I'm sure we have the same goals."

"Listen," Thomas said. "We need a reason to trust you. Just talk."

After a long pause, Gally began. "The guy who gave you the note is named Richard. He's a member of a group called the Right Arm. They have people in every city and town left on this crappy planet. Their whole mission is to bring down our old friends—to use WICKED's money and influence for things that actually matter—but they don't have the resources to disrupt an organization so huge and powerful. They want to act, but they're still missing some information."

"We've heard of them," Brenda said. "But how'd you get involved?"

"They have a couple of spies in the main complex at WICKED, and they got to me, explained how if I faked going crazy, I'd be sent away. I would've done anything to get out of that place. Anyway, the Right Arm wanted an insider who knew about how the building functions, the security systems, that kind of klunk. So they attacked my escort car and took me. Brought me here. As for how I knew you were coming, we got an anonymous message over the Netblock. I assumed you guys sent it."

Thomas looked to Brenda for an explanation, but all he got from her was a shrug.

"So it wasn't you," Gally said. "Then maybe it was someone at headquarters sending out an alert, trying to set up bounty hunters or whatever. Point is, once we knew about it, from there it was just a matter of hacking into the airport system to see where a Berg had shown up."

"And you brought us here to talk about taking down WICKED?" Thomas asked. Even the remote possibility of such a thing filled him with hope.

Gally nodded slowly and deliberately before he spoke. "You make it sound so easy. But yeah, that's about the gist of it. We've got two big problems on our hands, though."

Brenda was clearly impatient. "What? Just let it out."

"Slim it, girl."

"What problems?" Thomas pushed.

Gally shot Brenda a glare, then looked back at Thomas. "First of all, word is that the Flare is running rampant through this whole shuck city and that all kinds of corruption is going on to hide it because the ones who are sick are government bigwigs. They're hiding the virus with the Bliss—it slows down the Flare so people who have it can blend in with everyone else, but the virus keeps spreading. My guess is it's the same all over the world. There's just no way to keep that beast out."

Thomas felt a fear in his gut. The idea of a world overwhelmed by hordes of Cranks was terrifying. He couldn't imagine how truly awful things could get—being immune wouldn't amount to much when that happened.

"What's the other problem?" Minho asked. "As if that one wasn't bad enough."

"People like us."

"People like us?" Brenda repeated, a confused look on her face. "You mean Immunes?"

"Yeah." Gally leaned forward. "They're disappearing. Being kidnapped or running away, vanishing into thin air—no one knows. A little birdie told me that they're being gathered and sold to WICKED so they can continue the Trials. Start all over if they have to. Whether that's true or not, the population of immune people in this city and others has been halved in the last six months, and most of them are disappearing without a trace. It's causing a lot of headaches. The city needs them more than people even realize."

Thomas's anxiety went up a notch. "Don't most people hate the Munies—isn't that what they call us? Maybe they're being killed or something." He hated the other possibility that was occurring to him: that WICKED might be kidnapping them and putting them through exactly what he'd been through.

"I doubt that," Gally said. "My little birdie is a reliable source, and this reeks of WICKED to the core. These problems make a bad combination. The Flare is all over the city even though the government claims it's not. And the Immunes are disappearing. Whatever's happening, there isn't gonna be anyone left in Denver. Who knows about other cities."

"So what does this have to do with us?" Jorge asked.

Gally looked surprised. "What, you don't care that civilization is about to come to an end? The cities are crumbling. Pretty soon it's just going to be a world of psychos who want to eat you for supper."

"Of course we care," Thomas answered. "But what do you want us to do about it?"

"Hey, all I know is that WICKED has one directive—to find a cure. And it's pretty obvious that's never gonna happen. If we had their money, their resources, we could use it to *really* help. To protect the healthy. I thought you'd want that."

Thomas did, of course. Desperately.

Gally shrugged when no one responded. "We don't have much to lose. We might as well try something."

"Gally," Thomas said, "do you know anything about Teresa and a bunch of other people who also escaped today?"

Gally nodded. "Yeah, we found them, too—gave them the same message I'm giving you. Who did you think my little birdie was?"

"Teresa," Thomas whispered. A flash of hope sparked within him—she must have remembered all that stuff about WICKED when they'd removed the Swipe. Could the operation have made her change her tune? Was her insistence that "WICKED is good" finally a thing of the past?

"That's right. She said she couldn't agree with them starting the cycle all over again. Said something about hoping to find you, too. But there's one more thing."

Thomas groaned. "That doesn't sound so good."

Gally shrugged. "Never does these days. One of our people out looking for your group came across a strange rumor. Said it was somehow related to all these people escaping from the WICKED headquarters. I'm not sure if they could track you or not, but it looks like they probably could've guessed you'd come to Denver anyway."

"Why?" Thomas asked. "What's the rumor?"

"There's a huge bounty out for a guy named Hans who used to work there, lives here now. WICKED thinks you came here for him, and they want him dead."

Brenda stood up. "We're leaving. Now. Come on."

Jorge and Minho got to their feet, and as Thomas joined them, he knew Brenda had been right earlier. Finding Hans had to be priority one now. He had to get the tracking device out of his head and, if they were after Hans, they had to get to him first. "Gally, do you swear everything you told us is true?"

"Every bit." The Glader hadn't moved from his position on the floor. "The Right Arm wants to take action. They're planning something even as we speak. They need information about WICKED, though, and who better to help us than you? If we can get Teresa and the others, too, that'd be even better. We need every warm body we can get."

Thomas decided to trust Gally. Maybe they'd never liked each other, but they had the same enemy, which put them on the same team. "What do we do if we want in?" he finally asked. "Do we come back here? Go somewhere else?"

Gally smiled. "Come back here. Any time before nine or so in the morning, for another week. I should be around. I don't think we'll make any moves before then."

"Moves?" Thomas was itching with curiosity.

"I've told you enough. You want more, you come back. I'll be here."

Thomas nodded, then held out a hand. Gally shook it.

"I don't blame you for anything," Thomas said. "You saw what I'd done for WICKED when you went through the Changing. I wouldn't have trusted me, either. And I know you didn't want to kill Chuck. Just don't plan on hugs every time I see you."

"The feeling's mutual."

Brenda was already at the door waiting for him when he turned to go. Before Thomas left, though, Gally squeezed his elbow. "Time's running out. But we can do something."

"We'll be back," Thomas said, then followed his friends. Fear of the unknown no longer controlled him. Hope had found its way in and taken hold.

They didn't find Hans until the next day.

Jorge got them into a cheap motel after they'd purchased some clothes and food, and Thomas and Minho used the room's computer to search the Netblock while Jorge and Brenda made dozens of calls to people Thomas had never heard of. After hours of work, they finally found an address through someone Jorge called "a friend of a friend of an enemy's enemy." By that time it was late and they all crashed for the night; Thomas and Minho were stuck sleeping on the floor while the other two got the twin beds.

The next morning they showered, ate, and put on their new clothes. Then they got a cab and went straight to the place they'd been told Hans lived—an apartment building in only slightly better shape than Gally's. They climbed to the fourth floor and knocked on a gray metal door. The lady who answered kept saying she'd never heard of any Hans, but Jorge kept pushing. Then a gray-haired man with a wide jaw peeked over the woman's shoulder.

"Let them in," he said in a gravelly voice.

A minute or so later, Thomas and his three friends were sitting around a rickety table in

the kitchen, all their focus on the gruffly distant man named Hans.

"It's good to see you're okay, Brenda," he said. "You, too, Jorge. But I'm not in the mood to catch up. Why don't you just tell me what you want."

"I think you know the main reason we're here," Brenda replied, then nodded toward Thomas and Minho. "But we also just heard that WICKED has put a bounty on your head. We need to hurry and do this, and then you need to get out of here."

Hans seemed to shrug off that last part, looking at his two potential customers. "You've still got the implants, do ya?"

Thomas nodded, nervous but determined to get this over with. "I only want the controlling device out. I don't want my memories back. And I want to know how this operation works first."

Hans wrinkled his face in disgust. "What kind of nonsense is this? Who's this weak-kneed coward you brought to my place, Brenda?"

"I'm not a coward," Thomas said before she could respond. "I've just had too many people in my head."

Hans threw up his hands, then slapped the table. "Who said I'd do anything to your head? Who said I liked you enough for that?"

"Are there any nice people in Denver?" Minho muttered.

"You folks are about three seconds from being thrown out of my apartment."

"Everyone just shut up for a second!" Brenda shouted. She leaned toward Hans and spoke in a quieter voice. "Listen, this is important. *Thomas* is important, and WICKED will do just about anything to get their hands on him. We can't risk them getting close enough to start controlling him or Minho."

Hans glared at Thomas, scrutinized him like a scientist examining a specimen. "Doesn't look important to me." He shook his head and stood up. "Give me five minutes to prep," he said, then disappeared through a side door without further explanation. Thomas could only wonder if the man recognized him. If he knew what Thomas had done for WICKED before the Maze.

Brenda sat back in her chair and let out a sigh. "That wasn't so bad."

Yeah, Thomas thought, the bad part's coming up. He was relieved that Hans was going to help them, but as he looked around he got more and more nervous. He was about to let a stranger mess with his brain in a dirty old apartment.

Minho snickered. "You look scared, Tommy."

"Don't forget, *muchacho*," Jorge said. "You're doing this, too. That gray-haired grandpa said five minutes, so get ready."

"The sooner, the better," Minho replied.

Thomas rested his elbows on the table, his head—which had begun to throb—in his hands.

"Thomas?" Brenda whispered. "You okay?"

He looked up. "I just need to—"

The words caught in his throat as a sharp pain sliced down his spine. But just as quickly as it had come, it was gone. He sat up in the chair, startled; then a spasm sent his arms out straight and his legs kicked, twisting his body so that he slid off the chair and collapsed to the floor, shaking. He yelled when his back slammed into the hard tile, and struggled to get

control of his jerking limbs. But he couldn't. His feet slapped the floor; his shins banged against the legs of the table.

"Thomas!" Brenda yelled. "What's wrong?"

Despite his loss of bodily control, Thomas's mind was clear. He could see out of the corner of his eye that Minho was next to him on the ground trying to calm him and Jorge was frozen in place, eyes wide.

Thomas tried to speak, but only drool came out of his mouth.

"Can you hear me?" Brenda yelled, bending over him. "Thomas, what's wrong!"

Then his limbs abruptly stilled, legs straightening and coming to a rest, his arms falling limp at his sides. He couldn't make them move. He strained with the effort, but nothing happened. He tried to speak again, but no words formed.

Brenda's expression changed to something close to horror. "Thomas?"

He didn't know how, but his body started moving even though he wasn't telling it to. His arms and legs shifted, he was getting to his feet. It was as if he'd become a puppet. He tried to scream but couldn't.

"You okay?" Minho asked.

Panic clenched inside Thomas as he kept doing things against his will. His head twitched, then turned toward the door through which their host had disappeared. Words started spilling from his mouth, but he had no idea where they came from.

"I can't ... let you ... do this."

Thomas fought desperately against it, straining to get control of his muscles. But something foreign had taken over his body.

"Thomas, they've got you!" Brenda yelled. "Fight it!"

He watched helplessly as his own hand pushed her face away, sent her tumbling to the floor.

Jorge moved to protect her but Thomas reached out and punched him in the chin with a quick jab. Jorge's head snapped back; a little spray of blood shot from his lip.

Again the words were forced from Thomas's mouth. "I can't ... let you ... do this!" By that time he was screaming, the effort hurting his throat. It was like his brain had been programmed with that one sentence and he couldn't say anything else.

Brenda had gotten back to her feet. Minho stood dazed, his face a mask of confusion. Jorge was wiping the blood off his chin, his eyes lit with anger.

And a memory bubbled up in Thomas. Something about a fail-safe programmed into his implant to prevent it from being removed. He wanted to shout at his friends, tell them to sedate him. But he couldn't. He started moving toward the door in lurching steps, shoving Minho out of the way. As he half stumbled past the kitchen counter, his hand reached out and grabbed a knife sitting by the sink. He gripped the handle, and the harder he tried to drop it, the more tightly his fingers clenched.

"Thomas!" Minho shouted, finally breaking out of his stupor. "Fight it, man! Get those shuck people out of your head!"

Thomas turned to face him, held the knife up. He hated himself for being so weak, for not being able to master his own body. Once again he tried to speak—but nothing. All his body would do now was whatever it took to prevent his implant from being removed.

"You gonna kill me, slinthead?" Minho asked. "Gonna throw that thing just like Gally did to Chuck? Do it, then. Throw it."

For one second Thomas was terrified that that was exactly what he'd do, but instead his body turned back around to face the opposite direction. Just as he did, Hans came through the doorway, and his eyes widened. Thomas guessed Hans was his main target—that the fail-safe would attack whoever was attempting to remove his implant.

"What the hell is this?" Hans asked.

"I can't ... let you ... do this," Thomas replied.

"I was worried about this," Hans murmured. He turned to the group. "You guys get over here and help!"

Thomas pictured the internal workings of the mechanism in his brain as minuscule instruments operated by minuscule spiders. He fought them, clenched his teeth. But his arm started to rise, the knife gripped tightly in his balled fist.

"I ca—" Before he could finish, someone slammed into him from behind, knocking the knife from his hand. He crashed to the floor and twisted to see Minho.

"I'm not letting you kill anybody," his friend said.

"Get off me!" Thomas yelled, not sure if they were his own words or WICKED's.

But Minho had pinned Thomas's arms to the ground. He hovered over him, heaving to

catch his breath. "I'm not getting up until they let your mind go."

Thomas wanted to smile—but his face couldn't follow even a simple command. He felt the tension in every single muscle.

"It won't stop until Hans fixes him," Brenda said. "Hans?"

The older man knelt down next to Thomas and Minho. "I can't believe I ever worked for those people. For you." He almost spat the word, looking directly at Thomas.

Thomas watched all this, powerless. His insides boiled with the desire to relax—to help Hans do what he needed to do. Then something ignited inside him, making his midsection arch upward. His body bucked and fought to free his arms. Minho pressed down, tried to get his legs in position to sit on Thomas's back. But whatever was controlling Thomas seemed to release adrenaline inside him; his strength overcame Minho's and he threw the boy off.

Thomas was on his feet in an instant. He grabbed the knife off the floor and dove toward Hans, lashing out with the blade. The man deflected it with his forearm, a red gash appearing there as the two of them collided and rolled across the floor, struggling against each other. Thomas did everything he could to stop himself, but the knife kept slashing as Hans kept dodging it.

"Get him!" Brenda yelled from somewhere close.

Thomas saw hands appear, felt them grabbing his arms. Somebody gripped him by the hair and yanked back. Thomas screamed in agony, then slashed blindly with the knife. Relief flooded through him—Jorge and Minho were gaining control, pulling him off Hans. Thomas crashed onto his back and the knife was knocked from his grip; he heard it clatter across the floor as someone kicked it to the far side of the kitchen.

"I can't let you do this!" Thomas yelled. He hated himself even though he knew he had no control.

"Shut up!" Minho shouted back, now in his face as he and Jorge fought against Thomas's attempts to get free. "You're crazy, dude! They're making you crazy!"

Thomas desperately wanted to tell Minho that he was right—Thomas didn't really believe what he was saying.

Minho turned and yelled at Hans. "Let's get that thing out of his head!"

"No!" Thomas shouted. "No!" He twisted and flailed his arms, battled them with ferocious strength. But the four of them proved too much. Somehow they ended up with one person holding tightly to each of his limbs. They lifted him from the floor, carried him out of the kitchen into a short hallway and down its length as he kicked and squirmed, knocking several framed pictures off the walls. The sound of shattering glass followed them.

Thomas screamed once, then again, over and over. He had no more strength to resist the internal forces—his body fought against Minho and the others; he said whatever WICKED wanted him to. He'd given up.

"In here!" Hans shouted over him.

They entered a small, cramped lab with two instrument-filled tables and a bed. A crude-looking version of the mask they'd seen back at WICKED hung over the empty mattress.

"Get him on the bed!" Hans yelled. They slammed Thomas down onto his back, where he continued to struggle. "Get this leg for me—I need to knock him out."

Minho, who had been holding the other leg, now grabbed both legs and used his body to

press them against the bed. Thomas's thoughts immediately went back to when he and Newt had done this same thing to Alby when he'd woken up from the Changing back in the Glade Homestead.

There was the clatter and clanging of Hans going through a drawer, searching for something; then he was back.

"Hold him as still as possible!"

Thomas erupted in one last flurry of effort to get free, screaming at the top of his lungs. An arm sprang loose from Brenda's grip and he smacked Jorge in the face with his fist.

"Stop it!" Brenda yelled as she reached for it.

Thomas arched his torso again. "I can't ... let you do this!" He had never felt such frustration.

"Hold him still, dammit!" Hans shouted.

Somehow Brenda got his arm again, leaned against it with her upper body.

Thomas felt a sharp prick in his leg. It was such an odd thing to be fighting against something so violently and yet wanting it to happen so completely.

When the darkness started to take him and his body stilled, he finally regained control of himself. At the very last second he said, "I hate those shucks." And then he was out.

Lost in the dark haze of drugs, Thomas dreamed.

He is fifteen years old, sitting on a bed. The room is dark except for the amber glow of a lamp on the desk. Teresa is there—she has pulled a chair out and is sitting close to him. Her face is haunted—a mask of misery.

“We had to do this,” she says quietly.

Thomas is there but isn’t there. He doesn’t remember the details of what happened, but he knows his insides feel like rot and filth. He and Teresa have done something horrible, but his dreaming self can’t quite grasp what it was. A ghastly thing that is no less repulsive because they were told to do it by the people they did it to.

“We had to do it,” she repeats.

“I know,” Thomas responds in a voice that sounds as dead as dust.

Two words pop into his head: *the Purge*. The wall blocking him from the memory thins for a moment and a dreadful fact looms on the other side.

Teresa starts talking again. “They wanted it to end this way, Tom. Better to die than spend years going crazier and crazier. They’re gone now. We had no choice, and no better way to make it happen. It’s done and that’s that. We need to get the new people trained and keep the Trials going. We’ve come too far to let it fall apart.”

For a moment Thomas hates her, but it’s fleeting. He knows she’s trying to be strong. “That doesn’t mean I have to like it.” And he doesn’t. He has never hated himself with such intensity before.

Teresa nods but says nothing.

The dreaming Thomas tries to invade the mind of his younger self, explore the memories in that unfettered space. The original Creators, Flare-infected, purged and dead. Countless volunteers to take their place. The two ongoing Maze Trials, running strong over a year in, with more results every day. The slowly but surely building blueprint. Training for the replacements.

It’s all there for the taking. For the *remembering*. But then he changes his mind, turns his back on it all. The past is the past. There is only the future now.

He sinks into a dark oblivion.

Thomas woke up groggy and with a dull ache behind his eyes. The dream still throbbed in his skull like a pulse, though its details had grown fuzzy. He knew enough about the Purge, about its being the shift from the original Creators to their replacements. He and Teresa had had to exterminate the entire staff after an outbreak—they’d had no choice, were the only ones left who were immune. He swore to never think about it again.

Minho was sitting in a chair nearby, his head lolling as he snored in fitful sleep.

“Minho,” Thomas whispered. “Hey. Minho. Wake up.”

“Huh?” Minho opened his eyes slowly and coughed. “What? What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I just want to know what happened. Did Hans get the thing switched off? Are

we fixed?"

Minho nodded through a big yawn. "Yeah—both of us. At least, he said he did. Man, you wiggled out big-time. You remember all that?"

"Of course I do." A wave of embarrassment made his face flush hot. "But it was like I was paralyzed or something. I kept trying, but I couldn't stop whatever was controlling me."

"Dude, you tried to slice my you-know-whats off!"

Thomas laughed, something he hadn't done in a long time. He welcomed it happily. "Too bad I didn't. Could've saved the world from future little Minhos."

"Just remember you owe me one."

"Good that." He owed them all.

Brenda, Jorge, and Hans walked in, all three of them looking serious, and the smile fell from Thomas's face.

"Gally stop by and give you guys another pep talk?" Thomas asked, forcing a lighthearted tone to his voice. "You look downright depressed."

"When did you get so cheerful, *muchacho*?" Jorge responded. "A few hours ago you were stabbing at us with a knife."

Thomas opened his mouth to apologize—to explain—but Hans shushed him. He leaned over the bed and flashed a little light into both of Thomas's eyes. "Looks like your head's clearing up pretty well. The pain should be gone soon—your operation was a little worse because of that fail-safe."

Thomas turned his attention to Brenda. "Is it fixed?"

"It worked," she said. "Judging from the fact that you're not trying to kill us anymore, it's deactivated. And ..."

"And what?"

"Well, you shouldn't be able to talk to or hear from Teresa or Aris again."

Thomas might've felt a pang of sadness at that even the day before, but now he felt only relief. "Suits me fine. Any sign of trouble yet?"

She shook her head. "No, but they can't take any chances—Hans and his wife are going to leave, but he wanted to tell you something first."

Hans had stepped back to stand by the wall, probably to give them a little space. He came forward now, his eyes downcast. "I wish I could go with you and help, but I have a wife, and she's my family. She's my first concern. I wanted to wish you luck. I hope you can do what I don't have the courage to try."

Thomas nodded. The change in the man's attitude was marked—maybe the recent incident had reminded him of what WICKED was capable of. "Thanks. And if we can stop WICKED, we'll come back for you."

"We'll see about that," Hans murmured. "We'll see about a lot of things."

Hans turned and walked back to his position by the wall. Thomas was sure that the man carried around many dark memories in his mind.

"What next?" Brenda asked.

Thomas knew they didn't have time to rest. And his mind was set on what they needed to do. "We find our other friends, convince them to join us. Then we go back to Gally. The only thing I've accomplished in life is to help set up an experiment that failed and tormented a bunch of kids. It's time to add something else to that list. We're going to stop

the entire operation before they do it to new Immunes all over again.”

Jorge spoke for the first time in a while. “We? What’re you saying, *hermano*?”

Thomas shifted his gaze to the man, his resolve solidifying. “We have to help the Right Arm.”

No one said anything.

“Okay,” Minho finally said. “But first let’s get something to eat.”

They went to a coffee shop nearby, recommended by Hans and his wife.

Thomas had never been in such a place before. At least, not that he remembered. Customers lined up at the counter, getting coffee and pastries, then heading for a table or back out the door. He watched as a nervous older woman kept lifting her surgical mask to sip her hot drink. One of those red-shirted guards stood at the door, randomly testing people for the Flare with his handheld device every couple of minutes or so; an odd metal apparatus covered his own mouth and nose.

Thomas sat with Minho and Brenda at a table in the back corner while Jorge went to get food and drinks. Thomas's eyes kept coming back to a man, maybe thirty-five or forty years old, who sat at a nearby bench in front of a large window onto the street. He hadn't touched his coffee since Thomas and his friends had arrived, and steam no longer rose from the cup. The man just hunched over, elbows on knees, hands loosely clasped, staring at a spot on the other side of the shop.

There was something disturbing about the look on his face. Blank. His eyes were almost floating in their sockets, and yet there was a hint of pleasure there. When Thomas pointed it out to Brenda, she whispered that the guy was probably on the Bliss and would be jailed if he got caught. It gave Thomas the willies. He hoped the man would leave soon.

Jorge returned with sandwiches and steaming cups of coffee and the four of them ate and drank in silence. Thomas knew they all realized the urgency of their situation, but he was grateful to rest and get some strength back.

They finished up and were getting ready to leave, but Brenda remained in her seat. "Would you guys mind waiting outside for a few minutes?" she asked. Her look made it obvious that she meant Jorge and Minho.

"Excuse me?" Minho responded, his tone exasperated. "More secrets?"

"No. Nothing like that. I promise. I just need a moment. I want to tell Thomas something."

Thomas was surprised but curious. He sat back down. "Just go," he said, addressing Minho. "You know I won't keep anything from you. And she knows it, too."

His friend grumbled, but finally went with Jorge, and the two of them stood out on the sidewalk near the closest window. Minho flashed Thomas a goofy grin and waved, his sarcasm making it obvious he wasn't exactly happy. Thomas waved back, then focused on Brenda.

"So? What's this all about?" he asked.

"I know we need to hurry, so I'll be really quick. We haven't had time to be alone, and I just want to make sure you know that what happened in the Scorch wasn't an act. I was there on a job, I was there to help things play out, but I *did* grow close to you and it *did* change me. And there are a few things I think you deserve to know. About me, about Chancellor Paige, about—"

Thomas held his hand up to cut her off. "Please just stop."

She pulled back, a look of surprise on her face. "What? Why?"

"I don't *want* to know anything. Not one more thing. All I care about is what we're going

to do from here out, not stuff about my past or yours or WICKED's. Nothing. And we need to move."

"But—"

"No, Brenda. I mean it. We're here and we have a goal and that's all we need to focus on. No more talking."

She held his gaze without saying anything, then looked down at her hands resting on the table. "Then all I'll say is I know you're doing the right thing, going in the right direction. And I'll keep helping as best I can."

Thomas hoped he hadn't hurt her feelings, but he meant what he'd said. It was time to let go, even though she was obviously itching to tell him something. As he searched for a response, his eyes wandered back to the odd man on the bench. He'd pulled something Thomas couldn't see out of his pocket and was pressing it against the crook of his right elbow. He closed his eyes in a long blink, looking a little dazed when they opened again. His head slowly drifted backward until it rested on the window.

The red-shirted Flare tester stepped into the café and Thomas leaned over to get a better look. Red Shirt walked toward the bench where the drugged-out man was still resting peacefully. A short woman moved along next to the tester, whispering into his ear and fidgeting nervously.

"Thomas?" Brenda asked.

He put a finger to his lips, then nodded toward the potential confrontation. She turned in her seat to see what was going on.

Red Shirt kicked the toe of the guy on the bench, who flinched and looked up. The men started exchanging words, but Thomas couldn't hear what they were saying over the bustle and buzz of the crowded coffee shop. The man who'd been relaxing there suddenly looked scared.

Brenda turned back to Thomas. "We need to get out of here. Now."

"Why?" The air seemed to have thickened, and Thomas was curious about what was going to happen.

Brenda was already standing. "Just come on!"

She turned and walked briskly toward the exit, and Thomas finally moved to follow her. He'd just risen from his chair when Red Shirt pulled out a gun and pointed it at the man on the bench, then leaned in to place his testing device on the man's face. But the man swatted it away and rushed forward, tackling the tester. Thomas stared, frozen in shock, as the gun skittered away and disappeared under a counter. The two men crashed into a table and slammed to the floor.

Red Shirt started yelling; his voice sounded almost robotic coming through the protective metal mask covering his mouth and nose. "We've got an infected! Everyone evacuate the building!"

The place turned into pandemonium, screams filling the air as everyone fled toward the only exit.

Thomas wished he hadn't hesitated. He should've run when he'd had the chance. A pack of bodies pressed forward, blocking the door. Brenda wouldn't have been able to come back even if she'd tried. Thomas was stuck at the table, watching in stunned silence as the two men struggled on the floor, punching and grabbing and trying to gain the advantage.

Thomas realized that though it was possible he could get hurt by the fleeing crowd, he really had nothing to worry about. He was immune. The rest of the people in the shop had freaked out knowing the virus was so close. And understandably—odds were at least one of them had caught it. But as long as he could stay out of the way of the commotion, he was probably safe right where he was.

Someone pounded on the window and Thomas turned to see Brenda next to Minho and Jorge on the sidewalk—she was motioning frantically for him to get out. But Thomas wanted to watch what was happening.

Red Shirt had finally pinned the man to the ground. "It's over! They're already on their way," he shouted, again in that creepy mechanized voice.

The infected man stopped struggling, burst into lurching sobs. It was then that Thomas realized the crowd had fully evacuated and the coffee shop was empty except for the two men and Thomas. An eerie silence settled on the place.

Red Shirt glanced at him. "Why're you still here, kid—got a death wish?" The man didn't let Thomas answer, though. "If you're gonna stick around, make yourself useful. Find me the gun." He turned his attention back to the man he'd restrained.

Thomas felt like he was in a dream. He'd seen a lot of violence, but this was different somehow. He went to fetch the gun from under the counter where it had disappeared. "I'm ... I'm immune," he stammered. He got down on his knees and reached, straining until his fingers found the cool metal. He pulled the gun out and walked over to Red Shirt.

The man didn't offer any thanks. He took his gun and jumped back to his feet, pointing the weapon at the infected man's face. "This is bad, really bad. Been happening more and more—you can tell when someone's drugged out on the Bliss."

"So it was the Bliss," Thomas murmured.

"You knew?" Red Shirt asked.

"Well, he's looked weird ever since I got here."

"And you didn't say anything?" The skin around the guard's mask almost matched the color of his shirt. "What's wrong with you?"

Thomas was taken aback by Red Shirt's sudden anger. "I ... I'm sorry. I didn't really know what was going on."

The infected man had curled up into a ball on the ground and was sobbing. Red Shirt finally stepped away from him and looked sternly at Thomas. "You didn't know? What kind of ... Where are you from?"

Now Thomas *really* wished he had run. "I'm ... my name's Thomas. I'm nobody. I just ..." He searched for something to say—to explain himself. "I'm not from around here. Sorry."

Red Shirt turned the gun on him. "Sit down. Sit down right there." He flicked the gun toward a nearby chair.

"Wait! I swear I'm immune!" Thomas's heart thudded in his chest. "That's why I—"

"Sit your butt down! Now!"

Thomas's knees gave out and he plopped into the chair. He glanced toward the door and his chest loosened a bit when he saw Minho standing there, with Brenda and Jorge right behind him. But Thomas didn't want his friends involved—didn't want to chance getting them hurt. He quickly shook his head to tell them to stay out of it.

Red Shirt ignored the people in the doorway, concentrating purely on Thomas. "If you're so sure about being a Munie, then you won't mind testing to prove it, now, will you?"

"No." The idea actually relieved him—maybe the man would let him go once he realized he was telling the truth. "Do it, go ahead."

Red Shirt holstered his gun and stepped up to Thomas. He retrieved his device and leaned forward to put it on Thomas's face.

"Look into it, eyes open," the man said. "It'll only take a few seconds."

Thomas did as he was told, wanting to get it over with as quickly as possible. He saw the same flash of colorful lights he'd seen at the city gates, felt the same puff of air and prick in his neck.

Red Shirt took the device back, looked at the readings on a small screen. "Well, what do ya know? You're a damn Munie after all. You care to explain to me how you came to be in Denver and how you don't know squat about the Bliss or how to spot a user when you see one?"

"I work for WICKED." It came out before he'd really thought it through. He just wanted to get out of there.

"I believe that crap about as much as I believe this guy's drug problem has nothing to do with the Flare. You keep your butt glued right there or I'll start shooting."

Thomas swallowed. He wasn't so much scared as he was mad at himself for having gotten into such a ridiculous situation. "Okay," he said.

But Red Shirt had already turned around. His help had arrived—four people covered from head to toe with a thick green plastic, except for their faces. Their eyes were fitted with big goggles, and beneath those was a mask like the one Red Shirt wore. Images flashed through Thomas's mind, but the one that stuck was the most complete memory—the time he'd been taken from the Scorch after his bullet wound had gotten infected. Everyone on that Berg had been wearing the same type of gear as these four people.

"What in the world?" one of them said, his voice also mechanized. "You caught two of 'em?"

"Not really," Red Shirt replied. "Got us a Munie, thinks he wants to sit around and see the show."

"A Munie?" The other man sounded like he couldn't believe what he'd heard.

"A Munie. He stayed put when everyone else jackrabbed out of here, claims he wanted to see what happened. To make it worse, he says he suspected our future Crank here was on the Bliss and didn't tell anyone, just went on drinking his coffee like all was right with the world."

Everyone looked over at Thomas, but he was speechless. He just shrugged.

Red Shirt stepped back as the four protected workers surrounded the still-sobbing infected man, lying curled up on his side on the ground. One of the newcomers had a thick blue

plastic object gripped in both hands. It had an odd nozzle on the end, and the guy was pointing it at the man on the ground as if it were a weapon. Its purpose seemed ominous, and Thomas searched his memory-depleted mind to work out what it could possibly be but came up empty.

"We need you to straighten out your legs, sir," the lead worker said. "Keep your body still, don't move, try to relax."

"I didn't know!" the man wailed. "How was I supposed to know?"

"You knew!" Red Shirt yelled from the side. "No one takes the Bliss just for kicks."

"I like the way it feels!" The pleading in the man's voice made Thomas feel incredibly sorry for him.

"Plenty of cheaper drugs than that. Quit lying and shut your mouth." Red Shirt waved a hand as if swatting a fly. "Who cares. Bag the sucker."

Thomas watched as the infected man curled up even tighter, gripping his legs to his chest with both arms. "It's not fair. I didn't know! Just kick me out of the city. I swear I'll never come back. I swear. I swear!" He broke into another agonizing series of lurching sobs.

"Oh, they'll put you out, all right," Red Shirt said, glancing over at Thomas for some reason. It looked as if he was smiling behind the mask—his eyes shone with something like glee. "Keep watching, Munie. You're gonna like this."

Thomas suddenly hated Red Shirt as much as he'd ever hated anyone. He broke eye contact and returned his focus to the four suited people, now crouching as they inched closer to the poor guy on the floor.

"Straighten out your legs!" one of them repeated. "Or this is gonna hurt something awful. Straighten them. Now!"

"I can't! Please just let me leave!"

Red Shirt stomped over to the man, pushing one of the workers out of the way, then leaned over and placed the end of his gun against the sick man's head. "Straighten your legs, or I'll put a bullet in your brain and make it easier on everybody. Do it!" Thomas couldn't believe the guard's complete lack of compassion.

Whimpering, eyes filled with terror, the infected man slowly let go of his legs and extended them, his whole body shaking as he lay flat on the ground. Red Shirt stepped out of the way, sliding his gun back into its holster.

The person with the odd blue object immediately moved so that he stood behind the man's head, then placed the nozzle so it rested on the crown of his skull, pressing it into his hair.

"Try not to move." It was a woman, and if anything, her voice, filtered through her mask, sounded even creepier to Thomas than the mens'. "Or you'll lose something."

Thomas barely had time to wonder what that meant before she pressed a button and a gel-like substance shot out of the nozzle. It was blue and viscous but moved quickly, spreading over the man's head, then down around his ears and face. He screamed, but the sound was cut off as the gel washed over his mouth, down to his neck and shoulders. The substance hardened as it moved, freezing into a shell-like coating that Thomas could see through. In a matter of seconds, half the infected man's body was rigid, wrapped in a tight sheet of the stuff, which seeped into every crevice of his skin and wrinkle of his clothing.

Thomas noticed that Red Shirt was looking at him, and he finally met the guard's gaze.

“What?” Thomas asked.

“Quite the show, huh?” Red Shirt replied. “Enjoy it while it lasts. When this is over, you’re coming with me.”

Thomas's heart sank. There was something sadistic in Red Shirt's eyes, and he looked away, focused back on the infected man just as the blue gel reached his feet and solidified around them. The guy now lay completely motionless, wrapped in the hard, plasticky coating. The woman with the gel gun stood up, and Thomas saw that it was now nothing but an empty bag. She folded it up and stuffed it into a pocket in her green coverall.

"Let's get him out of here," she said.

As the four workers reached down and lifted up the infected man, Thomas's eyes flickered back to Red Shirt, who was watching the others carry off their captive. What in the world had he meant that Thomas would be going with him? Where? Why? If the man hadn't had a gun, Thomas would have run.

When the others had made their way out the door, Minho appeared again. He was just about to step inside when Red Shirt pulled out his weapon.

"Stop right there!" the man yelled. "Get out!"

"But we're with him." Minho pointed to Thomas. "And we need to go."

"This one's not going anywhere." He paused, as if something had just occurred to him. He looked at Thomas, then back at Minho. "Wait a second. Are you guys Munies, too?"

Panic flared in Thomas, but Minho was fast. He didn't hesitate, just bolted.

"Stop!" Red Shirt yelled, sprinting for the doorway.

Thomas lurched over to the window. He saw Minho, Brenda, and Jorge just as they made it across the street and disappeared around a corner. Red Shirt had stopped right outside the coffee shop; he gave up on the others and came back in. With his gun pointed at Thomas.

"I ought to shoot you in the neck and watch you bleed out for what your little friend just did. Better thank God above that Munies are so valuable, or I'd do it just to make myself feel better. Been a crappy day."

Thomas couldn't believe that after all he'd been through, he was stuck in such a stupid situation. He wasn't scared, only frustrated. "Well, it hasn't been so great for me, either," he muttered.

"You'll bring me a good hunk of cash. That's all there is to it. And just for the record, I don't like you. I can tell by just lookin' at ya."

Thomas smiled. "Yeah, well, the feeling's mutual."

"You're a funny guy. Just full of laughs. We'll see how you feel by the time the sun goes down tonight. Come on." He gestured to the door with his weapon. "And trust me, I'm out of patience. Try anything and I'll shoot you in the back of the head and tell the police that you were acting like an infected and ran. Zero-tolerance policy. Won't even get questioned about it. Not so much as a raised eyebrow."

Thomas stood there, sorting through his options. The irony wasn't lost on him. He'd escaped WICKED only to be held at gunpoint by an average everyday city worker.

"Don't make me say it again," Red Shirt warned.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll find out in time. And I'll be one rich sucker. Now get moving."

Thomas had been shot twice already and knew how badly it hurt. If he didn't want to go through it again, it looked like going with the guy was his only option. He glared at the man, then walked toward the door. When he reached it, he stopped.

"Which way?" Thomas asked.

"Go left. We'll walk nice and easy for about three blocks, then another left. I've got a car waiting for us there. Do I need to warn you again what'll happen if you try something?"

"You'll shoot an unarmed kid in the back of the head. Got it, crystal clear."

"Oh, man, I hate you Munies. Start walking." He pressed the tip of the gun into Thomas's spine and Thomas headed down the street.

They made it to the end of the third block and turned left without saying a word to each other. The air was stifling, and sweat had moistened every last inch of Thomas's body. When he reached up to wipe his forehead, Red Shirt whacked him in the head with the butt of the gun.

"Don't do that," the man said. "I might get nervous and put a hole in your brain."

It took every ounce of Thomas's willpower to stay silent.

The street was abandoned and there was trash everywhere. Posters—some warning about the Flare, others images of Chancellor Paige—covered the lower portion of the buildings' walls, and everything was spray-painted, layer on top of layer, by the looks of it. When they reached an intersection and had to stop to wait for a few passing cars, Thomas focused on an unmarked poster right next to him—a new one, he guessed from its lack of graffiti. He read the words of warning.

Public Service Announcement

!!! Stop the Spread of the Flare !!!

Help stop the spread of the Flare. Know the symptoms before you infect your neighbors and loved ones.

The Flare is the virus Flarevirus (VC321xb47), a highly contagious, manmade infectious disease that was accidentally released during the chaos of the sun flare catastrophe. The Flare causes a progressive, degenerative illness of the brain, resulting in uncontrolled movements, emotional disturbances and mental deterioration. The result has been the Flare pandemic.

Scientists are conducting late-stage clinical trials, but there is no standard treatment for the Flare at this time. The virus is generally fatal, and can be spread through the air.

At this time citizens must unite to prevent further spread of this pandemic. By learning how to recognize yourself and others as Viral Contagion Threats (VCTs) you will take the first step in the battle against the Flare.*

*Any suspicious subjects should be reported to the authorities immediately.

It went on to talk about a five- to seven-day incubation period and the symptoms—how such things as irritability and trouble with balance were early warning signs, followed by dementia, paranoia and severe aggression later on. Thomas had witnessed them all

firsthand, having crossed paths with Cranks on more than one occasion.

Red Shirt gave Thomas a slight shove and they continued walking. As they made their way, Thomas couldn't stop thinking about the poster's dire message. The part about the Flare's being manmade not only haunted him, it tickled something in his brain, a memory he couldn't quite latch on to. Even though the sign didn't say it outright, he knew there was something else, and for the first time in a while he wished he could access the past for just a moment.

"It's right up here."

Red Shirt's voice pulled him back to the present. A small white car waited at the end of the block, just a few dozen feet down the street. Thomas desperately tried to think of a way out of this—if he got in that vehicle it might all be over. But could he really risk getting shot?

"You're going to slide nice and easy into the backseat," Red Shirt said. "I've got some cuffs in there, and I'm going to watch you put them on yourself. You think you can handle that without doing something stupid?"

Thomas didn't respond. He hoped desperately that Minho and the others were close, making a plan. He needed someone or something to distract his captor.

They reached the car and Red Shirt pulled out a key card and pressed it to the front passenger window. The locks clicked and he opened the back door, his gun trained on Thomas the whole time.

"Get in. Easy does it."

Thomas hesitated, searching the streets for anyone, anything. The area was deserted, but out of the corner of his eye he noticed movement. A hovering machine almost as large as a car. He spun to look and the cop machine swerved onto the street two blocks down and started heading their way. A humming sound grew louder as it approached.

"I said get in," Red Shirt repeated. "The cuffs are in the console in the middle."

"One of those cop machine things is coming," Thomas said.

"Yeah, so what? It's just patrolling, sees this stuff all the time. The people controlling it are on my side, not yours. Which is tough luck for you, big fella."

Thomas sighed—it had been worth a shot. Where were his friends? He scanned the area one last time, then stepped up to the open door and slipped inside. Just as he looked up at Red Shirt the air filled with the sound of heavy gunfire. Then Red Shirt was stumbling backward, jerking and twitching. Bullets tore into his chest, sparks flying as they hit the metal mask. He dropped his gun, and his mask fell off as he slammed into the wall of the closest building. Thomas watched in stunned horror as the man slumped onto his side.

Then it stopped. Thomas was frozen, wondering if he'd be shot next. He heard the steady hum of the machine as it hovered just outside his open door, and he realized that it had been the source of the attack. The things were unmanned but heavily armed. A familiar voice rang out from a speaker on its roof.

"Get out of the car, Thomas."

Thomas shivered. He would know that voice anywhere.

It was Janson. The Rat Man.

Thomas couldn't have been more surprised. He hesitated at first but quickly scooted out of the car. The cop machine hovered only a few feet away. A panel had opened on its side, revealing a screen from which Janson's face stared back at him.

Relief flooded him. It was Rat Man, but he wasn't in the cop machine—there was just a video feed of his image. Thomas could only assume that the man could see him as well. "What happened?" he asked, still stunned. He tried to avert his eyes from the man now lying on the ground. "How'd you find me?"

Janson was as grim-faced as ever. "It took a considerable amount of effort and luck, trust me. And you're welcome. I just saved you from this bounty hunter."

Thomas let out a laugh. "You're the ones paying them anyway. What do you want?"

"Thomas, I'm going to be frank with you. The only reason we haven't come to Denver to retrieve you is because the infection rate is astronomical. This was our safest means of contacting you. I'm urging you to bring yourself in and complete the testing."

Thomas wanted to scream at the man. Why would he return to WICKED? But the Red Shirt's attack—his body only feet away—was too clear in his mind. He had to play this right. "Why would I come back?"

Janson's expression was blank. "We've been using our data to select a Final Candidate, and you're the one. We need you, Thomas. It all rests on your shoulders."

Not in a million years, Thomas thought. But saying that wouldn't get rid of the Rat Man. Instead he cocked his head and pretended to consider, then said, "I'll think about it."

"I trust you will." The Rat Man paused. "There's something I feel obligated to tell you. Mainly because I think it will influence your decision. Make you realize that you have to do what we're asking."

Thomas had leaned back against the rounded hood of the car—the whole ordeal had exhausted him emotionally and physically. "What?"

The Rat Man's face screwed up to look even rattier, as if he reveled in telling bad news. "It's about your friend, Newt. I'm afraid he's in a tremendous amount of trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Thomas asked, his stomach dropping.

"I know you're well aware that he has the Flare, and that you've already seen some of its effects taking place."

Thomas nodded, suddenly remembering the note in his pocket. "Yeah."

"Well, he seems to be succumbing to it rapidly. The fact that you were already seeing symptoms of anger and loss of concentration before you left means he'll be spiraling into madness very soon."

Thomas felt a fist clutch his heart. He'd accepted that Newt wasn't immune, but he'd thought it would take weeks, or months even, before it got really bad. Yet Janson had made sense—that the stress of everything seemed to be making Newt fall fast. And they'd left him all alone outside the city.

"You could very well save him," Janson said quietly.

"You enjoying this?" Thomas asked. "Because sometimes it seems like you enjoy it a lot."

Janson shook his head. "I'm just doing my job, Thomas. I want this cure more than

anyone else. Except for you, maybe, before we took away your memories.”

“Just go,” Thomas said.

“I hope you’ll come,” Janson replied. “You have a chance to do great things. I’m sorry for our differences. But Thomas, you need to hurry. Time is running out.”

“I’ll think about it.” Thomas forced himself to say it again. It made him sick to pacify the Rat Man, but it was the only thing he could think to say to buy himself time. And there was the possibility that if he didn’t stall Janson, he could end up like Red Shirt—shot down by this cop machine hovering a few feet in front of him.

Janson smiled. “That’s all I can ask for. I hope to see you here.”

The screen blacked out and the panel closed; then the cop machine rose into the air and flew away, its hum slowly fading. Thomas watched until it disappeared around a corner. When it was gone, his eyes fell upon the dead man. He quickly looked away—that was the last thing he wanted to see.

“There he is!”

He whipped his head around to see Minho running down the sidewalk toward him, Brenda and Jorge close behind. Thomas had never been so happy to see anyone.

Minho pulled up short when he saw Red Shirt in a heap on the ground. “Holy … What happened to *him*?” He turned his attention to Thomas. “And you? You okay? Did you do that?”

Absurdly, Thomas felt like laughing. “Yeah, I pulled out my machine gun and blasted him to tiny bits.”

Minho’s face showed that he didn’t appreciate the sarcasm, but Brenda spoke before he could come up with a retort.

“Who killed him?”

Thomas pointed at the sky. “One of those cop machines. Flew in here, shot him to death, then next thing I know the Rat Man appears on a screen. He tried to convince me that I need to go back to WICKED.”

“Dude,” Minho said, “you can’t even—”

“Give me some credit!” Thomas yelled. “There’s no way I’d go back, but maybe them needing me so much could help us at some point. What we should worry about is Newt. Janson thinks that Newt’s succumbing to the Flare a lot faster than average. We have to go check on him.”

“He really said that?”

“Yeah.” Thomas felt bad for blowing up at his friend. “And I believe him on this. You saw how Newt’s been acting.”

Minho stared at Thomas, his eyes filled with pain. It hit Thomas that Minho had known Newt for two years longer than he had. So much more time to grow close.

“We better check on him somehow,” Thomas repeated. “Do something for him.”

Minho just nodded and looked away. Thomas was tempted to pull Newt’s note out of his pocket and read it right then and there, but he’d promised he’d wait until he knew for sure the time was right.

“It’s getting late,” Brenda said. “And they don’t let people in and out of the city at night—it’s hard enough to keep things under control during the day.”

Thomas noticed for the first time that the light was beginning to fade, the sky above the

buildings taking on an orange hue.

Jorge, who'd been quiet until then, spoke up. "That's the least of our problems. Something weird's going on around this place, *muchachos*."

"What do you mean?" Thomas asked.

"All the people seem to have vanished in the last half hour, and the few I've seen don't look right."

"That scene at the coffee shop *did* send everyone scattering," Brenda pointed out.

Jorge shrugged. "I don't know. This city is just giving me the creeps, *hermana*. Like it's alive and waiting to unleash something really nasty."

A strange unease crawled up Thomas's spine and he turned his focus back to Newt. "Can we get out there if we hurry? Or can we break out?"

"We can try," Brenda said. "Better hope we can find a cab, though—we're on the other side of the city from where we came in."

"Let's try it," Thomas offered.

They took off down the street, but the look on Minho's face wasn't good. Thomas sure hoped it wasn't a sign of bad things to come.

They walked for an hour and didn't see a single car, much less a cab. They ran into only a few scattered people, and cop machines let out their eerie hum as they flew by at random. Every few minutes they'd hear a sound in the distance that brought memories of the Scorch back to Thomas—someone talking too loudly, a scream, an odd laugh. As the light faded to darkness, he began to feel more and more spooked.

Finally Brenda stopped and faced the rest of them. "We'll have to wait till tomorrow," she announced. "We're not going to find transportation tonight and we're too far to walk. We need to sleep so we'll be fresh in the morning."

Thomas hated to admit it, but she was right.

"There's gotta be a way to get out there," Minho countered.

Jorge squeezed his shoulder. "It's useless, *hermano*. The airport's at least ten miles from here. And by the looks of this town we'd get mugged or shot or beaten to death on the way. Brenda's right—better to rest up and go help him tomorrow."

Thomas could tell Minho wanted to be his usual defiant self, but he gave in without arguing. Jorge made too much sense. They were in a huge city, at night, completely out of their element.

"Are we close to our motel?" Thomas asked. He told himself that Newt could make it through one more night alone.

Jorge pointed to his left. "Just a few blocks."

They headed in that direction.

They were a block away when Jorge pulled up short, holding one hand in the air and putting a finger to his lips with the other. Thomas stopped dead in his tracks, alarm suddenly tingling through his nerves.

"What?" Minho whispered.

Jorge turned in a slow circle, scanning the area around them, and Thomas did the same, wondering what had suddenly made the older man so apprehensive. Darkness had completely fallen, and the few streetlights they passed barely put a dent in it. The world Thomas could see seemed made of shadows, and he imagined horrible things hiding behind every one of them.

"What?" Minho whispered again.

"I keep thinking I hear something right behind us," Jorge replied. "Whispering. Anyone else—"

"There!" Brenda shouted, her voice like a crack of thunder in the silence. "Did you see that?" She was pointing off to her left.

Thomas strained to look but saw nothing. The streets were empty as far as he could tell.

"Someone was just coming out from behind that building, then jumped back. I swear I saw it."

"Hey!" Minho yelled. "Who's over there?"

"Are you crazy?" Thomas whispered. "Let's get inside the motel!"

"Slim it, dude. If they wanted to shoot us or something, don't you think they would've done it by now?"

Thomas just sighed in exasperation. He didn't like the feel of this at all.

"I should've said something when I first heard it," Jorge said.

"Maybe it's nothing," Brenda responded. "And if it is, standing around won't help. Let's just get out of here."

"Hey!" Minho yelled again, making Thomas jump. "Hey, you! Who's over there?"

Thomas smacked him on the shoulder. "Seriously, would you stop that?"

His friend ignored him. "Come out and show yourself!"

Whoever it was didn't respond. Minho moved like he was going to walk across the street and take a look, but Thomas grabbed him by the arm.

"No way. Worst idea in history. It's dark, it could be a trap, it could be a lot of terrible things. Let's just get some sleep and keep a better eye out tomorrow."

Minho didn't put up much of an argument. "Fine. Be a wuss. But I get one of the beds tonight."

And with that they went up to their room. It took forever for Thomas to fall asleep, his mind spinning with the possibilities of who might be following them. But no matter where his thoughts wandered, they always came back to Teresa and the others. Where were they? Could that have been Teresa out on the street, spying on them? Or had it been Gally and the Right Arm?

And Thomas hated that they'd had no choice but to wait a night before checking on Newt. What if something had happened to him?

Finally his mind slowed, the questions faded away, and he fell asleep.

The next morning, Thomas was surprised at how rested he felt. He'd tossed and turned all night, it seemed, but at some point he must have gotten some deep and recharging sleep. After a long, hot shower and breakfast out of a vending machine, he was ready to face the day.

He and the others left the motel around eight o'clock in the morning, wondering what they'd find in the city on their way to check on Newt. They saw some people here and there, but far fewer than they'd seen during the busy hours of the day before. And Thomas didn't notice any strange noises like the ones they'd heard the previous night during their long walk.

"Something's up, I'm tellin' ya," Jorge said as they made their way down the street in search of a cab. "There should be more folks out and about."

Thomas observed the few pedestrians around him. None of them would look him in the eye—everyone kept their head down, often with one hand holding their surgical mask to their face as if afraid that a sudden wind might blow it off. And they walked with a hurried, frantic gait, almost jumping out of the way when another person got too close. He noticed a woman studying a poster about the Flare just like the one he'd read the day before while being escorted by Red Shirt. It brought to mind that memory he hadn't been able to grasp—it was going to drive him crazy.

"Let's hurry and get to the shuck airport," Minho muttered. "This place is giving me the creeps."

"We should probably go up that way," Brenda said, pointing. "There have to be cabs around those business offices."

They crossed the street and headed down a narrower one that passed what looked like an empty lot on one side and an old, dilapidated building on the other.

Minho leaned into Thomas and half whispered, "Dude, I'm a little shucked in the head right now. I'm scared of what we're gonna find with Newt."

Thomas was scared, too, but didn't admit it. "Don't worry. I'm sure he's fine for now."

"Good that. And the cure for the Flare's gonna fly out of your butt any second."

"Who knows, maybe it will. Might smell funny, though." His friend didn't seem to think that was very humorous. "Look, we can't do anything until we get there and see him." Thomas hated sounding so insensitive, but things were hard enough—they couldn't assume the worst.

"Thanks for the pep talk."

The empty lot to their right contained the scattered remains of an old brick building, weeds filling every square inch. A large section of wall stood right in the middle, and as they passed, Thomas noticed movement on the far side of it. He stopped, and instinctively put a hand out to halt Minho as well. He shushed him before he could ask what was going on.

Brenda and Jorge noticed and froze in place. Thomas pointed at what he'd seen, then tried to get a better look.

A shirtless man had his back to them, and he was hunched over something, digging with

his hands like he'd lost something in the mud and was trying to find it. Oddly shaped scratches covered his shoulders, and there was a long scab crossing the middle of his spine. His movements were jerky and ... desperate, Thomas thought. His elbows kept popping back like he'd torn something loose from the ground. The tall weeds prevented Thomas from seeing the focus of the man's frantic attention.

Brenda whispered from behind. "Let's keep moving."

"That guy's sick," Minho whispered back. "How's he loose like this?"

Thomas had no idea. "Let's just go."

The group started walking again, but Thomas couldn't tear his eyes away from the disturbing scene. What was that guy *doing*?

When they reached the end of the block, Thomas stopped, as did the others. It was clearly bothering everyone as much as it was him—they all wanted to get one last look.

Without warning, the man sprang up and turned toward them; blood covered his mouth and nose. Thomas flinched and stumbled back into Minho. The man bared his teeth in a nasty grin, then held up bloody hands as if to show them off. Thomas was just about to yell at him when the guy bent back over and returned to his business. Thankfully they couldn't see exactly what that business was.

"This would be a good time to go," Brenda said.

Icy fingers crawled along Thomas's back and shoulders—he couldn't have agreed more. They all turned and ran, and they'd gone two blocks before they slowed to a walk again.

It took another half hour before they found a cab, but they were finally on their way. Thomas wanted to talk about what they'd seen in the empty lot, but he couldn't put it into words. It had sickened him through and through.

Minho was the first to speak about it. "That guy was eating a person. I just know it."

"Maybe ..." Brenda began. "Maybe it was just a stray dog." Her tone made Thomas think she didn't believe it for one second. "Not like that'd be okay, either."

Minho scoffed. "I'm pretty sure that's not something you're supposed to see during a nice leisurely stroll through a quarantined city in the middle of the day. I believe Gally. I think this place is crawling with Cranks, and soon the whole city's gonna start killing each other."

No one responded. They stayed silent the rest of the way to the airport.

It didn't take long to get through security and back outside the massive walls surrounding the city. If anything, the staff they encountered seemed thrilled that they were leaving.

The Berg was right where they'd left it, waiting like the abandoned shell of a giant insect on the hot and steamy concrete. Nothing stirred around it.

"Hurry up and open it," Minho said.

Jorge didn't seem fazed by the curt command; he pulled his small control pad out of his pocket and pressed some buttons. The ramp of the cargo door slowly pivoted down, hinges squealing, until its edge landed on the ground with a grating scrape. Thomas had hoped to see Newt come running down that ramp, a big smile on his face, glad to see them.

But nothing moved inside or out, and his heart sank.

Minho obviously felt the same way. "Something's wrong." He sprinted to the door and

ran up the ramp before Thomas had a chance to react.

"We better get in there," Brenda said. "What if Newt's turned dangerous?"

Thomas hated the sound of the question but knew she was right. Without responding, he ran after Minho, entering the dark and stifling Berg. All the systems had been shut down at some point: no air-conditioning, no lights, nothing.

Jorge followed right at Thomas's heels. "Let me power her up or we'll all sweat till we're nothing but a pile of bones and skin." He moved off in the direction of the cockpit.

Brenda stood next to Thomas, both of them peering into the gloom of the ship, the only light coming from the few scattered portholes. They could hear Minho calling Newt's name somewhere deep in the ship, but the infected boy wasn't responding. A cavity seemed to open within Thomas, widening and sucking the hope out of him.

"I'll go to the left," he said, pointing toward the small hallway to the common area. "Why don't you follow Jorge and search up there. This isn't good—he would've been here to welcome us if everything was okay."

"Not to mention the lights and air would be on." She gave Thomas a grim look, then headed off.

Thomas went down the hallway to the main room. Minho sat on one of the couches, looking at a piece of paper, his face as stony as Thomas had ever seen it. The hollowness inside him grew even more, and his last ounce of hope faded.

"Hey," he said. "What is it?"

Minho didn't answer. He just kept staring at the paper.

"What's wrong?"

Minho glanced up at him. "Come see for yourself." He held up the paper in one hand while he slouched back on the couch, seeming on the verge of tears. "He's gone."

Thomas walked over and took the paper from him, then flipped it over. Scribbled in black marker, it said:

They got inside somehow. They're taking me to live with the other Cranks.

It's for the best. Thanks for being my friends.

Goodbye.

"Newt," Thomas whispered. His friend's name hung in the air like a pronouncement of death.

Soon they were all sitting together. The goal was to talk over what should come next, but the reality was they had nothing to say. The group of four just stared at the floor and said nothing. For some reason, Thomas couldn't get Janson out of his head. Could going back really be a way to save Newt? Every part of him rebelled against the idea of returning to WICKED, but if he *did* go back, and was able to complete the testing ...

Minho broke the sullen silence.

"I want you three to listen to me." He took a moment to look at each one of them, then continued. "Ever since we broke out of WICKED, I've basically gone along with whatever you slinheads ended up saying we should do. And I haven't complained. Much." He gave Thomas a wry grin. "But right here, right now, I'm making a decision and you're going to do what I say. And if anyone pushes back, to hell with you."

Thomas knew what his friend wanted, and he was glad for it.

"I know we have bigger goals in mind," Minho continued. "We need to connect with the Right Arm, figure out what to do about WICKED—all that save-the-world klunk. But first we're going to find Newt. This isn't open for discussion. The four of us—all of us—are flying to wherever we need to go, and we're getting Newt out of there."

"They call it the Crank Palace," Brenda said. Thomas turned to her and she was staring off into space. "It has to be what he was talking about. Some of those Red Shirts probably broke into the Berg, found Newt and saw that he was infected. Let him leave us a note. I don't have any doubt that's what happened."

"Sounds fancy," Minho said. "You've been there?"

"No. Every major city has a Crank Palace—a place where they send the infected and try to make it bearable for them until they reach the Gone. I don't know what they do to them then, but it's not a pretty place to be, no matter who you are, so I can only imagine. Immunes run things there, and get paid a lot for it because a non-Immune would never risk catching the Flare. If you want to go, we should think long and hard about it first. We're completely out of ammunition, so we'll be unarmed."

Despite the ominous description, Minho had a glimmer of hope in his eyes. "Long and hard thinking done. You know where the closest one is?"

"Yeah," Jorge answered. "We passed over it on the way here. It's just on the far side of this valley, right up against the mountains to the west."

Minho clapped his hands once. "Then that's where we're going. Jorge, get this piece of klunk up in the sky."

Thomas expected at least a little argument or resistance. But none came.

"I'll be glad for a little adventure, *muchacho*," Jorge said, standing up. "We'll be there in twenty minutes."

Jorge was true to his word on the timing. He landed the Berg in a clearing along the beginnings of a forest that stretched up the surprisingly green mountainside. About half of the trees were dead, but the other half looked as if they'd just begun to recover from years

of massive heat spells. It made Thomas sad to think that the world would probably recover from the sun flares just fine someday, only to find itself uninhabited.

He stepped off the cargo ramp and took a good look at the wall surrounding what had to be the Crank Palace just a few hundred feet away. It was made of thick planks of wood. The closest gate was just beginning to open, and two people appeared, both of them holding huge Launchers. They looked exhausted, but wearily they took a defensive stance and aimed their weapons—they'd obviously heard or seen the Berg's approach.

"Not a good start," Jorge said.

One of the guards shouted something, but Thomas couldn't hear what he'd said. "Let's just go over there, talk to them. They must be immune if they have those Launchers."

"Unless the Cranks took over," offered Minho, but then he looked at Thomas with an odd grin. "Either way, we're going in, and we're not leaving without Newt."

The group held their heads up high and slowly walked to the gate, making sure not to do anything that would cause alarm. The last thing Thomas wanted was to be shot by a Launcher grenade again. As they got closer, he saw that the two guards looked worse up close. They were filthy, sweaty and covered in bruises and scratches.

They stopped at the gate and one of the guards stepped forward.

"Who the hell are you people?" he asked. He had black hair and a mustache and was taller than his partner by a few good inches. "You don't look much like the science goons that come in sometimes."

Jorge did the talking, just as he had at the airport when they'd arrived in Denver. "You wouldn't have known we were coming, *muchacho*. We're from WICKED, and one of our guys got captured and taken here by mistake. We'll be picking him up."

Thomas was surprised. What Jorge had said was technically the truth, when he thought about it.

The guard didn't seem too impressed. "You think I give a crap about you and your fancy WICKED jobs? You're not the first uppity-up to drop in here and act like you own the place. You wanna come hang out with Cranks? Be my guest. Especially after what's been going on lately." He stepped to the side and made an exaggerated sweeping gesture of welcome. "Enjoy your stay at the Crank Palace. No refunds or exchanges if you lose an arm or eyeball."

Thomas could almost smell the tension in the air, and he worried that Minho would add some smart remark and send these guys over the edge, so he spoke up quickly.

"What do you mean 'what's been going on lately'? What's happening?"

The guy shrugged. "It's just not a very happy place, and that's all you need to know." He didn't offer anything more.

Thomas already disliked the way things were going. "Well ... do you know if any new"—saying *Cranks* didn't feel right to Thomas—"people were brought here in the last day or two? Do you have a register?"

The other guard—short and stocky, his head shaved—cleared his throat, then spit. "Who you lookin' for? A he or a she?"

"A he," Thomas answered. "His name is Newt. A little taller than me, blond hair, kinda long. Has a limp."

The guy spit again. "I might know somethin'. But knowin' and tellin' are two different

things. You kids look like you got plenty of money. Wanna share?"

Thomas, daring to let himself hope, looked back at Jorge, whose face had tightened in anger.

Minho spoke before Jorge could. "We've got money, shuck-face. Now tell us where our friend is."

The guard jabbed the Launcher toward them a little more fiercely. "Show me your cash cards or this conversation is over. I want at least a thousand."

"He's got it all," Minho said, jabbing a thumb at Jorge as his eyes lasered in on the guard. "Greedy slinthead."

Jorge pulled his card out and waved it in the air. "You'll have to shoot me dead to take this, and you know it won't do any good without my prints. You'll get your money, *hermano*. Now show us the way."

"All right, then," the man said. "Follow me. And remember, if any of your body parts become detached due to an unfortunate encounter with a Crank, I highly advise you to leave said body part behind and run like hell. Unless it's a leg, of course."

He turned on his heels and walked through the opened gate.

The Crank Palace was a horrible, filthy place. The short guard proved to be very talkative, and as they made their way through the chaos of the frightening domain, he provided more information than Thomas ever would've asked for.

He described the village for the infected as a huge set of rings within rings, with all the communal areas—cafeteria, infirmary, recreation facilities—located in the middle and then row upon row of poorly built housing encircling them. The Palaces had been conceived as humane options—refuges for the infected until they reached a point where the madness took over. After that they were shipped to remote locations that had been abandoned during the worst of the sun flares. Those who had built the palaces had wanted to give the infected one last shot at a decent life before the end. Projects had sprung up near most remaining cities in the world.

But the well-intended idea had gone very bad. Filling a place with people who had no hope and knew they were about to descend into a rotten, horrific spiral of insanity ended up creating some of the most wretched anarchic zones ever known to man. With the residents well aware that there could be no real punishment or consequences worse than what they already faced, crime rates grew astronomically. And so the developments became havens of debauchery.

As the group walked past home after home—nothing more than shacks that had fallen into disrepair—Thomas imagined how truly awful it must be to live in such a place. Most windows in the buildings they passed were broken, and their guard explained how it had been a huge mistake to allow glass in the towns at all. It had become the number one source of weaponry. Trash littered the streets, and though he hadn't spotted any people yet, Thomas felt like he and his friends were being watched from the shadows. In the distance he heard someone yell a few obscenities; then a scream came from another direction, putting Thomas even more on edge.

"Why don't they just close the place down?" he asked, the first of his group to speak. "I mean—if it's gotten so bad."

"Gotten so bad?" the guard asked. "Kid, bad's a relative term. This is just how it is. What else are you gonna do with these people? You can't leave 'em hanging out with the healthy folks in the fortressed cities. You can't just dump 'em in a place full of Cranks way past the Gone and let 'em get eaten alive. And no government's gotten desperate enough yet to start killing people as soon as they catch the Flare. This is it. And it's a way for us Immunes to make some good money, since no one else would ever work here."

His statements left Thomas with a heavy dose of gloom. The world was in pitiful shape. Maybe he *was* being selfish by not helping WICKED complete the tests.

Brenda spoke up—her face had been creased into a look of disgust since they'd entered the town. "Why don't you just tell it like it is—you let the infected run around this godforsaken place until they're so bad that your conscience is clean enough to get rid of them."

"That about wraps 'er up," the guard responded matter-of-factly. Thomas had a hard time disliking the guy—he mostly just felt sorry for him.

They kept walking, passing row after row of houses, all of them broken, run-down and dirty.

"Where is everybody?" Thomas asked. "I thought this place would be packed wall to wall. And what did you mean earlier about something happening?"

This time the guy with the mustache answered, and it was good to hear another voice for a change. "Some—the lucky ones—are vegging on the Bliss in their homes. But most of them are in the Central Zone, eating or playing or up to no good. They're sending us too many—and faster than we can ship them out. Add to that the fact that we're losing Immunes left and right to who-knows-where, decreasing our ratio each and every day, and things were bound to reach a boiling point eventually. Let's just say this morning the water finally got hot enough."

"Losing Immunes left and right?" Thomas repeated. It looked like WICKED was tapping every resource they could for more Trials. Even if their doing so had dangerous consequences.

"Yeah, almost half our workers have disappeared over the last couple months. No sign of 'em, no explanations. Which only makes my job a thousand times harder."

Thomas groaned. "Just keep us away from the crowds and put us somewhere safe until you find Newt."

"That's more like it," Minho added.

The guard merely shrugged. "Okay. As long as I get my money."

The guards finally stopped two rings away from the Central Zone and told the group to wait. Thomas and the others huddled in some shade behind one of the shacks. The cacophony had grown louder by the minute, and now, so close to most of the Palace's population, it sounded as if a massive brawl was taking place just around the corner. Thomas hated every second he sat there, waiting, listening to those awful noises, wondering the whole time whether the guard would come back at all, much less with Newt in tow.

About ten minutes after he'd left, two people came out of a little hut across the narrow pathway from them. Thomas's pulse quickened, and he almost got up and ran before he realized they didn't look threatening in the least. They were a couple, holding hands, and other than being a little dirty and wearing wrinkled and worn clothes, they seemed sane enough.

The two approached the little group and stopped in front of them. "When did you get here?" the woman asked.

Thomas fumbled for words, but Brenda spoke up.

"We came in with the last group. We're actually looking for our friend who was with us. His name is Newt—blond hair, has a limp. Have you seen him?"

The man answered as if he'd just heard the dumbest question of his life. "Lots of people with blond hair around here—how're we supposed to tell who's who? What kind of name is Newt anyway?"

Minho opened his mouth to respond, but the noise coming from the center of town picked up and everyone turned to look. The couple gave each other concerned looks. Then, without a word, they scurried back inside their home. They closed the door and Thomas

heard the click of a lock engaging. A few seconds later a wooden board appeared in their window, covering it up; a small shard of glass fell to the ground outside.

"They look about as happy to be here as we are," Thomas said.

Jorge grunted. "Real friendly. I think I'll come back to visit."

"They obviously haven't been here long," Brenda said. "I can't imagine what that must feel like. Finding out you're infected, being sent to live with Cranks, seeing what you're about to become right in front of you."

Thomas just shook his head slowly. It'd be misery in its purest form.

"Where are those *guards*?" Minho asked, impatience clear in his tone. "How long does it take to find someone and tell 'em their friends are here?"

Ten minutes later, the two guards reappeared around a corner. Thomas and his friends jumped to their feet.

"What'd you find out?" Minho asked in a rush.

The short one seemed fidgety, his eyes darting, as if he'd lost his brazenness from before, and Thomas wondered if a trip to what they'd called the Central Zone always did that to a person.

His partner answered. "Took some asking around, but I think we found your guy. Looks just like you described, and he turned toward us when we called his name. But ..." The guards exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

"But what?" Minho pushed.

"He said—very pointedly, I might add—to tell you guys to get lost."

The words stabbed Thomas, and he could only imagine how Minho felt.

"Show us where he is," his friend ordered curtly.

The guard held up his hands. "Did you not hear what I just said?"

"Your job's not done," Thomas insisted. He was with Minho one hundred percent. It didn't matter what Newt had said—if they were this close, they were going to talk to him.

The shorter guard shook his head adamantly. "No way. You asked us to find your friend and we did. Give us our money."

"Does it look like we're with him yet?" Jorge asked. "No one makes a dollar until you get us all together."

Brenda didn't say anything, but she stood next to Jorge and nodded to show her support. Thomas was relieved that everyone was on board to go to Newt despite the message he'd sent.

The two guards didn't look happy at all, and they whispered back and forth, arguing.

"Hey!" Minho barked. "If you want that money, let's go!"

"Fine," the guard with the mustache finally said. His partner gave him an exasperated glare. "Follow us."

They turned and headed back in the direction they'd come. Minho was right on their heels, and then everyone else.

As they made their way deeper into the compound, Thomas kept thinking things couldn't get worse, but they did. The buildings were shabbier, the streets dirtier. He saw several people lying on the sidewalks, their heads resting on filthy bags or wadded-up pieces of clothing. Each one of them stared at the sky with a glazed expression, a look of oblivious glee. The Bliss was aptly named, Thomas thought.

The guards marched ahead, sweeping their Launchers left and right at anyone who got within a dozen feet of them. At one point they passed a ravaged-looking man—his clothes torn, his hair matted with some kind of black goo, skin covered in rashes—as he fell on a drugged-out teenager and started beating him.

Thomas stopped, wondering if they should help.

"Don't even think about it," the short guard said before Thomas could get a word out. "Keep moving."

"But isn't it your job to—"

The other guard cut him off. "Shut up and let us handle things. If we meddled in every squabble and catfight we saw, we'd never be done. We'd probably be dead. Those two can sort out their own problems."

"Just get us to Newt," Minho said evenly.

They continued, and Thomas tried to ignore the gargled scream that suddenly rose behind them.

Finally, they reached a high wall with a big archway that led to an open area full of people. A sign at the top of the arch proclaimed in bright letters that this was the Central

Zone. Thomas couldn't quite make out what was going on inside, but everyone seemed busy.

The guards stopped, and the one with the mustache addressed the group. "I'm only going to ask once. Are you sure you want to go in there?"

"Yes," Minho answered quickly.

"Okay, then. Your friend is at the bowling alley. As soon as we point him out, I want our money."

"Let's just get moving," Jorge growled.

They followed the guards through the arch and entered the Central Zone. Then they stopped to take it all in.

The first word that popped into Thomas's mind was *madhouse*, and he realized that it was almost literally true.

Cranky were everywhere.

They milled about in a circular area several hundred feet across that was bordered by what had apparently once been shops and restaurants and entertainment venues. Most of them were run-down and closed. The majority of the infected didn't seem quite as gone as the matted-hair fellow they'd seen out in the streets, but there was a frenzied air about the groups of people. To Thomas, everyone's actions and mannerisms seemed ... exaggerated. Some people were laughing hysterically, a wildness in their eyes, as they slapped each other's backs roughly. Others cried uncontrollably, sobbing all alone on the ground or walking in circles, faces in their hands. Small fights had broken out everywhere, and here and there you'd find a man or woman standing still and screaming at the top of their lungs, faces red and necks corded.

There were also those who huddled in groups, arms folded and heads snapping left and right as if they expected to be attacked at any second. And just as Thomas had seen in the outer rings, some of the Cranks were lost in the haze of the Bliss, smiling as they sat or lay on the ground and ignored the chaos. A few guards walked around, weapons held at the ready, but they were vastly outnumbered.

"Remind me not to buy any real estate here," Minho quipped.

Thomas couldn't bring himself to laugh. He was filled with anxiety, and he desperately wanted to get this over with.

"Where's the bowling alley?" he asked.

"Over this way," the shorter guard said.

He headed to the left, sticking close to the wall as Thomas and the others followed. Brenda walked beside Thomas, their arms brushing with every step. He wanted to take her hand, but he didn't want to make any move that would call attention to himself. Everything about this place was so unpredictable he didn't want to do anything he didn't absolutely have to.

Most of the Cranks stopped their feverish activities and stared at the small group of newcomers as they approached and walked past. Thomas kept his gaze lowered, scared that if he made eye contact with anyone, they might get hostile or try to talk to him. There were catcalls and whistles, lots of crude jokes or insults thrown their way as they kept moving. They passed a dilapidated convenience store, and Thomas could see through the open windows—the glass was long gone—that almost all the shelves were empty. There

was a doctor's office and a sandwich shop, but no lights shone in either one.

Someone grabbed Thomas's shirt at the shoulder. He spun to see who it was as he swatted the hand away. A woman stood there, her dark hair messy and a scratch on her chin, but otherwise she seemed somewhat normal. Her face was drooping in a frown, and she stared at him for a moment before opening her mouth as wide as it would go, revealing teeth that were in good shape other than looking as if they hadn't been brushed in a while, and a tongue that was swollen and discolored. Then she closed her mouth again.

"I want to kiss you," the woman said. "What do you say, Munie?" She laughed, a manic cackle that was full of snorts, and ran her hand lightly down Thomas's chest.

Thomas jerked away and continued walking—he noticed that the guards hadn't even stopped to make sure nothing bad happened.

Brenda leaned closer and whispered to him. "That might've been the creepiest thing yet."

Thomas just nodded and kept going.

The bowling alley didn't have any doors—based on the thick rust that covered the exposed hinges, they'd been taken off and disposed of a long time ago. A large wooden sign hung above the entrance, but any words it had once displayed were gone, leaving only faded scratches of color.

"He's in there," the guard with the mustache said. "Now pay up."

Minho stepped past him to the empty doorway and leaned through the opening, craning his neck to see inside. Then he turned around and looked at Thomas.

"I can see him in the back," Minho said, his face pinched with worry. "It's dark in there, but it's definitely him."

Thomas had been so worried about finding their old friend, he realized he didn't have any clue what they'd actually say to him. Why had he told them to get lost?

"We want our money," the guard repeated.

Jorge appeared completely unfazed. "You'll get double if you make sure we get back to our Berg safely."

The two guards consulted; then the shorter one took a turn speaking. "Triple. And we want half of it now to make sure you're not blowing smoke out your butts."

"That's a deal, *muchacho*."

As Jorge pulled out his card and touched it to the guard's, transferring the money, Thomas felt a grim satisfaction that they were stealing money from WICKED.

"We'll wait right here," the guard said when they were done.

"Come on," Minho said. He went inside the building without waiting for a response.

Thomas looked at Brenda, who was frowning.

"What's wrong?" he asked. As if there were just one thing.

"I don't know," she responded. "I just have a bad feeling."

"Yeah, you and me both."

She gave him a half smile and took his hand, which now he gladly accepted; then they went into the bowling alley with Jorge right behind them.

As with many things since his memory had been wiped, Thomas had images in his mind of what a bowling alley should have looked like and how it functioned, but he couldn't recall having ever bowled. The room they stepped into was far from what he'd expected.

The lanes where people had once bowled were now completely torn up, most of the wood panels ripped out or broken. Sleeping bags and blankets filled the spaces now, with people either napping or lying in a daze as they stared at the ceiling. Brenda had told Thomas that only the rich could afford the Bliss, so he wondered how people would dare reveal to others that they were using it in a place like this. He imagined it wouldn't be long before someone decided to do whatever it took to get the drug from them.

In the niches where the bowling pins used to stand, several fires burned, which couldn't have been very safe. But at least one person sat at each fire, tending it. The smell of burning wood wafted through the air, and a smoky haze choked the darkness.

Minho pointed to the far left lane, about a hundred feet away. Not many people were over there—most seemed to congregate in the middle lanes—but Thomas spotted Newt immediately despite the poor lighting. It was the flash of his long blond hair in the firelight and the familiar shape of his slumping body. His back was to them.

"Here goes nothing," Thomas whispered to Brenda.

No one bothered them as they carefully made their way to Newt, picking through the maze of people dozing in blankets until they reached the far lane. Thomas watched where he walked—the last thing he wanted was to step on some Crank and get bitten in the leg.

They were about ten feet away from Newt when he suddenly spoke in a loud voice that echoed off the dark walls of the bowling alley. "I told you bloody shanks to get lost!"

Minho stopped and Thomas almost ran into him. Brenda squeezed Thomas's hand, then let go, which was when he realized how much he'd been sweating. Hearing those words come out of Newt somehow let him know that it was over and done. Their friend would never be the same—he had only dark days ahead.

"We need to talk to you," Minho said, moving a couple of feet closer to Newt. He had to step over a skinny woman lying on her side.

"Don't come any closer," Newt answered. His voice was soft, but it was full of menace. "Those thugs brought me here for a reason. They thought I was a bloody Immune holed up in that shuck Berg. Imagine their surprise when they could tell I had the Flare eating my brain. Said they were doing their civic duty when they dumped me in this rat hole."

When Minho didn't say anything, Thomas spoke up, trying not to let Newt's words overcome him. "Why do you think we're here, Newt? I'm sorry you had to stay back and got caught. I'm sorry they brought you here. But we can break you out—it doesn't look like anyone gives a klunk who comes or goes."

Newt slowly twisted around to face them. Thomas's stomach dropped when he saw that the boy had a Launcher clutched in his hands. And he looked ragged, like he'd been running and fighting and falling down cliffs for three days straight. But despite the anger that had pooled in his eyes, he hadn't been taken by madness quite yet.

"Whoa, there," Minho said, taking a half a step back—he barely missed stepping on the lady at his heels. "Slim it nice and calm. There's no need to point a shuck Launcher at my face while we talk. Where'd you get that thing, anyway?"

"I stole it," Newt answered. "Took it from a guard who made me ... unhappy."

Newt's hands were shaking slightly, which made Thomas nervous—the boy's finger hovered over the trigger of the weapon.

"I'm ... not well," Newt said. "Honestly, I appreciate you buggin' shanks coming for me. I mean it. But this is where it bloody ends. This is when you turn around and walk back out that door and head for your Berg and fly away. Do you understand me?"

"No, Newt, I don't understand," Minho said, the frustration in his voice escalating. "We risked our necks to come to this place and you're our friend and we're taking you home. You wanna whine and cry while you go crazy, that's fine. But you're gonna do it with us, not with these shuck Cranks."

Newt suddenly jumped to his feet, so quickly that Thomas almost stumbled backward. Newt lofted the Launcher and pointed it at Minho. "*I am a Crank, Minho! I am a Crank!* Why can't you get that through your bloody head? If you had the Flare and knew what you

were about to go through, would you want your friends to stand around and watch? Huh? Would you want that?" He was shouting by the time he finished, and was shaking more with each passing moment.

Minho didn't say anything, and Thomas knew why. He himself was trying to find words and coming up empty. Newt's glare shifted to him.

"And you, Tommy," the boy said, lowering his voice. "You've got a lot of nerve coming here and asking me to leave with you. A lot of bloody nerve. The sight of you makes me sick."

Thomas was stunned silent. Nothing anyone had ever said had hurt so much. Nothing.

Thomas couldn't think of any possible explanation for the statement. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

Newt didn't respond, just kept staring at him with hardened eyes, his arms shaking, his Launcher pointed at Thomas's chest. But then he stilled and his face softened. He lowered the weapon and looked at the floor.

"Newt, I don't get it," Thomas persisted quietly. "Why are you saying all this?"

Newt looked up again, and there was none of the bitterness that had been there just seconds earlier. "I'm sorry, guys. I'm sorry. But I need you to listen to me. I'm getting worse by the hour and I don't have many sane ones left. Please leave."

When Thomas opened his mouth to argue, Newt held up his hands. "No! No more talking from you. Just ... please. Please leave. I'm begging you. I'm begging you to do this one thing for me. As sincerely as I've ever asked for anything in my life, I want you to do this for me. There's a group I've met that are a lot like me and they're planning to break out and head for Denver later today. I'm going with them."

He paused, and it took every bit of Thomas's resolve to keep quiet. Why would they want to break out and go to Denver?

"I don't expect you to understand, but I can't be with you guys anymore. It's gonna be hard enough for me now, and it'll make it worse if I know you have to witness it. Or worst of all, if I hurt you. So let's say our bloody goodbyes and then you can promise to remember me from the good old days."

"I can't do that," Minho said.

"Shuck it!" Newt yelled. "Do you have any clue how hard it is to be calm right now? I said my piece and I'm done. Now get out of here! Do you understand me? Get *out* of here!"

Someone poked Thomas's shoulder and he spun to see that several Cranks had gathered behind them. The person who'd jabbed Thomas was a tall, broad-chested man with long, greasy hair. He reached out again and pushed the tip of his finger into Thomas's chest.

"I believe our new friend asked you people to leave him alone," the guy said. His tongue snaked out to lick his lips as he spoke.

"This is none of your business," Thomas replied. He could sense the danger, but for some reason he didn't care. There was only room enough inside him to be sick about Newt. "He was our friend way before he came here."

The man slicked his hand over his oily hair. "That boy's a Crank now, and so are we. That makes him our business. Now *leave* him ... *alone*."

Minho spoke before Thomas could respond. "Hey, psycho, maybe your ears are clogged with the Flare. This is between us and Newt. *You* leave."

The man scowled, then brought up a hand to show a long shard of glass gripped in his fist. Blood dripped from where he held it.

"I was hoping you would resist," he snarled. "I've been bored."

His arm flashed out, the glass slicing toward Thomas's face. Thomas ducked toward the floor and reached up with his hands to deflect the blow. But before the weapon hit him, Brenda stepped in and swatted the guy's hand away, which sent the glass shard flying.

Then Minho was on him, tackling the Crank to the ground. They landed on the woman he'd stepped over earlier to get to Newt, and she screamed bloody murder, started flailing and kicking. Soon the three of them were entangled in a wrestling match.

"Stop it!" Newt yelled. "Stop it now!"

Thomas had been frozen in place, crouching as he waited for an opportunity to jump in and help Minho. But he twisted around to see that Newt was holding his Launcher in shooting position, his eyes wild with fury.

"Stop or I'll start shooting and not give a buggin' piece of klunk who gets hit."

The man with the greasy hair pushed his way out of the melee and stood up, kicking the woman in the ribs as he did so. She wailed as Minho got to his feet, scratches covering his face.

The electric sound of the Launcher's charge filled the air just as Thomas got a whiff of burnt ozone. Then Newt squeezed the trigger. A grenade smashed into Greasy Hair's chest and lightning tendrils enveloped his body as he fell screaming to the ground, writhing, legs rigid, drool foaming out of his mouth.

Thomas couldn't believe the sudden turn of events. He looked at Newt with wide eyes, glad he'd done what he had, and happy he hadn't aimed the Launcher at him or Minho.

"I told him to stop," Newt half whispered. Then he aimed the weapon at Minho, but it was shaking because his arms were. "Now you guys leave. No more discussion. I'm sorry."

Minho held up his hands. "You're going to shoot me? Old pal?"

"Go," Newt said. "I asked nicely. Now I'm telling. This is hard enough. Go."

"Newt, let's go outside...."

"Go!" Newt stepped closer and aimed more fiercely. "Get out of here!"

Thomas hated what he was seeing—the complete wildness that had taken over Newt. His whole body trembled and his eyes had lost any hint of sanity. He was losing it, completely.

"Let's go," Thomas said, one of the saddest things he'd ever heard himself say. "Come on."

Minho's gaze snapped to Thomas, and he looked like his heart had been shattered. "You can't be serious."

Thomas could only nod.

Minho's shoulders slumped, and his eyes fell to the floor. "How did the world get so shucked?" The words barely came out, low and full of pain.

"I'm sorry," Newt said, and there were tears streaming down his face. "I'm ... I'm going to shoot if you don't go. Now."

Thomas couldn't take it for one more second. He grabbed Brenda by the hand, then Minho by the upper arm, started pulling them along toward the exit, stepping over bodies and winding his way through the blankets. Minho didn't resist, and Thomas didn't dare look at him, and could only hope that Jorge was following along. He just kept going, across the lobby, to the doors and through, outside into the Central Zone, into the chaotic crowds of Cranks.

Away from Newt. Away from his friend and his friend's diseased brain.

There was no sign of the guards who'd escorted them there, but there were even more Cranks than when they'd entered the bowling alley. And most of them seemed to be waiting for the newcomers. They'd probably heard the sounds of the Launcher firing and the screams of the guy who'd been hit. Or maybe someone had come out to tell them. Whatever the case, Thomas felt as if every person looking at him were past the Gone and hungry for human lunch.

"Look at these jokers," someone called out.

"Yeah, ain't they pretty!" another answered. "Come to play with the Cranks. Or are you on your way to joining us?"

Thomas kept moving, making his way toward the arched entrance to the Central Zone. He'd let go of Minho's arm but still held Brenda's hand. They marched through the crowd, and Thomas finally had to stop meeting peoples' gazes. All he saw was madness and bloodlust and jealousy carved onto countless bleeding and mangled faces. He wanted to run but had the sense that if he did the whole crowd would attack like a pack of wolves.

They reached the arch, went through it without hesitating. Thomas led them down the main street, crossing through the rings of dilapidated houses. The ruckus of the Zone seemed to have started up again now that they were gone, and eerie sounds of crazed laughter and wild screaming followed the group on their trek. The farther they got from the noise, the less tense Thomas felt. He didn't dare speak to ask Minho how he was. Plus, he knew the answer.

They were just passing another set of broken homes when he heard a couple of shouts ring out, and then the sound of footsteps.

"Run!" someone yelled. "Run!"

Thomas came to a stop just as the two guards who'd abandoned them came careering around the corner. They didn't slow but ran toward the farthest ring of the town and the Berg. Neither of them had their Launchers anymore.

"Hey!" Minho shouted. "Get back here!"

The guard with the mustache looked back. "I said run, you idiots! Come on!"

Thomas didn't take time to think. He sprinted after them, knowing it was the only choice. Minho, Jorge, and Brenda followed close on his heels. He looked back to see a cluster of Cranks chasing them, at least a dozen. And they seemed frantic, as if a switch had been flipped and every one of them had reached the Gone at once.

"What happened?" Minho asked through heavy breaths.

"They dragged us away from the Zone!" the shorter man yelled. "I swear to God they were gonna eat us. We barely escaped."

"Don't stop running!" the other guard added. The two of them suddenly peeled off in another direction, down a hidden alley.

Thomas and his friends continued toward the exit leading to their Berg. Catcalls and whistles rose from behind them, and Thomas risked another glimpse back for a better look at their pursuers. Torn clothes, matted hair, muddied faces. But they'd gained no ground.

"They can't catch us!" he yelled, just as the exterior gate came into view ahead of them.

"Keep going, we're almost there!"

Even so, Thomas ran faster than he'd ever run in his life—pushed harder even than he ever had in the Maze. The thought of getting caught by those Cranks filled him with horror. The group made it to the gate and passed through it without pausing. They didn't bother to close it, just ran straight for the Berg, its hatch opening as Jorge pushed the buttons on his pad.

They reached the ramp and Thomas ran up it and hurled himself inside. He turned to see his friends sliding to the floor around him, the ramp squealing as it started moving upward to close. The pack of Cranks chasing them would never make it in time, but they kept running, screaming and shouting nonsense. One of them reached down and picked up a rock, hurled it. The thing fell twenty feet short.

The Berg rose into the air just as the door sealed shut.

Jorge hovered the ship just a few dozen feet in the air while they gathered their wits. The Cranks were no threat from the ground—none of them had weapons. Not the ones who'd followed them outside the wall, at any rate.

Thomas stood with Minho and Brenda at one of the viewing ports and watched the deliriously angry crowd below. It was hard to believe that what he was seeing was real.

"Look at them down there," Thomas said. "Who knows what they were doing a few months ago. Living in a high-rise, maybe, working at some office. Now they're chasing people like wild animals."

"I'll tell you what they were doing a few months ago," Brenda answered. "They were miserable, scared to death of catching the Flare, knowing it's inevitable."

Minho threw his hands up. "How can you worry about *them*? Was I alone just now? With my *friend*? His name is Newt."

"Nothing we could've done," Jorge called from the cockpit. Thomas winced at the lack of compassion.

Minho turned to face him. "Just shut up and fly, shuck-face."

"I'll do my best," Jorge said with a sigh. He fiddled with some instruments and got the Berg moving.

Minho slumped to the floor, almost like he'd melted. "What happens when he runs out of Launcher grenades?" he asked no one in particular, looking at an empty spot on the wall.

Thomas had no idea how to respond, no way to express the sorrow that filled his chest. He sank down next to Minho on the ground and sat there without saying a word as the Berg rose higher and flew away from the Crank Palace.

Newt was gone.

Eventually, Thomas and Minho got themselves up and went to sit on a couch in the common area while Brenda helped Jorge in the cockpit.

With time to think, the full reality of what had happened hit Thomas like a falling boulder. Ever since Thomas had entered the Maze, Newt had been there for him. Thomas hadn't realized just how much of a friend he'd become until now. His heart hurt.

He tried to remind himself that Newt wasn't dead. But in some ways this was worse. In most ways. He'd fallen down the slope of insanity, and he was surrounded by bloodthirsty Cranks. And the prospect of never seeing him again was almost unbearable.

Minho finally spoke in a lifeless voice. "Why did he do that? Why wouldn't he come back with us? Why would he point that weapon at my face?"

"He never would've pulled the trigger," Thomas offered, though he doubted it was the truth.

Minho shook his head. "You saw his eyes when they changed. Complete lunacy. I'd be fried if I'd kept pushing. He's crazy, man. He's gone wacker from top to bottom."

"Maybe it's a good thing."

"Come again?" Minho asked as he turned to Thomas.

"Maybe when their minds go, they're not themselves anymore. Maybe the Newt we know is gone and he's not aware of what's happening to him. So really, he's not suffering."

Minho almost looked offended by the notion. "Nice try, slinthead, but I don't believe it. I think he'll always be there just enough to be screaming on the inside, deranged and suffering every shuck second of it. Tormented like a dude buried alive."

That image made Thomas not want to talk anymore, and they fell silent again. Thomas stared at the same spot on the floor, feeling the full dread of Newt's fate, until the Berg landed with a thump back at the Denver airport.

Thomas rubbed his face with both hands. "I guess we're here."

"I think I understand WICKED a little more now," Minho said absently. "After seeing those eyes up close. Seeing the madness. It's not the same when it's someone you've known for so long. I've watched plenty of friends die, but I can't imagine anything worse. The Flare, man. If we could find a cure for that ..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but Thomas knew what he was thinking. Thomas closed his eyes for a second—nothing about this was black-and-white. It never would be.

Jorge and Brenda joined them after they'd sat awhile in silence.

"I'm sorry," Brenda murmured.

Minho grunted something; Thomas nodded and gave her a long look, trying to let her know with his eyes how terrible he felt. Jorge just sat there, staring at the floor.

Brenda cleared her throat. "I know it's hard, but we need to think about what we're going to do next."

Minho flew to his feet and pointed at her. "You can think all you want about whatever shuck thing you want, Ms. Brenda. We just left our friend with a bunch of psychos." He stormed out of the room.

Brenda's eyes fell on Thomas. "Sorry."

He shrugged. "It's okay. He was with Newt for two years before I showed up in the Maze. It'll take him some time."

"We're really spent, *muchachos*," Jorge said. "Maybe we should take a couple of days and rest. Think it all through."

"Yeah," Thomas murmured.

Brenda leaned toward him and squeezed his hand. "We'll figure something out."

"There's only one place to start," Thomas replied. "Gally's."

"Maybe you're right." She squeezed his hand once more, then let go and stood up. "Come on, Jorge. Let's make something to eat."

The two of them let Thomas be alone with his sorrow.

After a dreadful meal during which no one spoke more than a couple of meaningless words at a time, the four of them went their separate ways. Thomas couldn't stop thinking about Newt as he wandered the Berg aimlessly. His heart sank when he thought about what their lost friend's life was going to become, what little left of it he had.

The note.

Thomas stood dazed for a moment, then ran to the bathroom and locked the door. The note! In all the chaos of the Crank Palace, he'd completely forgotten about it. Newt had said Thomas would know when the time came to read it. And he should've done it before they'd left him in that rancid place. If the time hadn't been right then, when would it have ever been?

He pulled the envelope out of his pocket and ripped it open, then took out the slip of paper. The soft lights that ringed the mirror lit up the message in a warm glow. It was two short sentences:

Kill me. If you've ever been my friend, kill me.

Thomas read it over and over, wishing the words would change. To think that his friend had been so scared that he'd had the foresight to write those words made him sick to his stomach. And he remembered how angry Newt had been at Thomas specifically when they'd found him in the bowling alley. He'd just wanted to avoid the inevitable fate of becoming a Crank.

And Thomas had failed him.

Thomas decided not to tell the others about the message from Newt. He didn't see what possible purpose it could serve. It was time to move on, and he did so with a coldness that he didn't know he had.

They spent two nights in the Berg, resting up and talking plans. None of them knew much about the city or had any solid connections. Their conversations always returned to Gally and the Right Arm. The Right Arm wanted to stop WICKED. And if it was true that WICKED might begin the Trials all over again with new Immunes, then Thomas and his friends had the same goals as the Right Arm.

Gally. They had to go back to Gally.

On the morning of the third day after their run-in with Newt, Thomas showered, then joined the others for a quick meal. It was obvious how anxious everyone was to get moving after two days of sitting around. The plan was to go to Gally's apartment and start from there. There'd been a little worry about what Newt had told them—that some Cranks were planning to break out of the Palace and go to Denver—but there'd been no sign of them from the air.

Once they were ready, Thomas and the others gathered at the hatch door.

"Let me do the talking again," Jorge said.

Brenda nodded. "And when we get in, we'll find a cab."

"Fine," Minho muttered. "Let's quit this shuck yapping and go."

Thomas couldn't have said it better himself. Movement was the only thing that would deaden the despair he felt about Newt and his dreadful note.

Jorge pressed a button and the huge ramp of the cargo door started to pivot downward. The door had only opened halfway when they saw three people standing just outside the Berg. By the time the bottom edge thumped the ground, Thomas had realized that they weren't there with a welcome banner.

Two men. One woman. Wearing the same metallic protective masks as Red Shirt back in the coffee shop. The men held pistols and the lady had a Launcher. Their faces were dirt-smeared and sweaty, and some of their clothes had been torn, as if they'd had to fight their way through an army to get there. Thomas could only hope it was security being extra cautious.

"What is this?" Jorge asked.

"Shut your mouth, Munie," one of the guys said, his mechanized voice making his words all the more sinister. "Now step down here nice and easy, or you won't like what happens. Don't. Try. Anything."

Thomas looked past their assailants and was shocked to see that both gates leading into Denver were standing wide open and two people lay lifeless in the narrow alley leading to the city.

Jorge was the first to respond. "You start firing that thing, *hermano*, and we'll be on top of you like stink on dookie. You may get one of us, but we'll get all three of you punks."

Thomas knew it was an empty threat.

"We've got nothing to lose," the man replied. "Give it your best shot. I'm pretty confident

I'll nail two of you before anybody takes a single step." He lifted his gun a couple of inches and aimed at Jorge's face.

"Fair enough," Jorge muttered, and put his hands in the air. "You win for now."

Minho groaned. "You are one tough slinthead." But he raised his hands, too. "You guys better not drop your guard. That's all I'm saying."

Thomas knew they had no choice but to go along. He put up his hands and was the first to walk down the ramp. The others followed right behind, and they were led around to the back of the Berg, where an old beat-up van waited, the engine rumbling. A lady in a protective mask sat at the steering wheel, and two others holding Launchers sat on the bench seat behind her.

One of the men opened the side door, then gestured inside with a nod of the head. "In you go. One wrong move and bullets start flying. Like I said, we've got nothing to lose. And I can think of a lot worse things than the world with one or two less Munies in it."

Thomas climbed into the back of the van, all the time working at their odds. Six versus six, he thought. But they had weapons.

"Who's paying you to steal Immunes?" he asked as his friends clambered in to sit beside him. He wanted someone to confirm what Teresa had told Gally, that Munies were being rounded up and sold.

Nobody responded.

The three people who'd greeted them at the Berg got into the van and closed the doors. Then they aimed their weapons toward the back.

"There's a pile of black hoods in the corner," the lead guy said. "Put them on. And it won't sit well with me if I catch you peeking during the ride. We like to keep our secrets nice and safe."

Thomas sighed—arguing would be pointless. He grabbed one of the hoods and slipped it over his head. All he saw was darkness as the van lurched into motion with a roar of the engine.

It was a smooth ride, but it seemed to last forever. And so much time to think about things wasn't exactly what Thomas needed—especially without being able to see. He was nauseated by the time they finally stopped.

When the side door of the van opened, Thomas instinctively reached up to take off his hood.

"Don't do it," the lead guy snapped. "Don't you dare take those off until we tell you to. Now get out, nice and slow. Do us a favor and keep yourselves alive."

"You sure are a tough shank," Thomas heard Minho say. "Easy to do when you've got six people with guns. Why don't you—"

He was cut off by the thump of a hard punch, followed by a loud grunt.

Hands grabbed Thomas and pulled him out of the van so roughly that he almost fell down. Once he got his balance, the person yanked again and started leading him away; Thomas was barely able to keep his feet under himself.

He kept quiet as he was led down a set of stairs and then down a long hallway. They stopped, and he heard the swipe of a key card, the click of a lock, then the creak of a door opening. As it did, the murmurs of hushed voices filled the air, as if dozens of people were waiting inside.

The woman gave him a push and he stumbled a few steps forward. He immediately reached up and yanked the hood off his head, just as the door closed behind him.

He and the others stood in a huge room filled with people, most of them sitting on the floor. Dull lights in the ceiling illuminated the few dozen faces that stared back at them, some of them dirty, most of them scratched or bruised.

A woman came forward, her face twisted by fear and anxiety. "What's it like out there?" she asked. "We've been in here for a few hours, and things were falling apart. Has it gotten worse?"

More people started to approach their group as Thomas answered. "We were outside the city—they got us at the gates. What do you mean things were falling apart? What happened?"

She looked at the floor. "The government declared a state of emergency, without any kind of warning. Then the police, the cop machines, the Flare testers—they all disappeared. All at once, it seemed. We got snagged by these people trying to get work at the city building. There wasn't even time to figure out what was happening or why."

"We were guards over at the Crank Palace," another man said. "Others like us had been disappearing left and right, so we finally gave up and came to Denver a few days ago. We got nabbed at the airport, too."

"How'd everything get so bad, so suddenly?" Brenda asked. "We were here three days ago."

The man let out a sharp, bitter laugh. "The whole city is full of idiots thinking they've been containing the virus. It's been a long and slow rumble, but it's all finally exploded in our faces. The world has no chance—the virus is too strong. Some of us have seen this coming for a long time."

Thomas's gaze wandered back to the group of people approaching. He froze when he saw Aris.

"Minho, look," he said, elbowing him and pointing.

The boy from Group B had already broken into a grin and was jogging over. Behind him, Thomas could see a couple of girls who had been in Aris's Maze group. Whoever these people were who had taken them, they were good at their job.

Aris reached Thomas and stood in front of him as if he were about to give him a hug, then held out a hand instead. Thomas shook it.

"Glad you guys are okay," the boy said.

"You too." Seeing Aris's familiar face made Thomas realize that any bitterness he'd felt about what had happened between them in the Scorch was gone. "Where is everyone?"

Aris's face darkened. "Most of them aren't with us anymore. They got taken by another group."

Before Thomas could process what he'd said, Teresa appeared. Thomas had to clear his throat to get rid of the lump that had suddenly formed there. "Teresa?" He felt such a flurry of conflicted emotions he could barely get the word out.

"Hey, Tom." She stepped close to him, her eyes sad. "I'm so glad you're okay." Her eyes moistened with tears.

"Yeah, you too." Part of him hated her; part of him had missed her. He wanted to scream at her for leaving them behind at WICKED.

"Where did you guys go?" she asked. "How did you get all the way to Denver?"

Thomas was confused. "What do you mean, where did we go?"

She stared at him for a few seconds. "We've got a lot to talk about."

Thomas squinted. "What're you up to now?"

"I'm not up to ..." Defiance gripped her voice. "There's obviously been some miscommunication. Look, most of our group was captured by different bounty hunters yesterday—they've probably already been taken back and sold to WICKED. Including Frypan. I'm sorry."

An image of the cook popped into Thomas's head. He didn't know if he could handle losing yet another friend.

Minho leaned in to speak. "I can see you're as cheerful as always. So glad to be back in your sunshiny presence."

Teresa completely ignored him. "Tom, they'll be moving us soon. Please come talk to me. In private. Now."

Thomas hated the fact that he *wanted* to, and he tried to hide his eagerness. "The Rat Man already gave me his big speech. Please tell me you don't agree with him and think I should go back to WICKED."

"I don't even know what you're talking about." She paused, as if battling her pride. "Please."

Thomas stared at her for a long moment, not sure how he felt. Brenda was just a few feet away, and it was clear she wasn't happy to see Teresa.

"Well?" Teresa asked. She motioned to their surroundings. "Not a lot to do in here but wait around. Are you too busy to talk to me?"

Thomas had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. He pointed to a couple of empty chairs

in the corner of the large room. “Let’s go, but make it quick.”

Thomas sat with his head against the wall, arms folded. Teresa had her legs pulled up under her, sitting so that she faced him. Minho had warned him not to listen to a word she said as they'd walked away.

"So," Teresa said.

"So."

"Where do we start?"

"This was your idea. You tell me. We can be done if you don't have anything to say."

Teresa sighed. "Maybe you could start by giving me the benefit of the doubt and quit acting like a jerk. Yes, I know I did things in the Scorch, but you also know why I did them—to save you in the long run. I didn't know it was all about Variables and patterns then. How about giving me a little credit? Talk to me like a regular person."

Thomas let silence fill the air for a few moments before he answered. "Okay, fine. But you left me behind at WICKED, which shows you—"

"Tom!" she yelled, looking as if she'd been slapped. "We did *not* leave you behind! What are you talking about?"

"What are you talking about?" Thomas was thoroughly confused now.

"We didn't leave you behind! We came after you. *You* left *us* behind!"

Thomas could only stare at her. "Do you really think I'm that stupid?"

"All anyone talked about at the complex was that you, Newt, and Minho had broken out and were in the surrounding forest somewhere. We looked but didn't see any sign of you. I've been hoping ever since that somehow you made it back to civilization. Why do you think I was so thrilled to see you alive!"

Thomas felt a stirring of familiar anger. "How can you possibly expect me to believe that? You probably knew exactly what Rat Man tried to tell me—that they needed me, that I'm the so-called Final Candidate."

Teresa slouched. "You think I'm the most evil person to ever walk the earth, don't you?" She didn't wait for him to answer her, though. "If you had just gotten your memories back like you were supposed to, you'd see that I'm the same Teresa I've always been. I did what I did in the Scorch to save you, and I've been trying to make up for it ever since."

Thomas was having a hard time staying angry—she didn't seem to be acting. "How can I believe you, Teresa? How?"

She looked up at him, and her eyes were glassy. "I swear to you, I don't know everything about the Final Candidate—that stuff was developed after we went to the Maze, so I have no memories of that. But what I *did* learn was that WICKED doesn't intend to stop the Trials until they get their blueprint. They're preparing to start another round, Thomas. WICKED is gathering more Immunes to begin testing if the Trials didn't work. And I can't do it again. I left to find you. That's it."

Thomas didn't respond. A part of him wanted to believe. Desperately.

"I'm so sorry," Teresa said through a sigh. She looked away and ran her hand through her hair. She waited several seconds before she looked at him again. "All I can tell you is that I'm torn up inside. Ripped apart. I did believe that a cure could happen, and I knew

they needed you to do it. It's different now. Even with my memories back I can't think the same way I did before. I can see now that things will never end."

She stopped talking, but Thomas had nothing to say. He searched Teresa's face and saw a pain unlike any he'd ever seen before. She was telling the truth.

She didn't wait for him to speak before she continued. "So I made a deal with myself. I'd do whatever it took to make up for my mistakes. I wanted to save my friends first, and then other Immunes, if possible. And look what a great job I did."

Thomas searched for words. "Well, we haven't done much better, have we?"

Her eyebrows rose. "Were you hoping to stop them?"

"We're about to be sold back to WICKED, so what does it matter?"

She didn't answer right away. Thomas would've given anything to be inside her head—and not in the old way. For a brief moment he felt sad, knowing they'd shared countless hours together that he no longer had any memory of. They'd been best friends once.

She finally said, "If somehow we *could* do something, I hope that you'd find a way to trust me again. And I know we can convince Aris and the others to help us. They feel the same way I do."

Thomas knew he had to be careful. It was strange that she only agreed with him about WICKED now that she'd gotten her memories back.

"We'll see what happens," he finally said

She frowned deeply. "You really don't trust me, do you?"

"We'll see what happens," he repeated. Then he stood up and walked away, hating the look of hurt on her face. And hating himself for caring after everything she'd done to him.

Thomas found Minho sitting with Brenda and Jorge when he returned, and Minho didn't seem happy to see him. He gave Thomas a nasty look. "So what did that shuck traitor have to say?"

Thomas sat down beside him. Several strangers had gathered closer, and he could tell they were listening in.

"Well?" Minho pushed.

"She said that the reason they escaped was because they found out WICKED plans to start all over again if they have to. That they were rounding up Immunes—just like Gally told us. She swears that somehow they were led to believe that we'd already broken out—and that they looked for us." Thomas paused—he knew Minho wouldn't like the next part. "And she'd help us if she can."

Minho just shook his head. "You're a slinthead. You shouldn't have talked to her."

"Thanks." Thomas rubbed his face. Minho was right.

"Hate to barge in here, *muchachos*," Jorge said. "You can talk all day about this crap, but it means diddly unless we can get ourselves out of this nice little place. No matter who's on whose side."

Just then the door to the room opened and three of their captors walked in with big sacks stuffed full of something. A fourth followed, armed with a Launcher and a pistol. He swept the room, looking for trouble, and the others started passing out what was inside the bags—bread and bottles of water.

"How do we always get into these messes?" Minho asked. "At least we used to be able to blame everything on WICKED."

"Yeah, well, we still can," Thomas murmured.

Minho grinned. "Good. Those shuck-faces."

An uneasy silence settled on the room as the kidnappers moved around. People began to eat. Thomas realized that they'd have to whisper if they wanted to keep talking.

Minho nudged Thomas. "Only one of them has a weapon," he whispered. "And he doesn't look so bad. I bet I could take him."

"Maybe," Thomas answered under his breath. "But don't do anything stupid—he's got a gun as well as a Launcher. And trust me, you don't want to get shot by either."

"Yeah, well, you trust *me* this time." Minho gave Thomas a wink, to which Thomas could only sigh. The odds were not good that what was about to happen would go unnoticed.

The kidnappers approached Thomas and Minho and stopped at their little group. Thomas took a roll and a bottle of water, but when the man tried to hand some bread to Minho, he swatted it away.

"Why would I take anything from you? It's probably poisoned."

"You wanna go hungry, fine by me," the guy replied, moving on.

He had nearly passed them when Minho suddenly leaped to his feet and tackled the man holding the Launcher. Thomas flinched as it slipped out of the guy's grip and discharged, sending a grenade up toward the ceiling, where it crashed in a display of lightning. The kidnapper was still on the ground when Minho started punching him, struggling to grab the

man's pistol with his free hand.

For a moment, everyone froze. But then movement exploded all at once before Thomas could react. The three other guards dropped their bags to go after Minho, but before they could take a step they had six people on them, throwing them to the ground. Jorge helped Minho drag the guard to the floor and was stomping the man's arm until he finally let go of the pistol he'd pulled from his belt; Minho kicked it across the floor, and a woman picked it up. Thomas saw that Brenda had grabbed the Launcher.

"Stop!" she shouted, aiming the weapon at the kidnappers.

Minho stood up, and as he stepped away from the man on the ground, Thomas could see that the guy's face was covered in blood. People were already dragging the other three guards over to lie next to their partner, lining them up so that all four were on their backs in a row.

It had all happened so fast, Thomas hadn't moved from his spot on the floor, but he immediately got to work.

"We have to get them to talk," he said. "We have to hurry before backup comes."

"We should just shoot them in the head!" a man called out. "Shoot them and get out of here." A few others shouted their agreement.

Thomas realized that the group had turned into a mob. If he wanted information he had to work fast—before things fell apart. He stood and made his way over to the woman with the gun and convinced her to hand it to him; then he turned and knelt beside the man who'd given him the bread.

Thomas put the gun to the guy's temple. "I'm going to count to three. You either start telling what WICKED plans to do with us and where you were going to meet them or I'll pull the trigger. One."

The man didn't hesitate. "WICKED? We got nothing to do with WICKED."

"You're lying. Two."

"No, I swear! This has nothing to do with them! At least as far as I know."

"Oh really? Then you want to explain why you're out kidnapping a bunch of immune people?"

The man's eyes flickered to his friends, but then he answered, looking straight at Thomas. "We work for the Right Arm."

"What do you mean you work for the Right Arm?" Thomas asked. It made no sense.

"What do you mean what do I mean?" the man said, despite the gun at his head. "I work for the freaking Right Arm. Why's that so hard to understand?"

Thomas pulled the gun away and sat back, confused. "Then why would you be out capturing Immunes?"

"Because we want to," he said, eyeing the lowered weapon. "You ain't got no business knowin' nothing else."

"Shoot him and move on to the next one," someone in the crowd called out.

Thomas leaned back in, pressed the gun against the man's temple again. "You're awfully brave considering I'm the one with the gun. I'll count to three one more time. Tell me why the Right Arm would want Immunes or I'll just have to assume you're lying. One."

"You know I ain't lying, kid."

"Two."

"You ain't gonna kill me. I can see it in your eyes."

The man had called his bluff. There was no way Thomas could just shoot some stranger in the head. He sighed, pulled the gun away. "If you work for the Right Arm, then we're supposed to be on the same side. Just tell us what's going on."

The guy sat up, slowly, and so did his three friends, the bloody-faced man groaning with the effort.

"If you want answers," one said, "then you'll have to ask the boss. We seriously don't know anything."

"Yeah," added the man next to Thomas. "We're nobodies."

Brenda stepped closer with her Launcher. "And how do we get to this boss of yours?"

The man shrugged. "I have no idea."

Minho groaned and snatched the gun from Thomas's hands. "I've had enough of this klunk." He pointed the weapon at the man's foot. "Fine, we won't kill you, but your toe's gonna be smarting something real awful in three seconds if you don't start talking. One."

"I'm telling you, we don't know nothin'." The guy's face was pinched in anger.

"Fine," Minho replied. He fired the gun.

Thomas watched in shock as the man grabbed his foot, wailing in agony. Minho had shot him right in the pinkie toe—that part of the shoe and the toe itself were completely gone, replaced by a bleeding wound.

"How could you do that?" the guard next to him on the ground yelled as she moved to help her friend. She pulled a wad of napkins from her pants and pressed them against his foot.

Thomas was shocked that Minho had actually done it, but he had to respect the guy. Thomas couldn't have pulled the trigger, and if they didn't get answers now, they never would. He looked over at Brenda, and her shrug showed that she agreed. Teresa was watching from a distance, her face unreadable.

Minho kept at it. "Okay, while she's working on that poor foot of his, someone better start talking. Tell us what's going on or we're going to lose another toe." He waved the

pistol at the lady, then the other two guys. “Why are you kidnapping people for the Right Arm?”

“We told you, we don’t know anything,” the woman answered. “They pay us and we do what they ask.”

“And you?” Minho asked, pointing the gun at one of the men. “You wanna say something—save a toe or two?”

He held up his hands. “I swear on the life of my mom I don’t know anything. But ...”

He seemed to regret that last part immediately. His gaze shot to his friends and his face paled.

“But what? Spill it—I know you’re hiding something.”

“Nothing.”

“Do we really need to keep playing this game?” Minho moved the gun directly up against the man’s foot. “I’m done counting.”

“Stop!” the guard yelled. “Okay, listen. We could take a couple of you back with us to ask them yourselves. I don’t know if they’ll let you talk to the one in charge, but they might. I’m not getting my toe shot off for no good reason.”

“All right, then,” Minho said, taking a step back and gesturing for the guy to stand up. “See, that wasn’t so bad. Let’s go visit this boss of yours. Me, you, and my friends.”

The room burst into a rush of voices. No one wanted to be left behind and no one was going to be quiet about it.

The woman who’d brought in the water stood up and started yelling. The crowd went silent. “You people are a lot safer here! Just trust me on that one. If all of us tried to make it to where we’d need to go, I can guarantee half wouldn’t get there. If these guys want to see the boss, then let them risk their necks. A gun and a Launcher aren’t going to do a bit of good out there. But in here we have a locked door and no windows.”

When she finished, another chorus of complaints filled the room. The woman turned to Minho and Thomas and spoke over the noise. “Listen, it’s dangerous out there. I wouldn’t take more than a couple of people. The more you have, the more likely you’ll be seen.” She paused and scanned the room. “And I’d go soon if I were you. From the looks of it, these people are only going to get antsier. Pretty soon there’ll be no way to hold them off. And out there ...”

She pursed her lips together tightly, then continued. “There are Cranks everywhere. They’re killing anything that moves.”

Minho pointed his gun at the ceiling and fired, making Thomas jump. The noise of the crowd collapsed into complete silence.

Minho didn't need to say a word. He gestured to the woman to speak.

"It's crazy out there. It's all happened really quickly. Like they've been hiding and waiting for a signal or something. This morning the police were overpowered and the gates were opened. Some Cranks from the Palace joined them. They're everywhere now."

She paused and took the time to meet a few gazes. "I promise you don't want to go out there. And I promise that we're the good guys. I don't know what the Right Arm has planned, but I do know that part of it includes getting all of us out of Denver."

"Then why are you treating us like prisoners?" someone yelled.

"I'm just doing what I was hired to do." She turned her attention back to Thomas and continued. "I think it's a stupid idea to leave this place, but like I said, if you're going to, you can't take more than a couple of people. Those Cranks spot a big group of fresh meat walking around and it's all over. Weapons or no weapons. And the boss might not like it if a crowd shows up—our guards see a van full of strangers and they might start shooting."

"Brenda and I will go," Thomas said. He didn't even know he was going to say it until it popped out of his mouth.

"No way," Minho shook his head. "Me and you."

Minho was a liability. His temper was too short. Brenda thought before she acted, and that was what they needed to get out of this alive. And Thomas didn't want to let her out of his sight—plain and simple. "Me and her. We did pretty well for ourselves back in the Scorch. We can do it."

"No way, man!" Thomas could swear his friend almost looked hurt. "We shouldn't split up. All four of us should go—it'll be safer."

"Minho, we need someone back here to watch over things," Thomas said, and he meant it. This was a whole roomful of people who might be able to help them take WICKED down. "Plus, I hate to say it, but what if something does happen to us? Stay behind and make sure our plans don't die. They've got Frypan, Minho. Who knows who else. You said once that I should be the Keeper of the Runners. Well, let me do it today. Trust me. Like the lady said, the fewer we are, the better our chance of going unnoticed."

Thomas looked his friend in the eye and waited for a response. Minho didn't answer for a long time.

"Fine," he finally said. "But if you die I will *not* be happy."

Thomas nodded. "Good that." He hadn't realized how important it was that Minho still believe in him. It went halfway to giving him the courage he needed to do what he had to do.

The man who'd said they could take Thomas and his friends to the boss ended up being the one to guide them. His name was Lawrence, and regardless of what was outside, he seemed eager to get out of the room full of angry people. He unlocked the big door and gestured for

Thomas and Brenda to follow him—Thomas with the pistol and Brenda with the Launcher.

The group made their way back down the long hallway and Lawrence stopped at the door leading out of the building. The dull light from the ceiling shone on the man's face, and Thomas could see that he was worried.

"Okay, we have to make a decision. If we go on foot, it'll take a couple of hours, but we have a lot better chance of getting through the streets. We can hide on foot easier than if we take the van. The van would get us there faster, but we'd be spotted for sure."

"Speed versus stealth," Thomas said. He looked at Brenda. "What do you think?"

"The van," she said.

"Yeah," Thomas agreed. The image of the bloody-faced Crank from the day before haunted him. "The thought of being out there on foot scares me to death. The van, definitely."

Lawrence nodded. "Okay, then, the van it is. Now keep your mouths shut and those weapons ready. First thing we gotta do is get in the vehicle and lock the doors. It's right outside this door. Ready?"

Thomas raised his eyebrows at Brenda and they both nodded. As ready as they'd ever be.

Lawrence pulled a stack of key cards out of his pocket and unlocked the many latches lined up on the wall. He clenched the cards in his fist and pushed his body up against the door, then slowly cracked it open. It was dark outside, a lone streetlamp providing the only light. Thomas wondered how long the electricity would hold up before it stopped, like everything else eventually would. Denver could be dead in days.

He could see the van parked in a narrow alley about twenty feet away. Lawrence peeked his head outside, looked left and right, then pulled it back in.

"Seems clear. Let's go."

The three slipped out, and Thomas and Brenda sprinted to the van as Lawrence secured the door behind them. Thomas felt like a live wire. Anxiety had him glancing up and down the street, sure he'd see a Crank jump out at any second. But though he could hear the far-off sound of crazed laughter, the place was deserted.

The van's locks disengaged and Brenda opened the door and slid inside just as Lawrence did. Thomas joined them in the front seat and slammed the door shut. Lawrence immediately engaged the locks and started the engine. He was just about to gun it when a loud pop came from right above their heads and the van shook with a couple of thumps. Then silence. Then the muted sound of a cough.

Someone had jumped onto the roof of the van.

The van shot forward, Lawrence's hands gripped tightly on the wheel. Thomas turned and looked out the back windows—but there was nothing. Somehow, the person on top of the van was hanging on.

Just as Thomas spun back around, a face started creeping down the front windshield, staring at them upside down. It was a woman, her hair whipping in the wind as Lawrence sent the van tearing down the alleyway at breakneck speed. The woman's eyes met Thomas's, and then she smiled, showing a set of surprisingly perfect teeth.

"What's she holding on to?" Thomas yelled.

Lawrence answered, his voice strained. "Who knows. But she can't last long."

The woman's eyes stayed locked on Thomas, but she had freed one of her hands and balled it into a fist, then started pounding the window. *Thump, thump, thump*. Her smile stayed wide, her teeth almost glistening in the lamplight.

"Would you *please* get rid of her?" Brenda shouted.

"Fine." Lawrence slammed on the brakes.

The woman flew into the air, shooting forward like a launched grenade, her arms windmilling and her legs splayed, until she crashed to the ground. Thomas winced and squeezed his eyes shut, then strained to get a look at her. Shockingly, she was already moving, shakily getting to her feet. She regained her balance, then turned slowly toward them, the headlights from the van brightly illuminating every inch of her.

She was no longer smiling, not at all. Instead her lips had curled into a fierce snarl; a big welt reddened the side of her face. Her eyes bore into Thomas once more, and he shivered.

Lawrence gunned the engine, and the Crank looked like she was going to hurl herself in front of the vehicle, as if she could somehow stop it, but at the last second she pulled back and watched them pass. Thomas couldn't take his eyes off her, and in his last glimpse, her face melted into a frown and her eyes cleared, as if she'd just realized what she'd done. As if there was something left of the person she used to be.

And seeing that made it worse for Thomas. "She was like a mix of sane and not sane."

"Just be glad she was the only one," Lawrence muttered.

Brenda squeezed Thomas's arm. "It's hard to look at. I know how it felt for you and Minho to see what'd happened to Newt."

Thomas didn't answer, but he put his hand on top of hers.

They reached the end of the alley, and Lawrence swerved to the right onto a bigger street. Small groups of people dotted the area up ahead. A few were struggling as if they were fighting, but most were digging through trash or eating things Thomas couldn't quite make out. Several haunted, ghostly faces just stood and stared at them with dead eyes as they drove by.

No one in the van said anything, as if they were afraid that speaking would somehow alert the Cranks outside.

"I can't believe it happened so fast," Brenda finally said. "You think they were somehow planning to take over Denver? Could they really *organize* something like that?"

"Hard to know," Lawrence replied. "There were signs. Locals disappearing, reps from the

government disappearing, more and more infecteds being discovered. But it looks like a huge number of them suckers hid out, waiting for the right time to make their move."

"Yeah," Brenda said. "It seems like it was a matter of Cranks finally outnumbering healthy people. Once the balance tipped, it tipped all the way over."

"Who cares how it happened," Lawrence said. "The only thing that matters is how it is. Look around us. The place is a nightmare now." He slowed down to make a tight turn into a long alley. "Almost there. We need to be more careful now." He turned off the headlights, then picked up speed again.

As they drove, it became darker and darker, until Thomas couldn't see anything more than large, formless shadows that he kept imagining would suddenly leap out in front of them. "Maybe you shouldn't drive so fast."

"We'll be fine," the man replied. "I've driven this route a thousand times. I know it like the back of my—"

Thomas flew forward and was snapped back by the seat belt. They'd run over something, and it was caught beneath the van—metal, from the sound of it. The van bounced a couple of times, then came to a stop.

"What was that?" Brenda whispered.

"I don't know," Lawrence responded in an even quieter voice. "Probably a trash can or something. Scared the crap out of me."

He inched forward and a loud, scraping screech filled the air. Then came a thump and another crash and everything fell silent.

"Got her loose," Lawrence murmured, not bothering to hide his relief. He continued, but slowed to a fraction of his earlier speed.

"Maybe you should turn the lights back on?" Thomas suggested, amazed at how fast his heart was beating. "I can't see a thing out there."

"Yeah," Brenda added. "I'm pretty sure anyone out there heard that racket anyway."

"I guess so." Lawrence turned them on.

The headlights illuminated the entire alley in a spray of bluish-white light that, compared to the previous darkness, seemed brighter than the sun. Thomas squinted at the glare, then opened his eyes fully and a bloom of horror rose up in him. About twenty feet in front of them, at least thirty people had emerged and now stood packed together, completely blocking the road.

Their faces were pale and haggard, scratched and bruised. Ripped, filthy clothes hung from their bodies. They stood there, every one of them looking into the bright lights as if they weren't fazed in the least. They were like standing corpses, raised from the dead.

Thomas shivered from the chill that iced his body.

The crowd started to part. They moved in sync, and a large space cleared in the middle as they backed to the sides of the alley. Then one of them waved an arm, gesturing that the van should go ahead and drive past.

"These are some awfully polite Cranks," Lawrence whispered.

"Maybe they're not past the Gone yet?" Thomas answered, even though the statement sounded stupid even to him. "Or not in the mood to get run over by a big van?"

"Well, gun it," Brenda said. "Before they change their mind."

To Thomas's relief, Lawrence did just that; the van shot forward and he didn't slow down. The Cranks lining the walls stared at them as they sailed past. Seeing them close up—the scratches and blood and bruises, those maddened eyes—made Thomas shiver again.

They were just approaching the end of the group when several loud pops sounded and the van jolted and swerved to the right. Its front end slammed into the wall of the alley, pinning two Cranks against it. Thomas stared in horror through the windshield as they screamed in agony and beat bloody fists against the front of the vehicle.

"What the hell?" Lawrence bellowed as he put the van in reverse.

They screeched backward several feet, the vehicle shaking horribly. The two Cranks fell to the ground and were immediately attacked by the ones closest to the front of the van. Thomas quickly looked away, filled with a nauseating terror. On all sides, Cranks started thumping the van with their fists. At the same time, the tires were spinning and squealing, unable to gain traction. The combination of noises was like something from a nightmare.

"What's wrong?" Brenda yelled.

"They did something to the tires! Or the axels. Something!"

Lawrence kept switching the van from reverse to drive, but each time it only went a few feet. A lady with wild hair approached the window to Thomas's right. She was holding a huge shovel in both hands, and he watched as she raised it over her head, then swung it down against the window. The glass didn't give.

"We really need to get out of here!" Thomas shouted. Helpless, he didn't know what else to say. They'd been stupid to let themselves fall into such an obvious trap.

Lawrence kept shifting and gassing the van, but they merely jerked back and forth. A series of familiar thumps sounded from the roof. Someone was up there. Cranks were attacking all the windows now, with everything from wooden sticks to their own heads. The lady outside Thomas's window didn't give up, smacking her shovel into the glass over and over again. Finally, the fifth or sixth time she did it, a hairline crack shot across the window.

The growing panic made Thomas's throat constrict. "She's going to smash it!"

"Get us out of here!" Brenda said at the same time.

The van moved a few inches, just enough to make the woman miss with her next swing. But someone slammed a sledgehammer into the windshield from above and a huge spiderweb blossomed like a white flower in the glass.

Again the van jolted backward. The man holding the sledgehammer tumbled onto the front hood before he could slam the glass again and landed in the street. A Crank with a long gash on top of his bald head yanked the tool from the man's grip and got two more whacks in before a group of other people started fighting him for his weapon. The cracks in the windshield almost completely obscured the view from inside the van. The sound of breaking glass came from the rear; Thomas spun around to see an arm wriggling through a

gash in the window, the jagged edges tearing its skin.

Thomas unbuckled his seat belt and squirmed into the back of the van. He grabbed the first thing he found, a long plastic tool with a brush on one end and a sharp edge on the other—a snow pick—and crawled over the middle row of seats; he slammed the thing into the Crank's arm, then again, then a third time. Screaming, whoever it was pulled their arm out, knocking pieces of glass onto the cement outside.

"You want the Launcher?" Brenda called back to him.

"No!" Thomas shouted. "It's too big inside the van. Grab the gun!"

The van lurched forward, then stopped again; Thomas smacked his face on the back of the middle bench, and pain shot through his cheek and jaw. He turned to see a man and woman tearing away at the remaining glass in the broken window. Blood from their hands oozed down both sides of the hole as it got bigger.

"Here!" Brenda yelled from behind him.

He turned and took the gun from her, then aimed and fired, once, then twice, and the Cranks fell to the ground, any screams of agony drowned out by the awful noise of the squealing tires and overworked engine, the pounding of the Cranks' attack.

"I think we're almost loose!" Lawrence shouted. "I don't know what the hell they did!"

Thomas turned to look at him; he was covered in sweat. A hole had appeared at the middle of the spiderweb on the windshield. Cracks completely lined the other windows—almost nothing outside was visible anymore. Brenda held her Launcher, ready to use it if things got completely hopeless.

The van went backward, then forward, then backward again. It seemed to be under a little more control, was shaking less than it had been. Two sets of arms came through the big hole in the back, and Thomas let off two more shots. They heard screams, and a woman's face—twisted into a hideous scowl, her every tooth edged with grime—appeared at the window.

"Just let us in, boy," she said, her words barely audible. "All we want is food. Just give us some food. *Let me in!*"

She screamed the last few words and pushed her head through the opening as if she actually thought she could fit. Thomas didn't want to shoot her but held the gun up, readied himself in case she somehow managed to get inside. But when the van bolted forward again, she fell out, leaving the edges of the broken window covered in blood.

Thomas braced himself for the van to go backward again. But after a short, jolting stop, it went forward several more feet, turning in the right direction. Then a few more.

"I think I've got it!" Lawrence yelled.

Again forward, this time maybe ten feet. The Cranks followed as best they could—the short moment of silence as they were left behind didn't last, though. Soon the screams and thumps and bangs began all over again. A man reached through the hole in the back with a long knife, started slashing left and right at anything and nothing. Thomas lifted his gun and fired. How many had he killed? Three? Four? Had he killed them?

With one last long, terrible squeal, the van shot forward and then didn't stop. It bounced a couple of times as it ran over the Cranks who'd been in their path; then it smoothed out and picked up speed. Thomas looked out the back, saw bodies falling off the roof and onto the street. The remaining Cranks gave chase, but soon they were all left behind.

Thomas collapsed onto the seat, lying on his back, staring up at the dented roof. He sucked in huge, heavy breaths, tried to regain control of his emotions. He was barely aware of Lawrence turning off the one headlight that hadn't been smashed, making two more turns, then slipping through an open garage door that closed as soon as they cleared it.

When the van pulled to a stop and Lawrence shut off the engine, silence enveloped Thomas's world. The only thing he heard was the rush of pumping blood inside his head. He closed his eyes and tried to slow his breathing. Neither of the other two said anything for a couple of minutes, until Lawrence broke the silence.

"They're out there, surrounding us, waiting for us to get out."

Thomas forced himself to sit up and face the front again. Outside the broken windows, it was totally dark.

"Who?" Brenda asked.

"The boss's guards. They know this is one of their vans, but they won't approach us until we get out and show ourselves. They need to confirm who we are—I'd guess we have about twenty weapons aimed at us right now."

"So what do we do?" Thomas asked, not ready for another confrontation.

"We get out, nice and slow. They'll recognize me soon enough."

Thomas crawled over the seats. "Do we get out at the same time, or should just one of us go first?"

"I'll get out first, tell them it's okay. Wait until I knock on the window to get out," Lawrence answered. "Ready?"

"I guess," Thomas sighed.

"It would really suck," Brenda said, "if we went through all that just to have them shoot us. I'm sure I look like a Crank right about now."

Lawrence opened his door and Thomas waited, anxious for his cue. The loud rap on the frame of the van startled Thomas, but he was ready.

Brenda eased her door open slowly and stepped out. Thomas followed her, straining to see in the darkness, but the room was pitch-black.

A loud click sounded and the place was instantly flooded with bright white light. Thomas threw his hands up and squeezed his eyes shut, then, shielding himself, squinted to see what was going on. A huge spotlight mounted on a tripod was pointed directly at them. He could just make out the silhouettes of two figures on either side of it. Scanning the rest of the room, he saw that there were at least a dozen other people, all holding various types of weapons, just as Lawrence had said there would be.

"Lawrence, is that you?" a man called out, his voice echoing against concrete walls. It was impossible to tell which person had spoken.

"Yeah, it's me."

"What happened to our van, and who are these people? Tell me you didn't bring infecteds in here."

"We got jumped by a huge group of Cranks down the alley a ways. And these guys are Munies—they forced me to bring them to you. They want to see the boss."

"Why?" the man asked.

"They said—"

The man cut Lawrence off. "No, I want to hear it from them. State your names, why you forced our man to come here and destroy one of the few vehicles we have left. And it better

be a good reason.”

Thomas and Brenda exchanged a look to see who should talk and Brenda nodded to him.

He returned his gaze to the spotlight, focusing on the person to the right of it. That was his best guess at who’d been doing the talking. “My name is Thomas. This is Brenda. We know Gally—we were with him at WICKED and he told us about the Right Arm and what you guys are doing a few days ago. We were on board to help, but not like this. We just want to know what you’re planning, why you’re kidnapping immune people and locking them up. I thought that was WICKED kind of stuff.”

Thomas didn’t know what he’d expected, but the guy started to chuckle. “I think I’ll let you see the boss just so you get the damn idea out of your head that we’d ever do anything like WICKED.”

Thomas shrugged. “Fine. Let us see your boss.” The man seemed sincere in his disgust with WICKED. But it still didn’t make sense why they’d taken all those people.

“You better not be blowing things out your butt, kid,” the guy said. “Lawrence, bring them in. Somebody else check the van for weapons.”

Thomas kept silent as he and Brenda were led up two flights of dingy metal stairs. Then through a weathered wooden door, down a dirty hallway with one lightbulb and wallpaper peeling from the walls, then finally to a large space that might’ve been a nice conference room fifty years earlier. Now all it held was a big, scarred table with plastic chairs scattered haphazardly around the room.

Two people sat at the far side of the table. Thomas noticed Gally first, on the right. He looked tired and disheveled, but he managed a slight nod and a small smile—nothing more than an unfortunate wrinkle in the mess that was his face. A huge man was next to him, more fat than muscle, his girth barely contained between the arms of the white plastic chair he sat in.

“This is the headquarters of the Right Arm?” Brenda asked. “Consider me a little discouraged.”

Gally answered, his smile gone. “We’ve moved around more times than we can count. But thank you for the compliment.”

“So which one of you is the boss?” Thomas asked.

Gally nodded at his companion. “Don’t be a slinthead—Vince is in charge. And show some respect. He’s risked his life just because he believes that things should be made right in the world.”

Thomas held his hands up in a conciliatory gesture. “I didn’t mean anything. The way you acted in your apartment, I thought you might be the guy in charge.”

“Well, I’m not. Vince is.”

“Does Vince know how to talk?” Brenda asked.

“Enough!” the large man yelled in a deep, booming voice. “Our whole city is overrun with Cranks—I don’t have time to sit here and listen to childish spats. What do you people want?”

Thomas tried to hide the anger that had lit up inside him. “Just one thing. We want to know why you captured us. Why you’re kidnapping people for WICKED. Gally gave us a lot of hope—we thought we were on the same side. Imagine our surprise when we found out

the Right Arm was just as bad as the people they're supposedly fighting against. How much money were you going to make selling humans?"

"Gally," the man said in response, as if he hadn't heard a single word Thomas had said.

"Yeah?"

"You trust these two?"

Gally refused to meet Thomas's gaze. "Yeah." He nodded. "We can."

Vince leaned forward, resting his massive arms on the table. "Then we can't waste any time. Boy, this is a look-alike operation and we didn't plan on making a single dime off of anybody. We're collecting Immunes to mimic WICKED."

The response surprised Thomas. "Why in the world would you do something like that?"

"We're going to use them to get inside their headquarters."

Thomas stared at the man for a few seconds. If WICKED really was responsible for the disappearance of the other Immunes, it was so simple he could almost laugh. “That just might work.”

“I’m glad you approve.” The man’s face remained unreadable and Thomas couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or not. “We have a contact, and the deal is already arranged to sell them. It’s our way in. We have to stop those people. Prevent them from wasting even more resources on a pointless experiment. If the world is going to survive, they need to use what they have to help the people left alive. Keep the human race going in a way that makes sense.”

“Do you think there’s any chance they could ever find a cure?” Thomas asked.

Vince let out a long, low chuckle that rumbled in his chest. “If you believed that for even a second, you wouldn’t be standing here in front of me, would you? You wouldn’t have escaped, wouldn’t be seeking revenge. Which is what I’m assuming you *are* doing. I know what you’ve been through—Gally told me everything.” He paused. “No, we gave up on their ... *cure* a long time ago.”

“We’re not here about revenge,” Thomas said. “It’s not about us. That’s why I like it that you talk about using their resources for something different. How much do you know about what WICKED is doing?”

Vince leaned back in his chair again, the whole thing squeaking as he shifted. “I just told you something, a secret that we’ve guarded with loss of life. It’s your turn to repay the trust. If Lawrence and his people had known who you were, they would’ve brought you here first thing. I apologize for the rough treatment.”

“I don’t need apologies,” Thomas answered. Though it did bother him that the Right Arm would have treated him differently than anyone else if they’d known who he was. “I just want to know what you have planned.”

“We go no further until you share what you know. What can you offer us?”

“Tell him,” Brenda whispered, nudging Thomas with an elbow. “This is what we came for.”

She was right. His gut had told him to trust Gally from the very moment he’d gotten the note from him, and it was time to commit. Without help, they’d never make it back to their Berg, much less accomplish anything else.

“Okay,” he said. “WICKED thinks they can complete the cure, that they’re almost there. The only missing piece is me. They swear it’s the truth, but they’ve manipulated and lied so much, it’s become impossible to know what’s real and what’s not real. Who knows what their motives are now. Or how desperate they’ve gotten, or what they might be willing to do.”

“How many of you are there?” Vince asked.

Thomas thought about it. “Fewer than four more—waiting back where we were taken by Lawrence. We don’t have numbers, but we have a lot of inside knowledge. How many in your group?”

“Well, Thomas, that’s a hard question to answer. If you’re asking how many people have

joined the Right Arm since we started meeting and gathering forces a few years back, then there are well over a thousand. But as for how many are still around, still safe, still willing to see it all through to the end ... Well. Then we're only talking a few hundred, unfortunately."

"Are any of you immune?" Brenda asked.

"Almost none. I myself am not, and—after what's come to light in Denver—I'm pretty sure I've got the Flare by now. Hopefully the majority of us do *not* have the virus yet, but it's inevitable in this crumbling world. And we want to make sure that something is done to salvage what's left of this beautiful race called humans."

Thomas pointed to a couple of chairs close by. "Can we sit down?"

"Of course."

Almost as soon as Thomas took a seat he began with the many questions that had built up. "So what exactly are you planning to do?"

Vince let out that rumbling chuckle of his again. "Calm down, son. Tell me what you have to offer in all this, and then I'll tell you my plans."

Thomas realized he was almost out of his seat, leaning across the table. He relaxed and sat back. "Look, we know a lot of things about WICKED's headquarters and how things work there. And we have some in our group who've had their memories returned. But the most important thing is that WICKED *wants* me to come back. And I think we can use that to our advantage somehow."

"That's it?" Vince asked. "That's all you have?"

"I never said we could do much without help. Or without weapons."

At this last comment, Vince and Gally exchanged a knowing look.

Thomas knew he'd struck a chord. "What?"

Vince turned his attention first to Brenda, then Thomas. "We've got something that's infinitely better than weapons."

Thomas leaned forward again. "And what could that possibly be?"

"We have a way to make sure no one can *use* any weapons."

"How?" Brenda asked, before Thomas could speak.

"I'll let Gally explain that." Vince gestured to the boy.

"Okay, think about the Right Arm," Gally said. He stood up. "These people aren't soldiers. They're accountants, janitors, plumbers, teachers. WICKED basically has their own little army. Trained in the finest and most expensive weaponry. Even if we could find the largest stash in the world of Launchers and everything else they use, we'd still be at a huge disadvantage."

Thomas couldn't imagine where this was going. "So what's the plan, then?"

"The only way to even the playing field is to make sure they don't have any weapons. Then we might stand a chance."

"So you're going to steal them somehow?" Brenda asked. "Stop a shipment? What?"

"No, nothing like that," Gally responded, shaking his head. Then a look of childlike excitement came over his face. "It's not about *how many* you can recruit to your cause, but *who* you can recruit. Of everyone the Right Arm has gathered, one woman is the key."

"Who?" Thomas asked.

"Her name is Charlotte Chiswell. She was a lead engineer for the biggest arms manufacturer in the world. At least for the advanced weaponry that uses second-generation technology. Every pistol, Launcher, grenade—you name it—used by WICKED comes from there, and they all rely on advanced electronics and computer systems to function. And Charlotte's figured out a way to render their weapons useless."

"Really?" Brenda asked, her tone full of doubt. Thomas found the idea hard to believe also, but he listened intently as Gally explained.

"There's a common chip in every weapon they use, and she's spent the last several months trying to figure out a way to reprogram the things remotely—to jam them. She finally did it. It'll take a few hours once she starts, and a small device needs to be planted inside the building for it to work, so our people who plan to hand over the Immunes will do the job. If it works, we won't have weapons, either, but at least we'll have a level playing field."

"If not an advantage," Vince added. "Their guards and security detail are so trained in using those weapons that it's second nature by now, I'm sure. But I bet they've grown lax in hand-to-hand combat. Real fighting. Sparring with knives and bats and shovels, sticks and rocks and fists." He grinned mischievously. "It'll be an old-fashioned brawl. And I think we can take them. If we didn't do it that way, if their weapons were still working, we'd get destroyed before it even got going."

Thomas thought back to the battle they'd had with the Grievers inside the Maze. It had been like what Vince just described. He shuddered at the memory, but it sure beat going against full-blown weapons.

And if it worked it would mean they had a chance. A rush of excitement hit Thomas. "So how do you do it?"

Vince paused. "We have three Bergs. We're going in with about eighty people—the strongest we could find in our group. We'll hand over the Immunes to our contact inside

WICKED, plant the device—though that's going to be our hardest task—and when it does the job, we'll blow out a hole in the wall and let everyone else in. Once we've gained control of their facility, Charlotte will help us get enough of the weapons running again to stay in control. We'll do this, or every last one of us will die trying. We'll blow up the place if we have to."

Thomas took it all in. His group could be invaluable in an assault like this. Especially those with their memories intact. They knew the layout of the WICKED complex.

Vince continued, and it was as if he'd read Thomas's mind. "If what Gally says is true, you and your friends will be a huge help to our planning team, since some of you know the facility inside and out. And every extra body counts—I don't care how old or young you are."

"We have a Berg also," Brenda offered. "Unless Cranks have ripped the thing to shreds. It's just outside the Denver walls on the northwest side. The pilot is back with our other friends."

"Where are your Bergs?" Thomas asked.

Vince waved his hand toward the back of the room. "Thataway. Safe and sound enough. Everything's close. We'd love to have another week or two to prepare, but don't have much choice. Charlotte's device is ready. Our first eighty people are ready. We can spend the next day or so letting you and the others share what you know, make final preparations, and then we move. No reason to make it sound any more glamorous. We'll just go in and do it."

Hearing him say it like that made it more real for Thomas. "How confident are you?"

"Boy, listen to me," Vince said, his expression grave. "For years and years all we've heard about is the mission of WICKED. How every penny, every man, every woman, every resource—how it all had to be devoted to the cause of finding a cure to the Flare. They told us they'd found Immunes, and if we could just figure out why their brains don't succumb to the virus, why then the whole world would be saved! While in the meantime, cities crumble; education, security, medicine for every other malady known to man, charity, humanitarian aid—the whole world goes to pot so WICKED can do whatever they want to do."

"I know," Thomas said. "I know all too well."

Vince couldn't stop talking, spilling thoughts that had obviously churned inside him for years. "We could've stopped the spread of the disease a lot better than we've been able to cure the disease. But WICKED sucked up all the money and all the best people. Not only that, they gave us false hope, and nobody took the care they should've. Thought the magical cure would save them in the end. But if we wait any longer we'll run out of people to save."

Vince looked tired now. The room fell silent as he sat and stared at Thomas, waiting for a response. And Thomas couldn't argue with what the man had said.

Vince finally spoke again. "Our people selling the Immunes could certainly plant the device once they're inside, but it would be a lot easier if it was in place when we arrive. Having the Immunes will get us into the airspace and permission to land, but ..." He raised his eyebrows at Thomas as if he wanted him to state the obvious himself.

Thomas nodded. "That's where I come in."

"Yes," Vince said, smiling. "I believe that's where you come in."

A surprising calm settled over Thomas. “You can drop me off a few miles away and let me hike in. I’ll pretend I’ve come back to finish the Trials. Based on what I’ve seen and heard, they’ll welcome me with open arms. Just show me what I need to do to plant the device.”

Another genuine smile crossed Vince’s face. “I’ll have Charlotte do it herself.”

“You can get information and help from my friends—Teresa, Aris, others. Brenda here knows a lot, too.” Thomas’s decision was quick and absolute, but he’d accepted the dangerous task. It was the best chance they had.

“All right, Gally,” Vince said. “What’s next? How are we going to do this?”

Thomas’s old enemy stood up and looked at him. “I’ll get Charlotte to train you on the device. Then we’ll take you to our Berg hangar, fly you close to the WICKED headquarters and drop you off while the rest of us are getting ready with the main assault team. You better be up for some good acting out there—we should wait a couple of hours before we come in with the Immunes or it’ll look suspicious.”

“I’ll be fine.” Thomas made an effort to pull in deep breaths, to calm himself.

“Good. We’ll move Teresa and the others over here when you leave. I hope you don’t mind another little jaunt through the city.”

Charlotte was a quiet, petite woman and she was all business. She explained the disabling device’s functions to Thomas in a curt, efficient manner. It was small enough to fit in the backpack they provided him along with some food and extra clothing for the cold hike he’d have to take. Once the device was planted and activated, it would search for and connect with the signals from each weapon, then scramble its system. It would take about an hour to render all of WICKED’s weapons useless.

Simple enough, Thomas thought. The hard part would be planting the thing when he got in without arousing suspicion.

Gally decided that Lawrence would be the one to take Thomas and the pilot to the abandoned hangar where they kept the Bergs. They’d fly to WICKED’s headquarters straight from there. It meant another van trip through the Crank-infested streets of Denver, but they’d take the most direct route, which was down a major highway, and dawn had arrived. For some reason that made Thomas feel a little better.

Thomas was busying himself helping to gather last-minute supplies for the trip when Brenda appeared. He nodded at her and gave her a small smile.

“You gonna miss me?” Thomas asked. He made it sound like a joke, but he really wanted her to say yes.

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t even say that. You sound like you’re giving up already. We’ll all be back together, laughing about the good ol’ days before you know it.”

“I’ve only known you a few weeks.” He smiled again.

“Whatever.” She put her arms around him and spoke into his ear. “I know I was sent into that Scorch city to find you and pretend to be your friend. But I want you to know that you *are* my friend. You ...”

He pulled away so he could see her face again, which was unreadable. “What?”

“Just ... don’t let yourself get killed.”

Thomas swallowed, not sure what to say.

“Well?” she said.

“You be careful, too” was all he could get out.

Brenda reached up and kissed him on the cheek. “That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard you say.” She rolled her eyes again but smiled.

And her smile made everything seem a little brighter to Thomas. “Make sure they don’t screw things up,” he said. “Make sure all the plans make sense.”

“I will. We’ll see you in a day or so.”

“Okay.”

“And I won’t get killed if you won’t. I promise.”

Thomas pulled her into one last hug. “Deal.”

The Right Arm gave them a newer van. Lawrence drove and the pilot sat in the passenger seat next to him. She was silent and not very friendly, keeping mostly to herself. Lawrence wasn't in the greatest of moods, either, probably because he'd gone from being a food distributor in a locked-down facility to serving as designated driver through a city of Cranks. Twice.

The sun had risen, glinting off the buildings of what seemed like an entirely different city from the night before. For some reason the light made the world feel a little safer.

Thomas had been given his pistol back, fully loaded, and he had it stuck in the waist of his jeans. He knew a round of twelve bullets wouldn't do a whole lot if they got ambushed again, but it went far for his peace of mind.

"Okay, remember the plan," Lawrence said, finally breaking the silence.

"And what was the plan?" Thomas asked.

"Make it to the hangar without dying."

It sounded good to Thomas.

They lapsed back into quiet, the only sounds those of the engine and the bumps of the road. Such a moment couldn't help but force Thomas to think about all the horrible things that could go wrong in the next day or two. He tried hard to shut his mind off, focus on the fallen city passing by outside.

So far he'd only seen a few people here and there, most of them at a distance. He wondered if the majority had stayed up late, scared of what might jump out of the darkness—or whether they had been doing the jumping themselves.

The sun gleamed on the high windows of the skyscrapers—the massively tall buildings seemed to stretch in every direction for eternity. The van drove right through the heart of the city, down a wide road scattered with abandoned cars. Thomas saw a few Cranks hiding in vehicles, peeking out the windows as if they were waiting to spring a trap.

Lawrence turned off after a mile or two, then headed down a long, straight highway that led to one of the gates of the walled city. Barricades edged both sides of the road—probably built in better times to keep the noise of countless cars from disturbing the city residents whose homes were set close to the thoroughfare. It seemed impossible that such a world had ever existed. A world where you weren't scared for your life every day.

"This'll take us all the way," Lawrence said. "The hangar is probably our most protected facility, so all we have to do is make it there. An hour from now we'll be up in the air, happy and safe."

"Good that," Thomas said, though after the night before it sounded far too easy. The pilot remained quiet.

They'd gone about three miles when Lawrence started to slow the vehicle. "What in the world?" he murmured.

Thomas turned his attention back to the road ahead to see what the man was talking about and saw several cars driving in circles.

"I guess I'll just try to get past them," Lawrence said, almost talking to himself.

Thomas didn't respond, knowing that every person in the vehicle understood very well

that whatever was going on could only mean trouble.

Lawrence picked up his speed again. "It'll take us forever to backtrack and try a different way. I'm just going to try to get through."

"Just don't do anything stupid," the pilot snapped. "We certainly won't get there if we have to walk."

As they approached, Thomas leaned forward in his seat and strained to see what was going on. A crowd of about twenty people were fighting over a big pile of something he couldn't quite make out, tossing debris and pushing and shoving, throwing punches. Maybe a hundred feet past them were the cars—swerving and spinning out and crashing into each other. It was a miracle no one on the road had been hit yet.

"What are you planning?" Thomas asked. Lawrence hadn't slowed one bit, and they were almost there.

"You need to stop!" the pilot shouted.

Lawrence ignored the command. "No. I'm going through."

"You'll get us killed!"

"We'll be fine. Just shut up for a second!"

They neared the group of people, still going at each other and whatever was in that huge pile. Thomas slid over to the side of the van, tried to get a better look. The Cranks were ripping apart huge sacks of garbage—pulling out old packages of food and half-rotten meat and scraps of leftovers—but no one was able to hold one thing in their hand before someone tried to steal it. Punches flew and fingers clawed and scratched. One man had a huge gash under his eye, a smear of blood dripping down his face like red tears.

The van swerved with a screech and Thomas turned his attention ahead. The drivers of the cars—old models, their shells dented, most of the paint gone—had stopped, and three of them were lined up facing the oncoming van. Lawrence didn't slow down. Instead he turned, heading for the larger gap between the car to the right and the one in the middle. Then in a flash the car on the left bolted forward, turning sharply to try to catch the van before it got by.

"Hold on!" Lawrence screamed, then gunned it even faster.

Thomas gripped the seat below him as they shot toward the gap. The two cars lining the gap didn't move, but the third car was banking and heading straight for them. Thomas saw that they had no chance, almost had time to shout it out, but it was too late.

The front hood of the van had just crossed the threshold of the gap when the third car slammed into the back of its left side. Thomas flew to his left and hit the bar between the two side windows, which shattered with a horrible crunch. Glass flew in all directions and the van spun in circles, its tail end like a whip. Thomas bounced all over, trying to get a grip on anything. The sounds of squealing tires and metal scraping against metal filled the air.

The noise stopped when the van finally hit the cement wall.

Thomas, battered and bruised, was on the floor, on his knees. He pulled himself up in time to see all three vehicles driving off, the sounds of their engines fading as they disappeared down the long, straight road, back the way Thomas and the others had come. He glanced over at Lawrence and the pilot, both of whom were fine.

Then the strangest thing happened. Thomas looked out the window and saw a banged-up

Crank staring at him from twenty feet away. It took him a second to register that the Crank was his friend.

Newt.

Newt looked horrible. His hair had been torn out in patches, leaving bald spots that were nothing more than red welts. Scratches and bruises covered his face; his shirt was ripped, barely hanging on to his thin frame, and his pants were filthy with grime and blood. It was like he'd finally given in to the Cranks, joined their ranks fully.

But he stared at Thomas, as if he recognized that he'd stumbled upon a friend.

Lawrence had been talking, but Thomas only now processed his words.

"We're okay. She's shot to hell, but hopefully she'll get us another couple of miles to the hangar."

Lawrence shifted into reverse and the van wobbled away from the cement wall, the crunch of broken plastic and metal and the squeal of tires erupting in the complete silence that had fallen. Then he started to drive off, and it was like a switch clicked in Thomas's head.

"Stop!" he yelled. "Stop the van! Now!"

"What?" Lawrence replied. "What're you talking about?"

"Just stop the freaking van!"

Lawrence slammed on the brakes as Thomas scrambled to his feet and went for the door. He started to open it when Lawrence grabbed his shirt from behind and yanked him backward.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" the man yelled at him.

Thomas wouldn't let anything stop him now. He yanked the gun out of his pants and pointed it at Lawrence. "Let go of me. Let go of me!"

Lawrence did, throwing his hands up in the air. "Whoa, kid. Calm down! What is *wrong* with you?"

Thomas backed away from him. "I saw my friend out there—I want to see if he's okay. If any trouble starts, I'll run back to the van. Just be ready to get us out of here when I do."

"You think that thing out there is still your friend?" the pilot asked coldly. "Those Cranks are way past the Gone. Can't you see that? Your friend is nothing but an animal now. Worse than an animal."

"Then it'll be a short goodbye, won't it," Thomas answered. He opened the door, then backed out onto the street. "Cover me if I need it. I have to do this."

"I'm gonna kick your butt before we get on that Berg, I can promise you that," Lawrence growled. "Hurry. If those Cranks by the garbage heap head this way, we start firing. I don't care if your mommy and uncle Frank are out there."

"Good that." Thomas turned away from them, slipping the pistol back into his jeans. He walked slowly toward his friend, who stood alone, far away from the pack of Cranks still working on their pile of refuse. For the moment they seemed satisfied with that—they didn't seem interested in him.

Thomas walked half the distance to Newt, then stopped. The worst part about his friend was the wildness in his eyes. Madness lurked behind them, two festering pools of sickness. How had it happened so quickly?

"Hey. Newt. It's me, Thomas. You still remember me, right?"

A sudden clarity filled Newt's eyes then, almost making Thomas step back in surprise.

"I bloody remember you, Tommy. You just came to see me at the Palace, rubbed it in that you ignored my note. I can't go completely crazy in a few days."

Those words hurt Thomas's heart even more than the pitiful sight of his friend. "Then why are you here? Why are you with ... them?"

Newt looked at the Cranks, then back at Thomas. "It comes and goes, man. I can't explain it. Sometimes I can't control myself, barely know what I'm doing. But usually it's just like an itch in my brain, throwing everything off-kilter just enough to bother me—make me angry."

"You seem fine right now."

"Yeah, well. The only reason I'm with these wackers from the Palace is because I don't know what else to do. They're fighting, but they're also a group. You find yourself alone, you don't have a bloody chance."

"Newt, come with me this time, right now. We can take you somewhere safer, somewhere better to ..."

Newt laughed, and when he did his head twitched strangely a couple of times. "Get out of here, Tommy. Get away."

"Just come with me," Thomas begged. "I'll tie you up if it makes you feel better."

Newt's face suddenly hardened into anger and his words shot out in a rage. "Just shut up, you shuck traitor! Didn't you read my note? You can't do one last, lousy thing for me? Gotta be the hero, like always? I hate you! I always hated you!"

He doesn't mean it, Thomas told himself firmly. But they were just words. "Newt ..."

"It was all your fault! You could've stopped them when the first Creators died. You could've figured out a way. But no! You had to keep it going, try to save the world, be the hero. And you came to the Maze and never stopped. All you care about is yourself! Admit it! Gotta be the one people remember, the one people worship! We should've thrown you down the Box hole!"

Newt's face had colored to a deep red, and spit flew from his mouth as he yelled. He started taking lumbering steps forward, his hands balled into fists.

"I'm gonna blast him!" Lawrence yelled from the van. "Get out of the way!"

Thomas turned. "Don't! It's just me and him! Don't do anything!" He faced Newt again. "Newt, stop. Just listen to me. I know you're okay in there. Enough to hear me out."

"I hate you, Tommy!" He was only a few feet away and Thomas took a step backward, his hurt over Newt turning to fear. "I hate you I hate you I hate you! After all I did for you, after all the freaking klunk I went through in the bloody Maze, you can't do the one and only thing I've ever asked you to do! I can't even look at your ugly shuck face!"

Thomas took two more steps back. "Newt, you need to stop. They're going to shoot you. Just stop and listen to me! Get in the van, let me tie you up. Give me a chance!" He couldn't kill his friend. He just couldn't.

Newt screamed and rushed forward. An arc of Launcher lightning shot from the van, skidding and crackling across the pavement, but it missed him. Thomas had frozen in place, and Newt tackled him to the ground, knocking the breath out of him. He struggled to fill his lungs as his old friend climbed on top of him and pinned him down.

"I should rip your eyes out," Newt said, spraying Thomas with spit. "Teach you a lesson

in stupidity. Why'd you come over here? You expected a bloody hug? Huh? A nice sit-down to talk about the good times in the Glade?"

Thomas shook his head, gripped by terror, very slowly reaching for his gun with his free hand.

"You wanna know why I have this limp, Tommy? Did I ever tell you? No, I don't think I did."

"What happened?" Thomas asked, stalling for time. He slipped his fingers around the weapon.

"I tried to kill myself in the Maze. Climbed halfway up one of those bloody walls and jumped right off. Alby found me and dragged me back to the Glade right before the Doors closed. I hated the place, Tommy. I hated every second of every day. And it was all ... your ... *fault!*"

Newt suddenly twisted around and grabbed Thomas by the hand holding the gun. He yanked it toward himself, forcing it up until the end of the pistol was pressed against his own forehead. "Now make amends! Kill me before I become one of those cannibal monsters! Kill me! I trusted *you* with the note! No one else. Now do it!"

Thomas tried to pull his hand away, but Newt was too strong. "I can't, Newt, I can't."

"Make amends! Repent for what you did!" The words tore out of him, his whole body trembling. Then his voice dropped to an urgent, harsh whisper. "Kill me, you shuck coward. Prove you can do the right thing. Put me out of my misery."

The words horrified Thomas. "Newt, maybe we can—"

"Shut up! Just shut up! I trusted you! Now do it!"

"I can't."

"Do it!"

"I can't!" How could Newt ask him to do something like this? How could he possibly kill one of his best friends?

"Kill me or I'll kill you. Kill me! Do it!"

"Newt ..."

"Do it before I become one of them!"

"I ..."

"KILL ME!" And then Newt's eyes cleared, as if he'd gained one last trembling gasp of sanity, and his voice softened. "Please, Tommy. Please."

With his heart falling into a black abyss, Thomas pulled the trigger.

Thomas had closed his eyes when he did it. He heard the impact of bullet on flesh and bone, felt Newt's body jerk, then fall onto the street. Thomas twisted onto his stomach, then pushed himself to his feet, and he didn't open his eyes until he started running. He couldn't allow himself to see what he'd done to his friend. The horror of it, the sorrow and guilt and sickness of it all, threatened to consume him, filled his eyes with tears as he ran toward the white van.

"Get in!" Lawrence yelled at him.

The door was still open. Thomas jumped through it and pulled it shut. Then the van was moving.

No one spoke. Thomas stared out the front window in a daze. He'd shot his best friend in the head. Never mind that it was what he'd been asked to do, what Newt had wanted, what he'd pleaded for. Thomas had still pulled the trigger. He looked down, saw that his hands and legs were shaking, and he suddenly felt freezing cold.

"What have I done?" he mumbled, but the others didn't say a word.

The rest of the trip was a blur to Thomas. They passed more Cranks, even had to shoot some Launcher grenades out the window a couple of times. Then they were through the outer wall of the city, through the fence to the small airport, through the enormous door of the hangar, which was heavily guarded by more members of the Right Arm.

Not much was said, and Thomas just did as he was told, went where he was supposed to go. They boarded the Berg, and he followed as they walked through it and did an inspection. But he never said a word. The pilot went to fire up the big ship, Lawrence disappeared somewhere, and Thomas found a couch in the common room. He lay down and stared at the metal grid of the ceiling.

Since he'd killed Newt, he hadn't thought once about what he had set out to do. Free of WICKED, finally, and here he was voluntarily going back.

He didn't care anymore. Whatever happened, happened. He knew that for the rest of his life he'd be haunted by what he'd seen. Chuck gasping for air while he bled to death, and now Newt screaming at him with raw, terrifying madness. And that last moment of sanity, eyes begging for mercy.

Thomas closed his own, and the images were still there. It took a long time for him to fall asleep.

Lawrence woke him up. "Hey, rise and shine, boy. We'll be there in a few minutes. We're dropping your butt, then getting the hell out of there. No offense."

"None taken." Thomas groaned and swung his legs off the couch. "How far will I have to walk to get there?"

"A few miles. Don't worry, I don't think you'll have too many Cranks to deal with—it's gotten cold in the wilderness. Might see a few angry moose, though. Wolves might try to eat your legs off. Nothing much."

Thomas looked at the man, expecting a big grin, but he was busy in the corner, putting things in order.

"A coat and your backpack are waiting for you at the cargo door," Lawrence said as he moved a small piece of equipment onto a shelf. "You've got food and water. We want to make sure you have a nice, enjoyable hike—relish the joys of nature and all that." Still no smile.

"Thanks," Thomas muttered. He was trying so hard not to slide back into the dark pit of sadness in which he'd fallen asleep. He still couldn't get Chuck and Newt off his mind.

Lawrence stopped what he was doing and turned to him. "I'm only going to ask you this once."

"What?"

"You sure about this? Everything I know about these people is rotten. They kidnap, torture, murder—do anything to get what they want. Seems crazy to let you waltz in there all by yourself."

For some reason Thomas wasn't scared anymore. "I'll be fine. Just make sure you come back."

Lawrence shook his head. "You're either the bravest kid I ever met or plain crazy. Anyway, go get yourself a shower and fresh clothes—gotta be some in the lockers."

Thomas didn't know how he looked at that moment, but he imagined something like a pale and lifeless zombie with dead eyes. "Okay," he said, and headed off to try to wash some of the horror away.

The Berg pitched and Thomas held on to a bar in the wall as the ship lowered to the ground. The ramp door started cranking open with the squeal of hinges while they were still a hundred feet up, and cool air blasted inside. The sound of the thrusters burning roared louder. Thomas could see that they were above a small clearing in a large forest of snow-dusted pine trees—so many that the Berg wouldn't be able to land. Thomas would have to jump.

The ship descended and Thomas steadied himself.

"Good luck, boy," Lawrence said, nodding toward the ground when they got close. "I'd tell you to be careful, but you're not an idiot, so I won't."

Thomas gave him a smile, hoping for one in return. He felt like he needed it, but got nothing. "Okay, then. I'll get the device planted as soon as I get in. I'm sure everything will go down with no problems. Right?"

"I'll have little lizards flying out my nostrils if we have no problems," Lawrence replied, but there was kindness in his voice. "Now get. Once you're out there, go that way." He pointed to the left, toward the edge of the forest.

Thomas pulled on a coat, slipped his arms through the straps of the backpack, then carefully walked down the big metal slab of the cargo door and crouched on its edge. It was only about four feet to the snow-covered ground, but he'd still have to be careful. He jumped and landed in a soft spot—a fresh snowdrift. All the while, his insides were numb.

He'd killed Newt.

He'd shot his own friend in the head.

The clearing was scattered with trunks of trees felled long ago. The tall, thick pines of the forest surrounded Thomas, reaching up to the sky like a wall of majestic towers. He shielded his eyes from the fierce wind as the Berg boosted its thrusters and rose into the air, and he watched as it vanished into the southwestern sky.

The air was crisp and cool and the forest felt fresh, like he was standing in a brand-new world—a place untouched by disease. He was sure that not many people got to see anything like this today, and he felt lucky.

He tightened up his backpack and set out in the direction Lawrence had indicated, determined to make it there as quickly as possible. The less time he had to dwell on what he'd done to Newt, the better. And he knew that being alone out there in the wild would only give him too much time. He took the last few steps out of the snowy clearing and entered the darkness of the thick pines. He allowed their pleasantly overwhelming scent to wash over him and he did his best to shut down his mind again and stop thinking altogether.

He did pretty well, concentrating on his path, the sights and sounds of birds and squirrels and insects, the wonderful smells. His senses weren't used to such things, since he'd spent most of the life he remembered inside. Not to mention the Maze and the Scorch. As he hiked through the woods, he found it hard to believe that such a different place—the Scorch—could exist on the same planet. His mind wandered. He wondered what life would be like for all these animals if humans really did go away for good.

He'd walked for over an hour when he finally reached the edge of the woods and a wide swatch of barren, rocky earth. Islands of dark brown dirt, devoid of vegetation, dappled the treeless expanse where the snow had been blown away by the wind. Craggy stones of all sizes dotted the land, which sloped toward a sudden drop-off—a huge cliff. Beyond that lay the ocean, its deep blue ending on the horizon, where in a sharp line it changed to the light blue of the brilliant sky. And resting on the edge of the cliff, about a mile ahead of him, was WICKED's headquarters.

The complex was enormous, made up of wide, unadorned interconnected buildings; the walls were peppered with narrow slits in the white cement, allowing for an occasional window. One rounded building rose up amid the others like a tower. The fierce weather of the region, mixed with the moisture from the sea, had taken its toll on the facades of the buildings—cracks spiderwebbed the exteriors of the complex—but they looked like structures that would exist there forever, unyielding to whatever man or weather threw at it. It called to mind a barely held memory of something from storybooks—some sort of haunted asylum. It was the perfect place to house the organization trying to prevent the world from becoming just such a madhouse. A long, narrow road led away from the complex, disappearing into the forest.

Thomas set out across the rock-strewn section of earth. An almost disturbing quiet settled over the land. The only thing he could hear besides the thump of his footsteps and his own

breathing was the sound of distant waves breaking on the bottom of the cliff, and even that was faint. He was certain that the people at WICKED had spotted him by now—the security was surely thorough and tight.

A scuttling sound, like clicks of metal against stone, made him stop and look to his right. As if summoned by the thought of security, a beetle blade stood perched on a boulder, its red eye gleaming in Thomas's direction.

He remembered how it had felt the first time he'd seen one of them inside the Glade, just before it scurried away and into the small woods there. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

He waved at the beetle blade, and then he kept walking. In ten minutes he'd be knocking on the door of WICKED, asking, for the first time, to be let in. Not out.

He made his way down the last section of the slope and stepped onto an icy sidewalk that encircled the campus. It looked like there'd once been an effort to make the grounds a little prettier than the barren land around it, but the bushes and flowers and trees had long succumbed to winter, and the patches of gray dirt he could see amid the snow bore only weeds. Thomas walked along the paved lane, wondering why no one had come to greet him yet. Maybe the Rat Man was inside, watching, guessing that Thomas had finally come over to their side.

Two more beetle blades captured his attention, both roaming the snow-covered weeds of the flower beds, scanning left and right with their red beams as they scuttled along. Thomas looked up at the closest set of windows but saw only darkness—the glass was heavily tinted. A rumble coming from behind made him turn to look. A storm was moving in, its clouds dark and heavy, but it was still a few miles distant. As he watched, several bolts of lightning zigzagged across the grayness, and it took him back to the Scorch, to that awful rain of lightning that had met them as they approached the city. He could only hope the weather wasn't so bad this far north.

He resumed his path along the sidewalk and slowed as he approached the front entrance. A large set of glass doors awaited him, and a sudden, almost painful surge of memory pounded inside his skull. The escape from the Maze, the flight through the corridors of WICKED, coming out these doors into the pouring rain. He looked to his right into a small parking lot, where an old bus squatted next to a row of cars. It had to be the same one that had run over that poor Flare-infested woman, then whisked them away to those dorms, where their minds were played with and a Flat Trans eventually took them to the Scorch.

And now, after all he'd been through, he stood at WICKED's threshold, there by his own choice. He reached out and knocked on the cold, dark glass in front of him. He could see nothing on the other side.

Almost immediately, a series of locks disengaged, one after the other; then one of the doors swung out. Janson—who'd always be the Rat Man to Thomas—extended a hand.

"Welcome back, Thomas," he said. "No one believed me, but I've been saying all along that you'd return. I'm glad you made the right choice."

"Let's just get on with it," Thomas said. He'd do this—he'd play the part—but he didn't have to be nice about it.

"Sounds like an excellent idea." Janson stepped back and bowed slightly. "After you."

With a chill along his spine to match the frosty weather outside, Thomas walked past the Rat Man and entered WICKED's headquarters.

Thomas stepped into a wide lobby with a few couches and chairs, fronted by a large, empty desk. It was different from the ones he'd seen the last time he was there. The furniture was colorful and bright, but it did nothing to perk up the dreary feel of the place.

"I thought we'd spend a few minutes in my office," Janson said, and pointed down the hallway that branched off to the right off the lobby. They started walking that way. "We're terribly sorry about what happened in Denver. A shame to lose a city with such potential. All the more reason we need to get this done and get it done quickly."

"What is it you have to do?" he forced himself to ask.

"We'll discuss everything in my office. Our lead team is there."

The device hidden in his backpack weighed heavily on Thomas's thoughts. Somehow he had to get it planted as soon as possible and get the clock ticking.

"That's fine," he said, "but I really need to use the bathroom first." It was the simplest idea he could come up with. And the only sure way to get a minute alone.

"There's one just up ahead," the Rat Man replied.

They turned a corner and continued down an even duller corridor that led to the men's room.

"I'll wait out here," Janson said with a nod toward the door.

Thomas went inside without saying a word. He pulled the device from his backpack and looked around. There was a wooden cabinet for storing toiletries above the sink, and the top of it had a lip just tall enough that Thomas could slip the gadget in and it would be concealed. He flushed the toilet and then turned on the water at the sink. He activated the device as he'd been taught, wincing at the slight beep that sounded, then reached up and deposited it on top of the cabinet. After shutting off the water, he calmed himself while the hand blower ran its course.

Then he stepped back into the hallway.

"All finished?" Janson asked, annoyingly polite.

"All finished," Thomas replied.

They continued walking, passing a few crookedly hung portraits of Chancellor Paige just like the ones on the posters in Denver.

"Am I ever going to meet the chancellor?" Thomas finally asked, curious about the woman.

"Chancellor Paige is very busy," Jansen answered. "You have to remember, Thomas—completing the blueprint and finalizing the cure are only the beginning. We're still organizing the logistics of getting it out to the masses—most of the team is working hard at it as we speak."

"What makes you so sure this will work? Why just me?"

Janson glanced at him, flashed his rodentlike smile. "I know, Thomas. I believe it with every ounce of my being. And I promise you'll get the credit you deserve."

For some reason Thomas thought of Newt just then. "I don't want any credit."

"Here we are," the man replied, ignoring Thomas.

They'd reached an unmarked door and the Rat Man let him inside. Two people—a man

and a woman—sat facing a desk. Thomas didn't recognize them.

The woman wore a dark pants suit and had long red hair, and thin-framed glasses were perched on her nose. The man was bald, angular and skinny, dressed in green scrubs.

"These are my associates," Janson said, already moving to sit behind the desk. He motioned for Thomas to take the third seat between his two visitors, which he did. "Dr. Wright"—he pointed at the woman—"is our lead Psych, and Dr. Christensen our lead physician. We have a lot to discuss, so you'll pardon me if I'm short on introductions."

"Why am I the Final Candidate?" Thomas asked, cutting to the chase.

Janson gathered himself, needlessly moving things around on his desk before sitting back and folding his hands on his lap. "Excellent question. We had a handful of—pardon the term—subjects slated in the beginning to ... compete for this honor. Recently it was narrowed to you and Teresa. But she has a way of following orders that you don't. Your tendency toward freethinking is what ultimately determined that you are the Final Candidate."

Played to the end, Thomas thought bitterly. His own attempts to rebel had turned out to be exactly what they wanted. Every ounce of his anger was directed at the man sitting in front of him. At the Rat Man. To Thomas, Janson had come to represent WICKED from top to bottom.

"Let's just get this over with," he said. He did his best to hide it, but he could hear the fury in his own voice.

Janson seemed unfazed. "Some patience, please. This won't take long. Keep in mind that collecting the killzone patterns is a delicate operation. We're dealing with your mind, and the slightest mishap in what you're thinking or interpreting or perceiving can render the resultant findings worthless."

"Yes," Dr. Wright added, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I know A.D. Janson told you about the importance of coming back, and we're glad you made the decision." Her voice was soft and pleasant and somehow exuded intelligence.

Dr. Christensen cleared his throat, then spoke, his voice thin and reedy. Thomas immediately disliked him. "I don't know how you could've made any other decision. The whole world's on the verge of collapse, and you can help save it."

"So you say," Thomas responded.

"Exactly," Janson said. "So we say. Everything is ready. But there's still a little more to tell you so you can understand this decision you've made."

"A little more to tell me?" Thomas repeated. "Isn't the whole point of the Variables that I don't know everything? Aren't you going to throw me in a cage with gorillas or something? Maybe make me walk through a field of land mines? Dump me in the ocean, see if I can swim back to shore?"

"Just tell him the rest," Dr. Christensen answered.

"The rest?" Thomas asked.

"Yes, Thomas," Janson said through a sigh. "The rest. After all the Trials, after all the studies, after all the patterns that have been collected and scrutinized, after all the Variables we've put you and your friends through, it comes down to this."

Thomas didn't say anything. He was barely able to breathe because of a strange anticipation, the simultaneous desires to know and *not* know.

Janson leaned forward, elbows on desk, a grave look shadowing his face. “One final thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“Thomas, we need your brain.”

Thomas's heartbeat sped up to rattling thumps in his chest. He knew that the man wasn't testing him. They'd gone as far as they could in analyzing reactions and brain patterns. Now they'd chosen the person best suited to ... take apart in their effort to build the cure.

Suddenly, the Right Arm couldn't get there fast enough.

"My brain?" he forced himself to repeat.

"Yes," Dr. Christensen answered. "The Final Candidate holds the missing piece to complete the data for the blueprint. But we had no way to tell until we monitored the patterns against the Variables. Vivisection will give us our final data, your systems functioning properly while we do it. Not that you'll feel any pain—we'll heavily sedate you until..."

He didn't need to finish. His words drifted off into silence and the three WICKED scientists awaited Thomas's response. But he couldn't speak. He'd faced death countless times over what he could remember of his life, yet he'd always done so in the desperate hope to survive, doing anything in his power to last one more day. But this was different. He didn't just have to last through some trial until his rescuers came. This was something he wouldn't come back from. This was the end if they didn't come.

He had a random, horrible thought: did Teresa know about this?

It surprised him how deeply the idea hurt.

"Thomas?" Janson asked, breaking Thomas's train of thought. "I know this must come as quite a shock to you. I need you to understand that this is not a test. This is not a Variable and I'm not lying to you. We think we can complete the blueprint for the cure by analyzing your brain tissue and how, combined with the patterns we've collected, its physical makeup allows it to resist the Flare virus's power. The Trials were all created so we wouldn't have to just cut everyone open. Our whole aim was to save lives, not waste them."

"We've been collecting and analyzing the patterns for years, and you've been the strongest by far in your reactions to the Variables," Dr. Wright continued. "We've known for a long time—and it was the highest priority to keep this from the subjects—that in the end we'd have to choose the best candidate for this last procedure."

Dr. Christensen went on to outline the process while Thomas listened in numb silence. "You have to be alive but not awake. We'll sedate you and numb the area of the incision, but there aren't any nerves in the brain so it's a relatively painless process. Unfortunately, you won't recover from our neural explorations—the procedure is fatal. But the results will be invaluable."

"And if it doesn't work?" Thomas asked. All he could see was Newt's final moments. What if Thomas *could* prevent that horrible death for countless others?

The Psych's eyes flickered with discomfort. "Then we'll keep ... working at it. But we have every confidence—"

Thomas cut her off, unable to help himself. "But you don't, do you? You've been paying people to steal more immune ... *subjects*"—he said the word with vicious spite—"so you can start all over again."

No one answered at first. Then Janson said, "We will do whatever it takes to find a cure.

With as little loss of life as possible. Nothing else needs to be said on the matter.”

“Why are we even talking?” Thomas asked. “Why not just grab me and tie me down, rip my brain out?”

Dr. Christensen answered. “Because you’re our Final Candidate. You were part of the bridge between our founders and the current staff. We’re trying to show you the respect you deserve. It’s our hope that you’ll make the choice yourself.”

“Thomas, do you need a minute?” Dr. Wright asked. “I know this is difficult, and I assure you we don’t take it lightly. What we’re asking for is a huge sacrifice. Will you donate your brain to science? Will you allow us to put the final pieces of the puzzle together? Take another step toward a cure for the good of the human race?”

Thomas didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t believe the turn of events. After everything, could it be true that they only needed one more death?

The Right Arm was coming. Newt’s image seared across his mind.

“I need to be alone,” he finally got out. “Please.” For the first time, a part of him actually wanted to give in, let them do this. Even if there was only a small chance that it would work.

“You’ll be doing the right thing,” Dr. Christensen said. “And don’t worry. You’re not going to feel an ounce of pain.”

Thomas didn’t want to hear another word. “I just need some time alone before all this begins.”

“Fair enough,” Janson said, standing up. “We’ll accompany you to the medical facilities and get you in a private room for a while. Though we need to get things started soon.”

Thomas leaned forward and put his head in his hands, staring at the floor. The plan he’d concocted with the Right Arm suddenly seemed foolish beyond measure. Even if he could escape this group—even if he *wanted* to now—how would he survive until his friends arrived?

“Thomas?” Dr. Wright asked, reaching out to put a hand on his back. “Are you okay? Do you have any more questions?”

Thomas sat up, brushed her hand away. “Just ... let’s go where you said.”

The air suddenly seemed to go out of Janson’s office and Thomas’s chest tightened. He stood and walked to the door, opened it and stepped out into the hallway. It was all too much.

Thomas followed the doctors, but his mind was racing. He didn't know what to do. There was no way to communicate with the Right Arm, and he'd lost his ability to speak inside Teresa's—or Aris's—mind.

They turned a couple of corners, and the zigzagging made Thomas think of the Maze. He almost wished he were back there—things were so much simpler then.

"There's a room right up here on the left," Janson explained. "I already put a typing pad in there if you'd like to leave any messages for your friends. I'll figure out a way to deliver them."

"I'll make sure you get something to eat, also," Dr. Wright called from behind.

Their politeness annoyed Thomas. He remembered stories of killers being put to death in the old days. They always got a last meal, too. As fancy as they wanted it.

"I want steak," he said, stopping to look at her. "And shrimp. And lobster. And pancakes. And a candy bar."

"I'm sorry—you'll have to settle for a couple of sandwiches."

Thomas sighed. "Figures."

Thomas sat in a soft chair, staring at the typing pad on the small table in front of him. He had no intention of writing a note to anyone, but he didn't know what else to do. The situation had proven to be way more complicated than he could've imagined. He didn't know what he'd expected, but the notion that they'd dissect him alive had never crossed his mind. He'd figured whatever they did, he could just play along until the Right Arm showed up.

But there wouldn't be any coming back from playing along now.

He finally typed goodbye messages to Minho and Brenda just in case he ended up dead; then he rested his head in his arms until the food arrived. He ate slowly, then rested again. He could only hope his friends showed up in time. Either way, he certainly wouldn't leave this room until he absolutely had to.

He dozed as he waited, the minutes stretching on.

A knock at the door startled him awake.

"Thomas?" came the muffled voice of Janson. "We really need to get things started."

The words lit a fire of panic in Thomas. "I'm ... not ready yet." He knew he sounded ridiculous.

After a long pause, Janson said, "I'm afraid we don't have much of a choice."

"But ..." Thomas began, but before he could pull his thoughts together, the door opened and Janson stepped inside.

"Thomas—waiting will only make it worse. We need to go."

Thomas didn't know what to do. He was surprised that they'd been so calm with him so far. He realized he'd pushed it to the limit and he'd run out of time. He took a deep breath.

"Let's get it over with."

The Rat Man smiled. "Follow me."

Janson led Thomas to a prep room with a wheeled bed surrounded by all kinds of monitors and several nurses. Dr. Christensen was there, dressed from head to toe in scrubs, a surgical mask already in place on his face. Thomas could only see his eyes, but he looked eager to get started.

"So that's it?" Thomas asked. A surge of panic raced through his gut, and it felt as if something were trying to chew through his chest. "Time to cut me open?"

"I'm sorry," the doctor answered. "But we need to begin."

The Rat Man was just about to speak again when a blaring alarm erupted throughout the building.

Thomas's heart lurched and relief flooded his system. It had to be the Right Arm.

The door swung open and Thomas turned just in time to see a frantic-looking woman announce, "A Berg arrived with a delivery, but it was a trick to get people inside—they're trying to take over the main building this very second."

Janson's response almost stopped Thomas's heart.

"Looks like we need to hurry and get this procedure started. Christensen, put him under."

Thomas's chest constricted and his throat seemed to swell. Everything was on the line, but he was frozen.

Janson barked orders. "Dr. Christensen, quickly. Who knows what these people are up to, but we can't waste a second now. I'll go tell operating personnel to stand their ground, no matter what."

"Wait," Thomas finally croaked. "I don't know if I can do this." The words felt empty—he knew they wouldn't stop at this point.

Janson's face burned red. Instead of answering Thomas, he turned to the doctor. "Do whatever it takes to open this kid up."

Just as Thomas opened his mouth to speak, something sharp pricked his arm, sending jolts of heat through his body, and he went limp, collapsing onto the gurney. From his neck down he was numb, and terror flared inside him. Dr. Christensen leaned over him and passed a spent syringe to a nurse.

"I'm really sorry, Thomas. We have to do this."

The doctor and a nurse pushed him farther onto the bed, hoisting his legs up so that he lay flat on his back. Thomas could move his head slightly from side to side, but that was all. The sudden turn of events overwhelmed him as he realized the implications. He was about to die. Unless somehow the Right Arm got to him immediately, he was going to die.

Janson stepped into his view. Nodding approvingly, the Rat Man patted the doctor on the shoulder. "Get it done." Then he turned and disappeared; Thomas could hear someone shouting in the hallway before the door closed.

"I just need to run a few tests," Dr. Christensen explained. "Then we'll get you into the operating room." He turned to fiddle with some instruments behind him.

It felt like the man spoke to him from a hundred miles away. Thomas lay helpless, his mind spinning as the doctor took blood, measured his skull. The man worked in silence, barely blinking. But the beads of sweat on his forehead showed that he was racing against who-knew-what. Did he have an hour to get this done? Several hours?

Thomas closed his eyes. He wondered if the weapons-disabling device had done its job. Wondered if anyone would find him. Then he realized, did he even want them to? Was it really possible that WICKED almost had a cure? He forced himself to breathe evenly, focus on trying to move his limbs. But nothing happened.

The doctor suddenly straightened and grinned at Thomas. "I believe we're ready. We'll wheel you to the operating room now."

The man walked through the door and Thomas's gurney was pushed into the hallway. Unable to move, he lay staring up at the lights in the ceiling flashing by as he rolled down the corridor. He finally had to close his eyes.

They'd put him to sleep. The world would fade. And he'd be dead.

He snapped his eyes open again. Closed them. His heart pounded; his hands grew sweaty and he realized he was gripping the sheets on the gurney in two balled fists. Movement was coming back, slowly. Eyes open again. The lights zooming by. Another turn, then another. Despair threatened to squeeze the life out of Thomas before the doctors could do it.

"I ...," he started to say, but nothing else came out.

"What?" Christensen asked, peering down at him.

Thomas struggled to speak, but before he could force any words out a thunderous boom rattled the hallway and the doctor tripped, his weight pushing the gurney forward as he scrambled to stop himself from falling. The bed shot to the right and crashed into the wall, then rebounded and spun until it hit the other side. Thomas tried to move, but he was still paralyzed, helpless. He thought of Chuck and Newt, and a sadness like none he'd ever known seized his heart.

Someone screamed from the direction of the explosion. Shouts followed; then everything grew silent again, and the doctor was up on his feet, hurrying to the gurney, straightening it out, pushing it again, banging through a set of swinging doors. A host of people dressed in scrubs awaited them in a white operating room.

Christensen started barking orders. "We have to hurry! Everyone, get to your places. Lisa, get him fully sedated. Now!"

A short lady responded. "We haven't done all the prep—"

"It doesn't matter! As far as we know the whole building's gonna burn down."

He placed the gurney next to an operating table; several sets of hands were lifting Thomas and moving him over before the gurney even came to a complete stop. He settled on his back, strained to take in the beehive buzz of doctors and nurses, at least nine or ten of them. He felt a prick in his arm, glanced down to see the short lady inserting an IV into his vein. All the while the only movement he could manage was in his hands.

Lights were placed in position just above him. Other things were stuck into his body in various places; monitors started beeping; there was the hum of a machine; people talking over other people; the room was filled with the scurry of movement, like an orchestrated dance.

And the lights, so bright. The room spinning, though he lay perfectly still. The rising terror of what they were doing to him. Knowing it was ending, right here, right now.

"I hope it works," he finally managed to get out.

A few seconds later, the drugs finally took him and it all went away.

For a long time, Thomas knew only darkness. The break in the void of his thoughts was just a hairline crack—only wide enough to let him know about the void itself. Somewhere on the edge of it all, he knew that he was supposed to be asleep, kept alive only so they could inspect his brain. Take it apart, probably slice by slice.

So he wasn't dead yet.

At some point as he floated in this confusing mass of blackness, he heard a voice. Calling his name.

After hearing *Thomas* several times, he finally decided to go after it, find it. He made himself move toward the voice.

Toward his name.

"Thomas, I have faith in you," a woman said to him as he fought to regain consciousness. He didn't recognize the voice, but it was somehow soft and authoritative at the same time. He continued struggling, heard himself moan, felt himself shifting in his bed.

Finally, he opened his eyes. Blinking against the brightness of the overhead lights, he noticed a door closing behind whoever had been there to wake him.

"Wait," he said, but it came out as nothing more than a gravelly whisper.

By force of will he got his elbows under him and pushed himself up. He was alone in the room, the only sounds distant shouts and an occasional rumble like thunder. His mind began to clear, and he realized that other than a little grogginess, he felt fine. Which meant that, unless the miracles of science had really taken a leap, he also still had his brain.

A manila folder on the table beside his bed caught his attention. In big red letters, *Thomas* had been written across the front of it. He swung his legs around to sit up on the edge of the mattress and grabbed the folder.

There were two pieces of paper inside. The first was a map of the WICKED complex, with black marker tracing several routes through the building. He quickly scanned the second: it was a letter, addressed to him and signed by Chancellor Paige. He put the map down and started to read the letter from the beginning.

Dear Thomas,

It's my belief that the Trials are over. We have more than enough data to create a blueprint. My associates disagree with me on this matter, but I was able to stop this procedure and save your life. It's now our task to work with the data we already have and build a cure for the Flare. Your participation, and that of the other subjects, is no longer necessary.

You now have a great task ahead of you. When I became chancellor I realized the importance of creating a back door of sorts to this building. I placed this back door in an unused maintenance room. I'm asking you to remove yourself, your friends, and the considerable number of Immunes we've gathered. Time is of the essence, as I'm sure you're aware.

There are three paths marked on the map I've enclosed. The first shows you how to leave this building through a tunnel—once outside, you'll be able to find where the Right Arm has made their own entrance to another building. There, you can join them. The second route will show you how to get to the Immunes. The third shows you how to find the back door. It's a Flat Trans that will transport you to what I hope will be a new life. Take them all and leave.

Ava Paige, Chancellor

Thomas stared at the paper, his mind in a spin. Another rumble sounded far away and jarred him back to reality. He trusted Brenda, and she trusted the chancellor. All he could do now was move.

He folded the letter and the map and stuffed them in his back pocket, then slowly stood

up. Surprised at how quickly his strength had returned, he ran to the door. A peek out into the hallway showed that it was empty. He slipped out, and just as he did, two people came running by from behind. They didn't so much as glance at him, and Thomas realized that the chaos brought about by the Right Arm's attack might be the thing that ended up saving him.

He pulled out the map and studied it carefully, following the black line that led to the tunnel. It wouldn't take long at all to get to it. He memorized the path and started jogging down the hall, scanning the two other paths Chancellor Paige had marked on the map as he went.

He had only gone a few yards when he stopped, stunned by what he was seeing. He pulled the map closer to make sure—maybe he wasn't reading it right. But there was no mistaking what it showed.

WICKED had hidden the Immunes in the Maze.

There were two mazes on the map, of course—the one for Group A and the one for Group B. Both must've been built deep into the bedrock that lay under the main buildings of WICKED's headquarters. Thomas couldn't tell which one he'd been directed to go to, but either way he was going back to the Maze. With a sickening dread, he started running toward Chancellor Paige's tunnel.

He followed the map and ran down hallway after hallway until he got to a long set of stairs that descended into a basement. The path took him through empty rooms and then, finally, to a small door that opened to a tunnel. The tunnel was dark but, Thomas was relieved to see, not completely black. Several uncovered lightbulbs hung from the ceiling as he ran along the narrow corridor. After about two hundred feet he came to a ladder that had been marked on the map. Up he went, and at the top there was a round metal door with a wheel handle that reminded him of the entrance to the Map Room in the Glade.

He spun the handle and pushed with all his strength. A dim light came in as Thomas forced the door up, and as it flipped open on its hinges, a great gust of cold air blew over him. He heaved himself out and onto the ground, next to a big rock in the barren, snow-covered land between the forest and WICKED headquarters.

He carefully hefted the lid to the tunnel up and over to close it again, then crouched behind the stone. He didn't notice any movement, but the night was too dark to see very well. He looked up into the sky, and when he saw the same heavy gray clouds he'd noticed when he'd reached the complex, he realized that he had no idea how much time had passed since then. Had he been in the building for only a few hours, or had a full night and day come and gone?

Chancellor Paige's note said that the Right Arm had made their own entrance into the buildings, probably with the explosions Thomas had heard earlier, and that was where he needed to go first. He saw the wisdom of connecting with the group—there was safety in numbers—and he had to let them know where the Immunes were hidden. Judging from the map, the best option Thomas had was to run to the cluster of buildings farthest from where he'd come out and search the area.

He went for it, edging around the boulder and sprinting for the closest building. He crouched as he ran, trying to stay as low as possible. Lightning streaked through the sky; it illuminated the cement of the complex and flashed off the white snow. Thunder followed quickly, rumbling across the land and rattling deep in his chest.

He reached the first building and pushed through the line of ragged bushes up against the wall. He edged along the side of the structure but found nothing. He stopped when he came to the first corner and peered around it—in the space between buildings were a series of courtyards. But he still saw no way inside.

He skirted the next two buildings, but as he approached the fourth one, he heard voices and immediately dropped to the ground. As quietly as he could, he scooted along the frozen dirt toward an overgrown bush, then peeked around it to search for the source of the noise.

There it was. Rubble lay strewn across the yard in huge heaps, and behind them a massive hole had been blasted in the side of the building. Which meant that the explosion

had originated from the inside. A faint light shone from the opening, casting broken shadows on the ground. Sitting on the edge of one of those shadows were two people wearing civilian clothes. The Right Arm.

Thomas had started to stand up when an icy hand gripped his mouth tightly and he was jerked backward. Another arm wrapped around his chest and pulled him, dragging him along the ground; his feet burrowed through the snow. Thomas kicked out, struggling to free himself, but the person was too strong.

They turned the corner of the building into another small courtyard, and Thomas was thrown to the ground on his stomach. His captor flopped him onto his back and clamped a hand again over Thomas's mouth. It was a man he didn't recognize. Another figure crouched over him as well.

Janson.

"I'm very disappointed," the Rat Man said. "Looks like not everyone in my organization is on the same team after all."

Thomas could do nothing but struggle against the person pinning him to the ground.

Janson sighed. "I guess we're going to have to do this the hard way."

Janson pulled out a long, slender knife, held it up and inspected it with narrowed eyes. "Let me tell you something, kid. I've never thought of myself as a violent man, but you and your friends sure have driven me to the brink. My patience is stretched to a minimum, but I'm going to show restraint. Unlike you, I think about more than myself. I'm working to save people, and I *will* finish this project."

Thomas forced his every inch to relax, to be still. Struggling hadn't accomplished a thing, and he needed to save his energy for when the right opportunity presented itself. It was clear that the Rat Man had lost it, and judging from that blade, he was determined to get Thomas back in the operating room at any cost.

"That's a good boy. No need to fight this. You should be proud. It will be you and your mind that save the world, Thomas."

The man holding Thomas down—a squat guy with black hair—spoke then. "I'm going to let go of your mouth now, boy. Let out one peep and A.D. Janson's gonna give you a nice poke with that blade of his. Understand? We want you alive, but that doesn't mean you can't have a few war wounds."

Thomas nodded as calmly as he could and the man let go of him and sat back. "Smart boy."

It was Thomas's cue to go for it. He swung his leg violently to his right and kicked Janson in the face. The man's head jerked backward and his body crashed to the ground. The dark-haired man moved to tackle Thomas, but Thomas squirmed out from under him and went after Janson again, this time kicking the hand that held the knife. It flew out of his grasp, skipping across the ground until it smacked into the side of the building.

Thomas turned his attention to the blade, and that was all the squat man needed. He lunged at Thomas, who landed on his back on top of Janson. Janson squirmed beneath them as they wrestled, and Thomas felt a desperation seize him, adrenaline exploding through his body. He screamed and pushed, kicked, fought his way out from between the two men. Scrabbling and clawing with his hands and feet, he got loose and dove toward the building for the knife. He landed next to it, grabbed it and spun around, expecting an immediate attack. Both men were just getting to their feet, obviously stunned by his sudden burst of strength.

Thomas stood up as well, holding the knife out in front of him. "Just let me go. Just walk away and let me go. I swear if you come after me I'm gonna go crazy with this thing and won't stop stabbing till you're both dead. I swear it."

"It's two against one, kid," Janson said. "I don't care if you have a knife."

"You've seen what I can do," Thomas replied, trying to sound as dangerous as he felt. "You've watched me in the Maze and the Scorch." He almost wanted to laugh at the irony. They had made him into a killer ... to save people?

The short guy scoffed. "If you think we're—"

Thomas reared back and threw the knife as he'd seen Gally do, handle over blade. It cartwheeled through the space between them and slammed into the man's neck. There was no blood at first, but he reached up, shock transforming his face, and clawed at the knife

stuck in him. That was when the blood came, spurting in jets in time with his heartbeat. He opened his mouth, but before he could speak he collapsed to his knees.

"You little ...," Janson whispered, his eyes wide with horror as he stared at his colleague.

Thomas was shocked by what he'd done, and froze to the spot, but the moment broke as Janson turned his head to look back at him. Thomas burst into a sprint out of the courtyard, around the corner of the building. He had to get back to the hole in the building, had to get back inside.

"Thomas!" Janson shouted; Thomas heard his footsteps in pursuit. "Get back here! You have no idea what you're doing!"

Thomas didn't even pause. He passed the bush he'd hidden behind and ran full-bore toward the gaping hole in the side of the building. A man and a woman still sat nearby, crouched on the ground so that their backs touched. Upon seeing Thomas, they both clambered to their feet.

"I'm Thomas!" he yelled at them just as they opened their mouths to ask questions. "I'm on your side!"

They exchanged a look, then returned their attention to Thomas just as he skidded to a stop in front of them. Heaving for breath, he turned to look back, saw the shadowed figure of Janson running toward them, maybe fifty feet away.

"They've been looking all over for you," the male guard said. "But you're supposed to be in there." He jabbed a finger at the hole.

"Where is everybody? Where's Vince?" Thomas panted.

And as he spoke he knew Janson was still tearing after him. Thomas turned to face the Rat Man, whose face was screwed up in unnatural rage. It was a look Thomas had seen before. It was the same insane anger he'd seen in Newt. The Rat Man had the Flare.

Janson spoke between heavy breaths. "That boy ... is property ... of WICKED. Hand him over."

The lady didn't flinch. "WICKED doesn't mean a pile of goose crap to me, old man. If I were you, I'd get lost, and I wouldn't go back inside, either. Bad things are about to happen to your friends in there."

The Rat Man didn't respond, just kept panting, his eyes darting between Thomas and the others. Finally, he started to back away, slowly. "You people don't get it. Your self-righteous arrogance will be the end of everything. I hope you can live with that while you rot in hell."

Then he turned and ran away, disappearing into the gloom.

"What'd you do to piss *him* off?" the lady asked.

Thomas tried to catch his breath. "Long story. I need to find Vince, or whoever's in charge. I need to find my friends."

"Calm down there, kid," the man responded. "Things are kind of quiet right now. People getting in position, planting, that sort of thing."

"Planting?" Thomas asked.

"Planting."

"What does that mean?"

"Explosives, you idiot. We're about to bring this whole building down. Show old WICKED that we mean serious business."

Everything came into focus at that moment for Thomas. There'd been a fanaticism about Vince that hadn't fully hit him until now. And there was the way the Right Arm had treated Thomas and his friends in the van after taking them hostage at the Berg. Also, why did they have all these explosives but no real conventional weapons? It didn't make sense unless their goal was to destroy, not take over. The Right Arm wasn't exactly on the same page as he was. Maybe they thought their motives were pure, but Thomas was beginning to realize that the organization had a darker purpose.

He needed to step carefully. All that mattered at that moment was saving his friends and finding and releasing the others who'd been captured.

The lady's voice interrupted Thomas's thoughts. "You're doing a lot of heavy thinking in that noggin of yours."

"Yeah ... sorry. When do you think they're going to set off the explosives?"

"Pretty soon, I suppose. They've been planting for hours. They want them all to detonate at the same time, but I'm guessing we aren't quite that skilled."

"What about all the people inside? What about the ones we came to rescue?"

The two of them looked at each other, then shrugged. "Vince hopes to get everyone out."

"He hopes? What does that mean?"

"He hopes."

"I need to talk to him." What Thomas really wanted was to find Minho and Brenda. Right Arm or no Right Arm, he knew what they had to do: get to the Maze and lead everyone out of there to the Flat Trans.

The lady pointed to the hole in the side of the building. "Just through there a ways is an area they've pretty much taken over. You'll probably find Vince there. Careful, though. WICKED's got guards hiding all over the place. And they're vicious little buggers."

"Thanks for the warning." Thomas turned, eager to get inside. The hole loomed over him, dusty darkness waiting within. There were no more alarms or flashing red lights. He stepped through.

At first Thomas didn't see or hear anything. He walked on in silence, careful of what might be around each turn. The lights got brighter the farther he walked, and he finally spotted a door at the end of the hallway that had been propped open. He jogged to it and peered in to see a large room with tables scattered across the floor set on their sides like shields. Several people crouched behind them.

The people were watching a large set of double doors on the other side of the room, and no one noticed him as he squeezed against the doorframe, hiding most of his body from the inside. He leaned his head in to get a better look. He spotted Vince and Gally behind one of the tables, but didn't recognize anyone else. On the far left side of the room, there was a small office, and he could tell that at least nine or ten people were huddled inside. He strained to see, but he couldn't make out any faces.

"Hey!" he whispered as loudly as he dared. "Hey! Gally!"

The boy turned immediately, but had to glance around a few seconds before he spotted Thomas. Gally squinted, as though he thought his eyes might be tricking him.

Thomas waved to make sure he saw him and Gally motioned for him to come over.

Thomas looked around again to make sure it was safe; then he crouched down, ran over to the table and collapsed on the ground next to his old nemesis. He had so many questions he didn't know where to begin.

"What happened?" Gally asked him. "What did they do to you?"

Vince shot him a glare but didn't say anything.

Thomas didn't know how to answer. "They ... ran a few tests. Look, I found out where they're keeping the Immunes. You can't blow the place up until we get them out."

"Then go get 'em," Vince said. "We've got a one-shot deal here, and I'm not going to waste it."

"You *brought* some of those people here!" Thomas looked to Gally for support, but he only got a shrug in response.

Thomas was on his own.

"Where's Brenda, Minho, everyone else?" he asked.

Gally nodded toward the side room. "Those guys are all in there, said they wouldn't do anything until you came back."

Thomas suddenly felt sorry for the scarred boy beside him. "Come with me, Gally. Let these guys do whatever they want, but come help us. Don't you wish someone had done the same for us when we were in the Maze?"

Vince spun on them. "Don't even think about it," he barked. "Thomas, you knew coming in here what our goals were. If you abandon us now I'll consider you a turncoat. You'll be a target."

Thomas kept his focus on Gally. He saw a sadness in the boy's eyes that made his heart break. And he also saw something he'd never seen there before: trust. Genuine trust.

"Come with us," Thomas said.

A smile formed on his old enemy's face and he responded in a way Thomas never would have expected.

"Okay."

Thomas didn't wait for Vince to react. He grabbed Gally's arm and they scooted away from the table together, then ran to the office and slipped inside.

Minho was the first to him, pulling him into a bear hug as Gally watched awkwardly from the side. Then the others were there, Minho. Brenda. Jorge. Teresa. Even Aris. Thomas almost got dizzy from the quick exchange of hugs and words of relief and welcome. He was especially thrilled to see Brenda, and he held on to her longer than anyone else. But as good as it felt, he knew they didn't have time for it.

He pulled away. "I can't explain everything right now. We have to go find the Immunes WICKED took, then find this back-door Flat Trans I learned about—and we need to hurry before the Right Arm blows this place up."

"Where are the Immunes?" Brenda asked.

"Yeah, what did you learn?" Minho added.

Thomas never thought he'd say what he had to say next. "We need to go back to the Maze."

Thomas showed them the letter he'd discovered next to him in the recovery room, and it only took a few moments for them all to agree—even Teresa and Gally—to abandon the Right Arm and set off on their own. Set off for the Maze.

Brenda looked at Thomas's map and said she knew exactly how to get there. She gave him a knife and he gripped it tightly in his right hand, wondering if his survival would come down to one thin blade. They slipped out of the side room and made for the double doors while Vince and the others yelled at them, called them crazy, told them they'd get killed within minutes. Thomas ignored every word.

The door was still cracked, and Thomas was the first one through. He crouched, ready for an attack, but the hall was empty. The others fell in behind him, and he decided to trade stealth for speed, sprinting down that first long hallway. The gloomy light made the place feel haunted, as if the spirits of all the people WICKED had let die were there waiting in the corners and alcoves. But to Thomas, it felt like they were on his side.

With Brenda pointing the way, they turned a corner, went down a flight of stairs. Took a shortcut through an old storage room, down another long hallway. Down more stairs. A right and then a left. Thomas kept a fast pace, constantly scanning for danger. He never paused, never stopped to catch his breath, never doubted Brenda's directions. He was a Runner again, and despite everything, it felt good.

They approached the end of one hallway and turned to the right. Thomas had only gone three more steps when out of nowhere someone was on top of him, gripping his shoulders and throwing him to the ground.

Thomas fell and rolled, pushing to get the person off of him. He heard shouts and the sounds of others struggling. It was dark and Thomas could barely see who he was fighting, but he punched and kicked, slashed with his knife, felt it connect and rip something. A woman screamed. A fist smacked into his right cheek, something hard nailed him in the upper thigh.

Thomas paused to brace himself, then pushed with all his strength. His attacker slammed into the wall, then jumped back on top of him again. They rolled, bumped into another pair of people fighting. It took every bit of his concentration to hold on to the knife, and he kept slashing, but it was hard being so close to his assailant. He jabbed with his left fist, hit under his attacker's chin, then used the moment of reprieve to slam his knife into the person's stomach. Another scream—again a woman, and definitely the person who was attacking him. He pushed her off for good.

Thomas stood, looked around to see who he could help. In the bare light, he saw Minho straddling a man, whaling on him, the guy showing no resistance. Brenda and Jorge had teamed up on another guard, and just as Thomas looked the man scrambled to his feet and fled. Teresa, Harriet, and Aris were leaning against a wall, catching their breath. They'd all survived. They needed to run.

"Come on!" he yelled. "Minho, leave him!"

His friend threw another couple of punches for good measure, then stood up, giving his guy one last kick. "I'm done. We can go."

And the group turned and kept running.

They ran down another long flight of stairs and stumbled one by one into the room at the bottom. Thomas froze in shock when he realized where he was. It was the chamber that housed the Griever pods, the room they'd found themselves in after they escaped from the Maze. The observation room windows were still shattered—the glass lay in shards all over the floor. The forty or so oblong pods where the Grievers rested and charged looked like they'd been sealed closed since the Gladers had come through weeks earlier. A layer of dust dulled what had been a shiny white surface the last time Thomas had seen them.

He knew that as a member of WICKED he'd spent countless hours and days in this place as they'd worked on creating the Maze, and he felt the shame of it all over again.

Brenda pointed out the ladder that led up to where they needed to go. Thomas shuddered at the memory of going down the slimy Griever chute during their escape—they could've just climbed down a ladder.

"Why isn't anybody here?" Minho asked. He turned in a circle, searching the place. "If they're holding people in there, why no guards?"

Thomas thought about it. "Who needs soldiers to keep them in when you have the Maze doing the job for you? It took us long enough to figure a way out."

"I don't know," Minho said. "Something's fishy about it."

Thomas shrugged. "Well, sitting here isn't gonna help. Unless you've got something useful, let's get up there and start bringing them out."

"Useful?" Minho repeated. "I got nothin'."

"Then up we go."

Thomas climbed the ladder and pulled himself out into another familiar room—the one with the input stations where he had typed the code words to shut down the Grievers. Chuck had been there, and he'd been terrified but brave. And not even an hour after that he was dead. The pain of losing his friend filled Thomas's chest once again.

"Home, sweet home," Minho muttered. He was pointing at a round hole above them. It was the hole that exited to the Cliff. Back when the Maze was fully operational, holotech had been used to conceal it, to make it look like part of the fake, endless sky beyond the stone edge of the drop-off. It was all turned off now, of course, and Thomas could see the walls of the Maze through the opening. A stepladder had been placed directly under it.

"I can't believe we're back here," Teresa said, moving to stand beside Thomas. Her voice sounded haunted, and it echoed how he felt inside.

And for some reason, with that simple statement, Thomas realized that standing there, the two of them were finally on equal ground. Trying to save lives, trying to make up for what they'd done to help start it all. He wanted to believe that with every ounce of his being.

He turned to look at her. "Crazy, huh?"

She smiled for the first time since ... he couldn't remember. "Crazy."

There was so much Thomas still didn't remember—about himself, about her—but she was here, helping, and that was all he could ask for.

"Don't you think we better get up there?" Brenda asked.

"Yeah." Thomas nodded. "We better."

He went last. After the others climbed through, he scaled the ladder, pushed himself up

onto the ledge, then walked over two boards that had been placed across the gap to the Maze's stone floor at the Cliff edge. Below him was just a black-walled work area that had always looked like an endless drop before. He looked back up at the Maze and had to pause to take it all in.

Where the sky had once shone blue and bright, there was now only the dull gray ceiling. The holotech off the side of the Cliff had been completely shut down, and the once-vertigo-inducing view had been transformed into simple black stucco. But seeing the massive ivy-covered walls leading away from the Cliff took his breath away. Those had been towering even without the help of illusion, and now they rose above him like ancient monoliths, green and gray and cracked. As if they'd stand there for a thousand years, enormous tombstones marking the death of so many.

He was back.

Minho led the way this time, his shoulders squared as he ran, every inch of him showing the pride he'd felt for those two years when he'd ruled the corridors of the Maze. Thomas was right behind him, craning his neck to see the walls of ivy majestically rising toward the gray ceiling. It was a strange feeling, being back in there after everything they'd been through since their escape.

No one said much as they ran toward the Glade. Thomas wondered what Brenda and Jorge must think of the Maze—he knew it had to seem enormous. A beetle blade could never translate size like this back to the observation rooms. And he could only imagine all the bad memories crashing back into Gally's brain.

They turned the final corner that led to the wide corridor outside the East Door of the Glade. When Thomas came to the section of wall where he'd tied Alby up in the ivy, he looked at the spot, could see the mangled mess of the vines. All that effort to save the former leader of the Gladers, only to see him die a few days later, his mind never fully recovered from the Changing.

A surge of anger burned like liquid heat in Thomas's veins.

They reached the huge gap in the walls that made up the East Door, and Thomas caught his breath and slowed. There were hundreds of people milling about the Glade. He was horrified that there were even a few babies and small children scattered among the crowd. It took a moment for the murmurs to spread across the sea of Immunes, but within seconds every eye was trained on the new arrivals and utter silence fell upon the Glade.

"Did you know there were this many?" Minho asked Thomas.

There were people everywhere—certainly more than the Gladers had ever numbered. But what stole Thomas's words was seeing the Glade itself again. The crooked building they called the Homestead; the pathetic copse of trees; the Bloodhouse barn; the fields, now only hardened weeds. The charred Map Room, its metal door blackened and still hanging ajar. He could even see the Slammer from where he stood. A bubble of emotion threatened to burst inside him.

"Hey, daydreamer," Minho said, snapping his fingers. "I asked you a question."

"Huh? Oh ... There's so many—they make the place look smaller than it ever did when we were here."

It didn't take long before their friends spotted them. Frypan. Clint, the Med-jack. Sonya and some other girls from Group B. They all came running, and there was a short burst of reunions and hugs.

Frypan swatted Thomas on the arm. "Can you believe they put me back in this place? They wouldn't even let me cook, just sent us a bunch of packaged food in the Box three times a day. Kitchen doesn't even work—no electricity, nothing."

Thomas laughed, the anger easing. "You think you were a lousy cook for fifty guys? Try feeding this army."

"Funny man, Thomas. You are a funny man. I'm glad to see you." Then his eyes got big. "Gally? Gally's here? Gally's *alive*?"

"Nice to see you, too," the boy responded dryly.

Thomas patted Frypan on the back. "Long story. He's a good guy now." Gally scoffed but didn't respond.

Minho stepped up to them. "All right, happy time is over. How in the world are we going to do this, dude?"

"Shouldn't be too bad," Thomas said. He actually hated the idea of trying to funnel all these people not only through the Maze itself, but then all the way through the WICKED complex to the Flat Trans. Still, it had to be done.

"Don't feed me that klunk," Minho said. "Your eyes don't lie."

Thomas smiled. "Well, we've certainly got a lot of people to fight with us."

"Have you *looked* at these poor saps?" Minho asked, sounding disgusted. "Half of 'em are younger than us, and the other half look like they haven't so much as arm wrestled before, much less had a fistfight."

"Sometimes numbers are all that matters," Thomas responded.

He spotted Teresa and called her over, then found Brenda.

"What's the plan?" Teresa asked.

If Teresa was really with them, this was when Thomas needed her—and all the memories she'd had returned.

"Okay, let's split them into groups," he said to everyone. "There's gotta be four or five hundred people, so ... groups of fifty. Then have one Glader or Group B person be in charge of them. Teresa, do you know how to get to this maintenance room?"

He showed her the map and she nodded after examining it.

Thomas continued. "Then I'll help move people along as you and Brenda lead the way. Everyone else guide one of the groups. Except Minho, Jorge, and Gally. I think you guys should cover the rear."

"Sounds good to me," Minho said, shrugging. Impossibly, he looked bored.

"Whatever you say, *muchacho*," Jorge added. Gally just nodded.

They spent the next twenty minutes dividing everyone into groups and getting them into long lines. They paid special attention to keeping the groups even in terms of age and strength. The Immunes had no problem following orders once they realized the new arrivals had come to help rescue them.

Once they were organized into groups, Thomas and his friends lined up in front of the East Door. Thomas waved his hands to get everyone's attention.

"Listen up!" Thomas began. "WICKED is planning to use you for science. Your bodies—your brains. They've been studying people for years, collecting data to develop a cure for the Flare. Now they want to use you as well, but you deserve more than a life as lab rats. You are—we all are—the future, and the future isn't going to happen the way WICKED wants it to. That's why we're here. To get you out of this place. We'll be going through a bunch of buildings to find a Flat Trans that'll take us somewhere safe. If we're attacked, we're going to have to fight. Stick with your groups, and the strongest need to do whatever it takes to protect the—"

Thomas's last words were cut off by a violent crack—like the sound of stone splintering. And then, nothing. Only an echo bouncing off the enormous walls.

"What was *that*?" Minho yelled, searching the sky for the source.

Thomas inspected the Glade, the walls of the Maze rising up behind him, but nothing was

out of place. He was just about to speak when another crack sounded, then another. A thunderous din of rumbling crossed the Glade, beginning low and increasing in depth and volume. The ground started to tremble, and it seemed as if the world was going to fall apart.

People turned in circles, looking for the source of the noise, and Thomas could tell panic was spreading. He'd lose control soon. The ground shook more violently; the sounds amplified—thunder and grinding rock—and now screams erupted from the mass of people standing in front of him.

Suddenly it dawned on Thomas. "The explosives."

"What?" Minho shouted at him.

Thomas looked at his friend. "The Right Arm!"

A deafening roar shook the Glade, and Thomas spun around to look up. A large portion of the wall to the left of the East Door had broken loose, great chunks of stone flying everywhere. A huge section seemed to hover at an impossible angle, and then it fell, toppling toward the ground.

Thomas didn't have time to shout a warning before the massive piece of rock landed on a group of people, crushing them as it broke in half. He stood for a moment, speechless as blood oozed out from the edges and pooled on the stone floor.

The wounded screamed. Rumbles of thunder and the sound of rock fracturing combined to make a horrible chorus as the ground beneath Thomas continued to shake. The Maze was falling apart around them—they had to get out.

“Run!” he yelled at Sonya.

She didn’t hesitate—she turned and disappeared into the corridors of the Maze. The people who’d been standing in her line didn’t need to be told to follow.

Thomas stumbled, regained his balance, ran over to Minho. “Bring up the rear! Teresa, Brenda and I need to get to the head of the pack!”

Minho nodded and gave him a push to get him going. Thomas glanced back in time to see the Homestead split down the middle like a cracked acorn, half of its slipshod structure collapsing to the ground in a cloud of splintered wood and dust. His gaze swept to the Map Room, its concrete walls already crumbling to pieces.

There was no time to spare. He searched the chaos until he found Teresa. He grabbed his old friend and she followed him to the gap into the Maze. Brenda was there, trying her best with Jorge to facilitate who would go next, to prevent everyone from going at once in a stampede that would surely kill half of them.

Another splintering crack sounded from above; Thomas looked up to see a section of wall falling toward the ground by the fields. It exploded when it hit, luckily with no one underneath. With a sudden jerk of horror he realized that the roof itself would eventually collapse.

“Go!” Brenda yelled at him. “I’m right behind you!”

Teresa grabbed his arm, yanked him forward, and the three of them ran past the jagged left edge of the Door and into the Maze, weaving their way around the crowd of people heading in the same direction. Thomas had to sprint to catch up with Sonya—he had no idea whether she’d been a Runner in Group B’s Maze or whether she’d remember the layout as well as he did, if it was even the same.

The ground continued to tremble, and lurched with every distant explosion. People stumbled left and right, fell, got back up, kept running. Thomas dodged and ducked as he ran, jumping over a fallen man at one point. Rocks tumbled from the walls. He watched one hit a man in the head, knocking him to the ground. People bent over his lifeless body, tried to lift him, but there was so much blood that Thomas could tell it was already too late.

Thomas reached Sonya and ran past her, leading everyone turn after turn.

He knew they were getting close. He could only hope that the Maze had been the first place to get hit and the rest of the compound was intact—that they’d still have time if they could just get out. The ground suddenly jumped underneath him and an earsplitting crack pierced the air. He fell face-first, scrambled to get up. A hundred feet or so in front of him, a section of the stone floor had shifted upward. As he watched, half of it exploded, sending a rain of rocks and dust in all directions.

He didn’t stop. There was a narrow space between the protruding ground and the wall, and he ran through it, Teresa and Brenda on his heels. But he knew the bottleneck would slow things down.

"Hurry!" he yelled over his shoulder. He slowed to watch and could see the desperation in everyone's eyes.

Sonya exited the gap, then paused to help funnel the others through, grabbing hands, pulling and pushing. It went faster than Thomas could've hoped, and he continued toward the Cliff at full speed.

Through the Maze he went, the world shaking, stone crumbling and falling all around them, people screaming and crying. There was nothing he could do but lead the survivors onward. A left and then a right. Another right. Then they were into the long corridor that ended at the Cliff. Beyond its edge, he could see the gray ceiling end at the black walls, the round hole of the exit—and a large crack shooting up and across the once-false sky.

He turned to Sonya and the others. "Hurry! Move!"

As they approached, Thomas got a full view of the terror. Faces white and twisted in fear, people falling to the ground, getting back up. He saw a boy who couldn't have been more than ten, half dragging a lady until she finally got her feet underneath her. A boulder the size of a small car toppled from high off the wall and struck an older man, throwing him several yards before he hit the ground and collapsed in a heap. Thomas was horror-struck but kept running, all the while yelling encouragement to everyone around him.

Finally he reached the Cliff. The two boards were firmly in place, and Sonya gestured to Teresa to cross the makeshift bridge and go through the old Griever hole. Then Brenda crossed with a line of people trailing her.

Thomas waited on the edge of the Cliff, waving people on. It was agonizing work, almost unbearable, to see the people so slowly making their way out of the Maze when the whole place seemed ready to collapse on itself at any second. One by one they ran across the boards and dropped into the hole. Thomas wondered if Teresa was sending them down the chute instead of the ladder to make it go more quickly.

"You go!" Sonya yelled to Thomas. "They need to know what to do once they're down there."

Thomas nodded, though he felt horrible for leaving—he'd done the same thing the first time he'd escaped, abandoning the Gladers to fight while he'd punched in the code. But he knew she was right. He took one last look at the quaking Maze—chunks of the ceiling torn loose and stone jutting from the ground where it had once been smooth. He didn't know how they'd all make it, and his heart ached for Minho, Frypan, the others.

He squeezed into the flow of people and crossed the boards to the hole, then swerved away from the crowd at the chute and ran to the ladder. He picked his way down the rungs as quickly as he could and was relieved to see at the bottom that the damage hadn't reached that section yet. Teresa was there, helping people get up after they landed and telling them which direction to head.

"I'll do this!" he yelled to her. "Get to the front of the pack!" He pointed through the double doors.

She was about to answer when she caught sight of something behind him. Her eyes widened in fear, and Thomas spun around.

Several of the dusty Griever pods were opening, their top halves lifting upward on hinges like the lids of coffins.

"Listen to me!" Teresa screamed. She grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him around to look him in the face. "On the tail end of the Grievers"—she pointed at the closest pod—"what the Creators called the barrel—inside the blubber, there's a switch, like a handle. You have to reach through the skin and pull it out. If you can do it, the things will die."

Thomas nodded. "Okay. You keep people going!"

The tops of the pods continued to open as Thomas sprinted to the closest one. The lid was halfway up when he reached it, and he strained to look inside. The Griever's huge, sluglike body was trembling and twisting, sucking up moisture and fuel from tubes connected to its sides.

Thomas ran to its far end and pulled himself up on the lip of the container, then stretched over and leaned down to the Griever inside. He slammed his hand through the moist skin to find what Teresa had described. He grunted with the effort, pushed until he found a hard handle, then yanked on it with all his strength. The whole thing tore loose and the Griever fell into a limp mass of jelly at the bottom of the pod.

He threw the handle to the floor and ran to the next pod, where the lid was lowering to the ground. It took him only a few seconds to pull himself up and over the side, bury his hand in the fatty flesh and yank out the handle.

As he ran to the next pod, Thomas risked a quick glance up at Teresa. She was still helping people from the floor after they slid down the chute and sending them through the doors. They were coming fast, landing on top of each other. Sonya was there, then Frypan, then Gally. Minho came flying through even as he watched. Thomas reached the pod, the lid now completely open, the tubes connecting the Griever to the container detaching themselves one by one. He pulled himself up and over, slammed his hand into the thing's skin and ripped out the handle.

Thomas dropped to the ground and turned to the fourth pod, but the Griever was moving, its front end slipping up and over the edge of the open pod, appendages bursting out of the skin to help it maneuver. Thomas barely reached it in time, jumped up and heaved himself over the side of the pod. He pushed his hand inside the blubbery skin, grabbed the handle. A pair of scissoring blades swiped at his head; he ducked as he wrenched the piece out of the creature's body and it died, its mass pulling it back into the coffinlike container.

Thomas knew it was too late to stop the last Griever before it exited its pod. He turned to assess the situation and watched as its full body sloshed out onto the ground. It was already scanning the area with a small observer socket that extended from its front; then, as he'd seen them do so many times before, the thing curled up into a ball and spikes burst from the skin. The creature spun forward with a great whirring of the machines within its belly. Concrete kicked up in the air, the Griever's spikes tearing through the flooring, and Thomas watched, helpless, as it crashed into a small group of people who'd come through the chute. Blades extended, it sliced through several people before they even knew what was happening.

Thomas looked around, searching for anything he could use as a weapon. A piece of pipe

about the length of his arm had broken off from something in the ceiling—he ran to it and picked it up. When he turned back toward the Griever, he saw that Minho had already made it to the creature. He was kicking at it with a fierceness that was almost frightening.

Thomas charged the monster, yelling at the others to get away. The Griever spun toward him as if he'd heard the command, and it reared up on its bulbous back end. Two appendages emerged from the creature's sides and Thomas skidded to a halt—a new metal arm buzzed with a spinning saw, the other with a nasty-looking claw, its four tips ending in blades.

"Minho, just let me distract it!" he yelled. "Get everyone out of here and have Brenda start leading them to the maintenance room!"

Even as he said it, he watched a man trying to crawl out of the Griever's way. Before the man could get a few feet from it, a rod shot out of the creature and stabbed him in the chest, and he collapsed to the floor, spitting blood.

Thomas ran in, raising his pipe, ready to beat his way past the appendages, find his way to the handle. He'd almost made it when Teresa suddenly flashed in from his right, throwing her body onto the Griever. It immediately collapsed into a ball, all its metal arms retracting to press her to its skin.

"Teresa!" Thomas screamed, pulling up short, not sure what to do.

She twisted around to look at him. "Just go! Get them out!" She started kicking and clawing, her hands disappearing in the fatty flesh. So far she appeared to have escaped major injury.

Thomas inched in closer, gripping the pipe tighter, looking for an opening to attack without hitting her instead.

Teresa's eyes found him again. "Get out of—"

But her words were lost. The Griever had sucked her face into its blubbery skin and was pulling her farther and farther in, suffocating her.

Thomas stared, frozen. Too many people had died. Too many. And he wasn't going to stand there and let her sacrifice herself to save him and the others. He couldn't let that happen.

He screamed, and with all of the force he had, he ran and leaped into the air, smashing into the Griever. The spinning saw flew toward his chest and he dodged to the left, swinging the pipe around as he did. It connected, hard, and the saw broke off, flew through the air. Thomas heard it hit the ground and clatter across the room. He used his balance to swing back, driving the pipe into the creature's body, just to the side of Teresa's head. He strained with all he had to pull it back out, then drove it in again, then again.

An appendage with a claw clamped down on him, lifted him into the air and threw him. He slammed onto the hard cement floor and rolled, jumped back to his feet. Teresa had gained some leverage on the creature's body, had gotten to her knees, was swatting at the Griever's metal arms. Thomas charged in again, jumped and clung to its fatty flesh. He used the pipe to whack at anything that came near him. Teresa fought and struggled from below and the creature lurched to the side, then spun in a circle, flinging her at least ten feet through the air before she landed.

Thomas grabbed hold of a metal arm, kicking away the claw as it swiped at him again. He planted his feet against the blubber, pushed himself down the creature's side and

stretched. He plunged his arm into the flabby flesh, felt for the handle. Something sliced his back, and pain ripped through his body. He kept digging, searching for the handle—the deeper he went, the more the creature's flesh felt like thick mud.

Finally his fingertips brushed hard plastic and he forced his hand forward another inch, grabbed the handle, pulled with all his strength and spun his body off of the Griever. He looked up to see Teresa batting back a pair of blades just inches from her face. And then a sudden silence filled the room as the creature's machine core sputtered and died. It collapsed into a flat, oblong pile of fat and gears, its protruding appendages falling to the ground, limp.

Thomas rested his head on the floor and sucked in huge lungfuls of air. And then Teresa was by his side, helping him roll over onto his back. He saw the pain on her face, the scratches, the flushed, sweaty skin. But then somehow she smiled.

"Thanks, Tom," she said.

"You're welcome." The respite from the battle felt too good to be true.

She helped pull him to his feet. "Let's get out of here."

Thomas noticed that no one was coming through the chute anymore, and Minho had just ushered the last few people through the double doors. Then he turned and faced Thomas and Teresa.

He bent over, hands on knees to catch his breath. "That's all of them." He stood straight with a groan. "All that made it, anyway. Guess we know now why they let us in so easy—they planned to slice us to bits with shuck Grievers if we came back out. Anyway, you guys need to push up to the front and help Brenda lead the way."

"She's okay, then?" Thomas asked. The relief he felt was overwhelming.

"Yeah. She's up there already."

Thomas crawled to his feet, but didn't take two steps before he stopped again. A deep rumble came from somewhere, from everywhere. The room shook for a few seconds then stilled.

"We better hurry," he said, and broke into a sprint, following the others.

At least two hundred people had made it out of the Maze, but for some reason they'd stopped moving. Thomas dodged people in the crowded hallway, struggling to get to the front.

He weaved around men, women and children until finally he spotted Brenda. She pushed her way toward him and pulled him into a hug and kissed his cheek. With every bit of his heart, he wished it could all be over right then—that they could be safe, not have to go any farther.

"Minho made me leave," she said. "He forced me to go, promised to help if you needed it. He told me that getting everyone out was too important and you guys could handle the Grievers. I should've stayed. I'm sorry."

"I told him to," Thomas responded. "You did the right thing. The only thing. We'll be out of here soon."

She gave him a little push. "Then let's hurry and make it happen."

"Okay." He squeezed her hand and they joined Teresa, moving toward the front of the group again.

The hallway was even darker than before—the lights that worked at all were dim, and flickered off and on. The people they passed huddled in silence, waiting anxiously. Thomas saw Frypan, who said nothing but did his best to give an encouraging smile, which, as usual, looked more like a smirk. In the distance, the occasional boom thundered through the air and the building trembled. The explosions still felt far enough away, but Thomas knew it wouldn't last.

When he and Brenda reached the front of the line, they found that the group had stopped at a stairwell, unsure whether to go up or down.

"We need to go up," Brenda said.

Thomas didn't hesitate. He motioned for the group to follow and started climbing, Brenda at his side.

He refused to succumb to the fatigue. Four flights, five, six. He stopped on the landing, catching his breath, and looked down, saw that the others were coming. Brenda guided him through a doorway, down another long hallway, left and then right, up another flight of stairs. One more hall and then *down* some stairs. One foot in front of the other. Thomas just hoped that the chancellor had been honest about the Flat Trans.

An explosion sounded somewhere above him, jolting the entire building and throwing him to the floor. Dust choked the air, and small pieces of the ceiling tiles landed on his back. Sounds of things creaking and breaking filled the air. Finally, after several seconds of shaking, everything grew quiet and still again.

He reached out for Brenda, made sure she wasn't hurt.

"Everybody okay?" he shouted down the hallway.

"Yeah!" someone called back.

"Keep moving! We're almost there!" He helped Brenda to her feet and they continued, Thomas praying the building would stay in one piece just a little while longer.

Thomas, Brenda, and those following them finally made it to the section of the building the chancellor had circled on the map—the maintenance room. Several more bombs had detonated, each one closer than the one before it. But nothing strong enough to stop them, and now they were practically there.

The maintenance room was situated behind a huge warehouse area. Neat rows of metal racks full of boxes lined the right wall, and Thomas crossed to that side of the room, then began waving everybody in. He wanted everyone together before they went through the Flat Trans. There was one door at the back of the space—it had to lead to the room they'd been looking for.

"Keep them coming and get them ready," he told Brenda; then he sprinted for the door. If Chancellor Paige had lied about the Flat Trans, or if someone from WICKED or the Right Arm figured out what they were doing, they were finished.

The door led to a small room filled with tables that were littered with tools and scraps of metal and machine parts. On the far side, a large piece of canvas had been hung against the wall. Thomas ran to it and ripped it down. Behind it he found a dully shimmering wall of gray framed by a rectangle of shiny silver, and next to it, a control box.

It was the Flat Trans.

The chancellor had told the truth.

Thomas let out a laugh at the thought. WICKED—the *leader* of WICKED—had helped him.

Unless ... He realized he needed to know one last thing. He had to test it to see where it led before he sent everyone through. Thomas sucked in a deep breath. This was it.

He forced himself to step through the icy Flat Trans surface. And he came out into a simple wooden shed, its door wide open in front of him. Beyond that he saw ... green. Lots and lots of green. Grass, trees, flowers, bushes. It was good enough for him.

He stepped back through to the maintenance room, exhilarated. They'd done it—they were almost safe. He ran out to the storage area.

"Come on!" he yelled. "Get everyone in here—it works! Hurry!"

An explosion rattled the walls and the metal racks. Dust and debris rained down from the ceiling.

"Hurry!" he repeated.

Teresa already had people running, shepherding them Thomas's way. He stood just inside the door of the maintenance room, and when the first person crossed the threshold he took the woman by the arm and led her to the gray wall of the Flat Trans.

"You know what this is, right?" he asked her.

She nodded, bravely trying to hide her eagerness to get through the thing and out of there. "I've been around the block a few times, kid."

"Can I trust you to stand here and make sure everyone goes through?"

She blanched at first, but then she nodded.

"Don't worry," Thomas assured her. "Just stay here as long as you can."

As soon as she agreed he ran back to the door.

Others had packed the small room, and Thomas stepped back. "It's right through there. Make space on the other side!"

He squeezed his way past the knot of people and back into the warehouse. Everyone had

lined up and was filing into the maintenance room. And standing at the back of the crowd were Minho, Brenda, Jorge, Teresa, Aris, Frypan and a few members of Group B. Gally was there, too. Thomas weaved his way to his friends.

"They better be quick about it up there," Minho said. "The explosions are getting closer and closer."

"The whole place is gonna fall down," Gally added.

Thomas scanned the ceiling as if he expected it to happen right that second. "I know. I told them to hurry. We'll all be out of here in a—"

"Well, what do we have *here*?" a voice shouted from the back of the room.

A few gasps sounded around Thomas as he turned to see who'd spoken. The Rat Man had just come through the door from the outside hallway, and he wasn't alone. He was surrounded by WICKED security guards. Thomas counted seven total, which meant that he and his friends still had the advantage.

Janson stopped and cupped his hands to shout over the rumble of another explosion. "Strange place to hide out when everything's about to come down!" Pieces of metal fell from the ceiling, clattering to the ground.

"You know what's here!" Thomas shouted back. "It's too late—we're already going!"

Janson pulled out the same long knife he had outside and flashed it. And as if on cue, the others revealed similar weapons.

"But we can salvage a few," Janson said. "And it looks like we have the strongest and brightest right here in front of us. Even our Final Candidate, no less! The one we need most, yet who refuses to cooperate."

Thomas and his friends had spread out in a line between the dwindling crowd of prisoners and the guards. The others in Thomas's group were searching the floor for anything they could find to use as a weapon—pipes, long screws, the jagged edge of a metal grid. Thomas spotted a warped piece of thick cabling that ended in a spike of rigid wires, as deadly-looking as a spear. He grabbed it just as another explosion rocked the room, sending a huge section of the metal shelving crashing to the floor

"I've never seen such a menacing bunch of thugs!" the Rat Man yelled, but his face was crazed, his mouth contorted into a wild sneer. "I have to admit I'm terrified!"

"Just shut your shuck mouth and let's get this over with!" Minho shouted back at him.

Janson focused his cold, mad gaze on the teenagers facing him.

"Gladly," he said.

Thomas ached to lash out for all the fear and pain and suffering that had defined his life for so long. "Go!" he shouted.

The two groups charged each other, their yells of battle drowned out by the sudden concussion of detonating explosives that shook the building around them.

Somehow Thomas kept his balance, despite the entire room quaking from the closest series of explosions yet. Most of the racks collapsed, and objects were launched across the room. He dodged a jagged chunk of wood, then jumped over a round piece of machinery that spun past him.

Gally, who was at Thomas's side, tripped and fell; Thomas helped him up. They continued charging. Brenda slipped but caught her balance.

They crashed into the others like the first line of soldiers in an ancient foot battle. Thomas met the Rat Man himself, who was at least half a foot taller than him, wielding his blade; it came down in an arc toward Thomas's shoulder, but Thomas thrust upward with his stiff cable and connected with the man's armpit. Janson screamed and dropped his weapon as a stream of blood gushed from the wound; he clamped his other hand over it and backed away, glaring at Thomas with hate-filled eyes.

To his right and left, everyone was fighting. Thomas's head was full of the sounds of metal against metal, screams and shouts and grunts. Some had matched up two-on-one; Minho ended up fighting a woman who seemed twice as strong as any of the men. Brenda was on the ground, wrestling a skinny man, trying to knock a machete out of his hand. Thomas saw all this with a quick glance but then returned his attention to his own foe.

"I don't care if I bleed to death," Janson said with a grimace. "As long as I die after I get you back up there."

Another explosion jolted the floor beneath him and Thomas stumbled forward, dropping his scavenged weapon and slamming into Janson's chest. They both crashed to the ground, and Thomas struggled to push off the man with one hand while swinging as hard as he could with the other. He smashed Janson's left cheek with his balled fist and watched as the Rat Man's head snapped to the side, blood spraying from his mouth. Thomas reached back to swing again, but the man arched his body violently, throwing him off; he landed on his back.

Before he could move Janson had jumped on top of him and gotten his legs wrapped around his torso, pinning Thomas's arms with his knees. Thomas squirmed to get loose as the man rained down blows with his fists, punching Thomas's unprotected face over and over. Pain flooded him. Then adrenaline surged through his body. He wouldn't die here. He pushed his feet against the floor and thrust his stomach toward the ceiling.

He only rose a few inches off the ground, but it was enough to free his arms from the man's knees. He blocked the next punch with both of his forearms, then threw both fists up and at Janson's face, connected. The Rat Man lost his balance; Thomas pushed him off, then kicked him by coiling both legs and slamming the bottoms of his feet into Janson's side, then again, and again, and again. The man's body inched away with each kick. But when Thomas next pulled back with his legs, Janson suddenly flipped around and came at him, grabbing Thomas's feet and throwing them to the side. Then he jumped on top of Thomas yet again.

Thomas went nuts; kicking and punching and squirming to get out from under the man. They rolled, each gaining the advantage for only a split second before toppling over again.

Fists flew and feet kicked—bullets of pain riddled Thomas's body; Janson clawed and bit. They continued to roll, beating each other nearly senseless.

Thomas finally got a good angle to slam his elbow into Janson's nose; it stunned the man, and both of his hands flew to his face. A burst of energy shot through Thomas; he jumped on top of Janson and put his fingers around the man's neck, began to squeeze. Janson kicked out, flailed his arms, but Thomas held on with feral rage, clutching, leaning forward with all his weight to crush as he constricted his hands tighter and tighter. He felt things snapping and pulling and breaking. Janson's eyes bulged; his tongue jutted from his mouth.

Someone swatted him on the head with an open palm; he could tell words were being spoken to him but he didn't hear them. Minho's face appeared in front of his. He was yelling something. A bloodlust had completely taken Thomas over. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve, focused again on Janson's face. The man was long gone, still and pale and battered. Thomas looked back at Minho.

"He's dead!" his friend was yelling. "He's dead!"

Thomas forced himself to let go, stumbled off of the man, felt Minho lifting him to his feet.

"We put them all out of commission!" Minho shouted in his ear. "We need to go!"

Two explosions rocked both sides of the storage room at the same time and the walls themselves collapsed inward, throwing chunks of brick and cement in all directions. Debris rained down on Thomas and Minho. Dust clouded the air and shadowy figures surrounded Thomas, swaying and falling and getting back up again. Thomas was on his feet, moving, heading in the direction of the maintenance room.

Pieces of the ceiling fell, crashing and exploding. The sounds were awful, deafening. The ground shook violently; bombs continued to detonate over and over, seemingly everywhere at once. Thomas fell; Minho jerked him to his feet. A few seconds later Minho fell; Thomas yanked and dragged until they were both running again. Brenda suddenly appeared in front of Thomas, terror in her eyes. He thought he saw Teresa nearby as well, all of them struggling to keep their balance as they moved forward.

A splintering, shattering noise split the air so loudly that Thomas looked back. His eyes drifted upward, where a massive section of the ceiling had torn loose. He watched, hypnotized, as it fell toward him. Teresa appeared in the corner of his vision, her image barely discernible through the clogged air. Her body slammed into his, shoving him toward the maintenance room. His mind emptied as he stumbled backward and fell, just as the huge piece of the building landed on top of Teresa, pinning her body; only her head and an arm jutted out from under its girth.

"Teresa!" Thomas screamed, an unearthly sound that somehow rose above everything else. He scrambled toward her. Blood streaked her face, and her arm looked crushed.

He shouted her name again, and in his mind he saw Chuck, falling to the ground, covered in blood, and Newt's bulging eyes. Three of the closest friends he'd ever had. And WICKED had taken them all away from him.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered to her, knowing she couldn't hear. "I'm so sorry."

Her mouth moved, working to speak, and he leaned in to make out what she was trying to say.

"Me ... too," she whispered. "I only ever ... cared for ..."

And then Thomas was being dragged to his feet, yanked away from her. He didn't have the energy or will to fight it. She was gone. His body ached with pain; his heart stung. Brenda and Minho pulled him up, got his feet under him. The three of them lurched forward, pushed ahead. A fire had started burning in a gaping hole left by an explosion—smoke billowed and churned with the thick dust. Thomas coughed but only heard roaring in his ears.

Another resounding boom shattered the air; Thomas turned his head as he ran to see the back wall of the storage room exploding, falling to the ground in pieces, flames licking through the open spaces. The remainder of the ceiling above it began to collapse, any support now gone. Every last inch of the building was coming down once and for all.

They reached the door to the maintenance room, squeezed inside just in time to see Gally disappear through the Flat Trans. Everyone else was already gone. Thomas stumbled with his friends across the short aisle between the tables. In seconds they'd be dead. The sounds of things crashing and crumbling behind Thomas grew impossibly louder, cracks and creaks and squeals of metal and the hollow roar of flames. All of it rose to an unimaginable pitch; Thomas refused to look, though he sensed it all coming down, as if it were just feet away, its leading edge breathing against his neck. He pushed Brenda through the Trans. The world was collapsing around him and Minho.

Together, they jumped into the icy gray wall.

Thomas could barely breathe. He was coughing, spitting. His heart raced, refused to slow down. He'd landed on the wooden floor of the shed, and now he crawled forward, wanting to get away from the Flat Trans in case any nasty debris came flying through. But he noticed Brenda out of the corner of his eye. She pushed some buttons on a control panel, and then the gray plane winked out of existence, revealing the cedar planks of the shed wall behind it. *How did she know how to do that?* Thomas wondered.

"You and Minho get out," she said, an urgency in her voice that Thomas didn't understand. They were safe now. Weren't they? "I have to do one last thing."

Minho had gotten to his feet, and he came over to help Thomas stand. "My shuck brain can't spend one more second thinking. Just let her do whatever she wants. Come on."

"Good that," Thomas said. The two of them then looked at each other for a long moment, catching their breath, somehow reliving in those few seconds all the things they'd gone through, all the death, all the pain. And mixed in there was relief, that maybe—just maybe—it was all over.

But mostly Thomas felt the pain of loss. Watching Teresa die—to save his life—had been almost too much to bear. Now, staring at the person who'd become his true best friend, he had to fight back the tears. In that moment, he swore to never tell Minho about what he'd done to Newt.

"Good that for sure, shuck-face," Minho finally replied. But his trademark smirk was missing. Instead was a look that said to Thomas he understood. And that they'd both carry the sorrow of their loss for the rest of their lives. Then he turned and walked away.

After a long moment, Thomas followed him.

When he set foot outside, he had to stop and stare. They'd come to a place he'd been told didn't exist anymore. Lush and green and full of vibrant life. He stood at the top of a hill above a field of tall grass and wildflowers. The two hundred or so people they'd rescued wandered the area, some of them actually running and jumping. To his right the hill descended into a valley of towering trees that seemed to stretched for miles, ending in a wall of rocky mountains that jutted toward the cloudless blue sky. To his left, the grassy field slowly became scrub brush and then sand. And then the ocean, its waves big and dark and white-tipped as they crashed onto a beach.

Paradise. They'd come to paradise. He could only hope that one day his heart would feel the joy of the place.

He heard the door of the shed close then the whoosh of fire behind him. He turned to see Brenda; she gently pushed him a few steps farther away from the structure, which was already engulfed in flames.

"Just making sure?" he asked.

"Just making sure," she repeated, and gave him a smile so sincere that he relaxed a little, feeling the tiniest bit comforted. "I'm ... sorry about Teresa."

"Thanks." It was the only word he could find.

She didn't say anything else, and Thomas figured there wasn't much she needed to. They walked over and joined the group of people who'd fought the last battle with Janson and

the others, everyone scraped and bruised from top to bottom. He met Frypan's eyes just like he had Minho's. Then they all faced the shed and watched as it burned to the ground.

A few hours later, Thomas sat atop a cliff overlooking the ocean, his feet dangling over the edge. The sun had almost dipped below the horizon, which appeared to be glowing with flames. It was one of the most amazing sights he'd ever witnessed.

Minho had already started taking charge down below in the forest where they'd decided to live—organizing food search parties, a building committee, a security detail. Thomas was glad of it, not wanting another ounce of responsibility to ever rest on his shoulders again. He was tired, body and soul. He hoped that wherever they were, they'd be isolated and safe while the rest of the world figured out how to deal with the Flare, cure or no cure. He knew the process would be long and hard and ugly, and he was one hundred percent positive that he wanted no part of it.

He was done.

"Hey, there."

Thomas turned to see Brenda. "Hey, there, back. Wanna sit?"

"Why, yes, thank you." She plopped down next to him. "Reminds me of the sunsets at WICKED, though they never seemed quite so bright."

"You could say that about a lot of things." He felt another tremor of emotion as he saw the faces of Chuck and Newt and Teresa in his mind's eye.

A few minutes went by in silence as they stared at the vanishing light of day, the sky and water going from orange to pink to purple, then dark blue.

"What're you thinking in that head of yours?" Brenda asked.

"Absolutely nothing. I'm done thinking for a while." And he meant it. For the first time in his life, he was both free and safe, as costly as the accomplishment had been.

Then Thomas did the only thing he could think of. He reached out and took Brenda's hand.

She squeezed his in response. "There are over two hundred of us and we're all immune. It'll be a good start."

Thomas looked over at her, suspicious at how sure she sounded—like she knew something he didn't. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, then the lips. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

Thomas put it all out of his mind and pulled her closer as the last wink of the sun's light vanished below the horizon.

Final WICKED Memorandum, Date 232.4.10, Time 12:45

TO: My Associates

FROM: Ava Paige, Chancellor

RE: A new beginning

And so, we have failed.

But we have also succeeded.

Our original vision didn't come to fruition; the blueprint never came together. We were unable to discover either a vaccine or a treatment for the Flare. But I anticipated this outcome and put into place an alternate solution, to save at least a portion of our race. With the help of my partners, two wisely placed Immunes, I was able to plan and implement a solution that will result in the best outcome we could've hoped for.

I know the majority of WICKED thought that we needed to get tougher, dig deeper, be more ruthless with our subjects, keep searching for an answer. Begin new rounds of Trials. But what we neglected to see was right before our eyes. The Immune are the only resource left to this world.

And if all has gone according to plan, we have sent the brightest, the strongest, the toughest of our subjects to a safe place, where they can begin civilization anew while the rest of the world is driven to extinction.

It is my hope that over the years our organization has in some part paid the price for the unspeakable act committed against humanity by our predecessors in government. Though I am fully aware that it was an act of desperation after the sun flares, releasing the Flare virus as a means of population control was an abhorrent and irreversible crime. And the disastrous results could never have been predicted. WICKED has worked ever since that act was committed to right that wrong, to find a cure. And though we have failed in that effort, we can at least say we've planted the seed for mankind's future.

I don't know how history will judge the actions of WICKED, but I state here for the record that the organization only ever had one goal, and that was to preserve the human race. And in this last act, we have done just that.

As we tried to instill in each of our subjects over and over, WICKED is good.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What a ride this trilogy has been. In so many ways it's been a collaborative effort between me; my editor, Krista Marino; and my agent, Michael Bourret. I can't possibly thank these two people enough. But I'll keep trying.

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Thank you, Lauren Abramo and Dystel & Goderich, for making sure these books are available around the world. And thank you to all my publishers abroad for giving them a chance.

Thank you, Lynette and J. Scott Savage, for reading early drafts and giving feedback. I promise it's gotten a lot better!

Thank you to all the book bloggers and Facebook friends and the Twitter #dashnerarmy for hanging out with me and pushing my stories to others. To you and to all my readers, thank you. This world became real to me, and I hope you've enjoyed living in it.

JAMES DASHNER

THE
KILL
ORDER

THE MAZE
RUNNER
SERIES

THE PREQUEL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

THE
KILL ORDER
JAMES
DASHNER

DELACORTE PRESS

For Kathy Egan.
I really miss you.

Contents

Master - Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

[Prologue](#)

[Thirteen Years Earlier](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52
Chapter 53
Chapter 54
Chapter 55
Chapter 56
Chapter 57
Chapter 58
Chapter 59
Chapter 60
Chapter 61
Chapter 62
Chapter 63
Chapter 64
Chapter 65
Chapter 66

Chapter 67

Epilogue: Two Years Later

Acknowledgments

PROLOGUE

Teresa looked at her best friend and wondered what it would be like to forget him.

It seemed impossible, though she'd now seen the Swipe implanted in dozens of boys before Thomas. Sandy brown hair, penetrating eyes and a constant look of contemplation—how could this kid ever be unfamiliar to her? How could they be in the same room and not joke about some smell or make fun of some clueless slouch nearby? How could she ever stand in front of him and not leap at the chance to communicate telepathically?

Impossible.

And yet, only a day away.

For her. For Thomas, it was a matter of minutes. He lay on the operating table, his eyes closed, chest rising and falling with soft, even breaths. Already dressed in the requisite shorts-and-T-shirt uniform of the Glade, he looked like a snapshot of the past—some ordinary boy taking an ordinary nap after a long day at an ordinary school, before sun flares and disease made the world anything *but* ordinary. Before death and destruction made it necessary to steal children—along with their memories—and send them to a place as terrifying as the Maze. Before human brains were known as the killzone and needed to be watched and studied. All in the name of science and medicine.

A doctor and a nurse had been prepping Thomas and now lowered the mask onto his face. There were clicks and hisses and beeps; Teresa watched as metal and wires and plastic tubes slithered across his skin and into the canals of Thomas's ears, saw his hands twitch reflexively at his sides. He probably felt pain on some level despite the drugs, but he'd never remember it. The machine began its work, plucking images from Thomas's memory. Erasing his mom and his dad and his life. Erasing *her*.

Some small part of her knew it should make her angry. Make her scream and yell and refuse to help for one more second. But the greater part was as solid as the rock of the cliffs outside. Yes, the greater part within her was entrenched in certainty so deeply that she knew she'd feel it even after tomorrow, when the same thing would be done to her. She and Thomas were proving their conviction by submitting to what had been asked of the others. And if they died, so be it. WICKED would find the cure, millions would be saved, and life on earth would someday get back to normal. Teresa knew this in her core, as much as she knew that humans grow old and leaves fall from trees in autumn.

Thomas sucked in a hitching breath, then made a little moaning sound, shifted his body. Teresa thought for a horrifying second that he might wake up, hysterical from the agony—things were inside his head doing who knew what to his brain. But he stilled and resumed the soft and easy breathing. The clicks and hisses continued, her best friend's memories fading like echoes.

They'd said their official goodbyes, and the words *See you tomorrow* still rang in her head. For some reason that had really struck her when Thomas said it, made what he was about to do all the more surreal and sad. They *would* see each other tomorrow, although she'd be in a coma and he wouldn't have the slightest idea who she was—other than an itch in his mind that maybe she looked familiar. Tomorrow. After all they'd been through—all the fear

and training and planning—it was all coming to a head. What had been done to Alby and Newt and Minho and all the rest would be done to them. There was no turning back.

But the calmness was like a drug inside her. She was at peace, these soothing feelings keeping the terror of things like Grievers and Cranks at bay. WICKED had no choice. She and Thomas—they had no choice. How could she shrink at sacrificing a few to save the many? How could *anyone*? She didn't have time for pity or sadness or wishes. It was what it was; what was done was done; what would be ... would be.

There was no turning back. She and Thomas had helped construct the Maze; at the same time she'd exerted a lot of effort to build a wall holding back her emotions.

Her thoughts faded then, seemed to float in suspended animation as she waited for the procedure on Thomas to be complete. When it finally was, the doctor pushed several buttons on his screen and the beeps and hisses and clicks sped up. Thomas's body twitched a little as the tubes and wires snaked away from their intrusive positions and back into his mask. He grew still again and the mask powered down, all sound and movement ceasing. The nurse leaned forward and lifted it off Thomas's face. His skin was red and marked with lines where it had rested. Eyes still closed.

For a brief moment, Teresa's wall holding back the sadness began to crumble. If Thomas woke up right then, he wouldn't remember her. She felt the dread—almost like panic—of knowing that they'd meet soon in the Glade and not know each other. It was a crushing thought that reminded her vividly of why she'd built the wall in the first place. Like a mason slamming a brick into hardening mortar, she sealed the breach. Sealed it solid and thick.

There was no turning back.

Two men from the security team came in to help move Thomas. They lifted him off the bed, hoisted him as if he were stuffed with straw. One had the unconscious boy by the arms, the other by the feet, and they placed him on a gurney. Without so much as a glance toward Teresa, they headed for the door of the operating room. Everyone knew where he was being taken. The doctor and the nurse went about the business of cleaning up—their job was done. Teresa nodded at them even though they weren't looking, then followed the men into the hallway.

She could barely look at Thomas as they made the long journey through the corridors and elevators of WICKED headquarters. Her wall had weakened again. Thomas was so pale, and his face was covered with beads of sweat. As if he were conscious on some level, fighting the drugs, aware that terrible things awaited him on the horizon. It hurt her heart to see it. And it scared her to know that she was next. Her stupid wall. What did it matter? It would be taken from her along with all the memories anyway.

They reached the basement level below the Maze structure, walked through the warehouse with its rows and shelves of supplies for the Gladers. It was dark and cool down there, and Teresa felt goose bumps break out along her arms. She shivered and rubbed them down. Thomas bounced and jostled on the gurney as it hit cracks in the concrete floor, still a look of dread trying to break through the calm exterior of his sleeping face.

They reached the shaft of the lift, where the large metal cube rested.

The Box.

It was only a couple of stories below the Glade proper, but the Glade occupants were

manipulated into thinking the trip up was an impossibly long and arduous journey. It was all meant to stimulate an array of emotions and brain patterns, from confusion to disorientation to outright terror. A perfect start for those mapping Thomas's killzone. Teresa knew that she'd be taking the trip herself tomorrow, with a note gripped in her hands. But at least she'd be in a comatose state, spared of that half hour in the moving darkness. Thomas would wake up in the Box, completely alone.

The two men wheeled Thomas next to the Box. There was a horrible screech of metal against cement as one of them dragged a large stepladder to the side of the cube. A few moments of awkwardness as they climbed those steps together while holding Thomas again. Teresa could've helped but refused, stubborn enough to stand there and watch, to shore up the cracks in her wall as much as she could.

With a few grunts and curses, the men got Thomas to the edge at the top. His body was positioned in a way that his closed eyes faced Teresa one last time. Even though she knew he wouldn't hear it, she reached out and spoke to him inside her mind.

We're doing the right thing, Thomas. See you on the other side.

The men leaned over and lowered Thomas by the arms as far as they could; they dropped him the rest of the way. Teresa heard the thump of his body crumpling onto the cold steel of the floor inside. Her best friend.

She turned around and walked away. From behind her came the distinct sound of metal sliding against metal, then a loud, echoing boom as the doors of the Box slammed shut. Sealing Thomas's fate, whatever it might be.

THIRTEEN YEARS EARLIER

CHAPTER 1

Mark shivered with cold, something he hadn't done in a long time.

He'd just woken up, the first traces of dawn leaking through the cracks of the stacked logs that made up the wall of his small hut. He almost never used his blanket. He was proud of it—it was made from the hide of a giant elk he'd killed himself just two months prior—but when he did use it, it was for the comfort of the blanket itself, not so much for warmth. They lived in a world ravaged by heat, after all. But maybe this was a sign of change; he actually felt a little chilled by the morning air seeping through those same cracks as the light. He pulled the furry hide up to his chin and turned to lie on his back, belting out a yawn for the ages.

Alec was still asleep in the cot on the other side of the hut—all of four feet away—and snoring up a storm. The older man was gruff, a hardened former soldier who rarely smiled. And when he did, it usually had something to do with rumbling gas pains in his stomach. But Alec had a heart of gold. After more than a year together, fighting for survival along with Lana and Trina and the rest of them, Mark wasn't intimidated by the old bear anymore. Just to prove it, he leaned over and grabbed a shoe off the floor, then chucked it at the man. It hit him in the shoulder.

Alec roared and sat up straight, years of military training snapping him instantly awake. "What the—" the soldier yelled, but Mark cut him off by throwing his other shoe at him, this time smacking his chest.

"You little piece of rat liver," Alec said coolly. He hadn't flinched or moved after the second attack, just stared Mark down with narrowed eyes. But there was a spark of humor behind them. "I better hear a good reason why you chose to risk your life by waking me up like that."

"Ummmmm," Mark replied, rubbing his chin as if he were thinking hard about it. Then he snapped his fingers. "Oh, I got it. Mainly it was to stop the awful sounds coming out of you. Seriously, man, you need to sleep on your side or something. Snoring like that can't be healthy. You're gonna choke on your own throat one of these days."

Alec grumbled and grunted a few times, muttering almost indecipherable words as he scooted off his cot and got dressed. There was something about "wish I'd never" and "better off" and "year of hell," but not much more Mark could make out. The message was clear, though.

"Come on, Sergeant," Mark said, knowing he was about three seconds from going too far. Alec had been retired from the military for a long time and really, really, *really* hated it when Mark called him that. At the time of the sun flares, Alec had been a contract worker for the defense department. "You never would've made it to this lovely abode if it hadn't been for us snatching you out of trouble every day. How about a hug and we make up?"

Alec pulled a shirt over his head, then peered down at Mark. The older man's bushy gray eyebrows bunched up in the middle as if they were hairy bugs trying to mate. "I like you, kid. It'd be a shame to have to put you six feet under." He whacked Mark on the side of the head—the closest thing to affection the soldier ever showed.

Soldier. It might have been a long time, but Mark still liked to think of the man that way. It made him feel better—safer—somehow. He smiled as Alec stomped out of their hut to tackle another day. A real smile. Something that was finally becoming a little more commonplace after the year of death and terror that had chased them to this place high up in the Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina. He decided that no matter what, he'd push all the bad stuff from the past aside and have a good day. No matter what.

Which meant he needed to bring Trina into the picture before another ten minutes ticked off the clock. He hurriedly got dressed and went out to look for her.

He found her up by the stream, in one of the quiet places she went to read some of the books they'd salvaged from an old library they'd come across in their travels. That girl loved to read like no one else, and she was making up for the months they spent literally running for their lives, when books were few and far between. The digital kind were all long gone, as far as Mark could guess—wiped away when the computers and servers all fried. Trina read the old-school paper kind.

The walk toward her had been as sobering as usual, each step weakening his resolve to have a good day. Looking at the pitiful network of tree houses and huts and underground burrows that made up the thriving metropolis in which they lived—all logs and twine and dried mud, everything leaning to the left or the right—did the trick. He couldn't stroll through the crowded alleys and paths of their settlement without it reminding him of the good days living in the big city, when life had been rich and full of promise, everything in the world within easy reach, ready for the taking. And he hadn't even realized it.

He passed hordes of scrawny, dirty people who seemed on the edge of death. He didn't pity them so much as he hated knowing that he looked just like them. They had enough food—scavenged from the ruins, hunted in the woods, brought up from Asheville sometimes—but rationing was the name of the game, and everyone looked like they were one meal a day short. And you didn't live in the woods without getting a smear of dirt here and there, no matter how often you bathed up in the stream.

The sky was blue with a hint of that burnt orange that had haunted the atmosphere since the devastating sun flares had struck without much warning. Over a year ago and yet it still hung up there like a hazy curtain meant to remind them forever. Who knew if things would ever get back to normal. The coolness Mark had felt upon waking up seemed like a joke now—he was already sweating from the steadily rising temperature as the brutal sun rimmed the sparse tree line of the mountain peaks above.

It wasn't all bad news. As he left the warrens of their camps and entered the woods, there were many promising signs. New trees growing, old trees recovering, squirrels dashing through the blackened pine needles, green sprouts and buds all around. He even saw something that looked like an orange flower in the distance. He was half tempted to go pick it for Trina, but he knew she'd scold him within an inch of his life if he dared impede the progress of the forest. Maybe his day would be good after all. They'd survived the worst natural disaster in known human history—maybe the corner had been turned.

He was breathing heavily from the effort of the hike up the mountain face when he reached the spot where Trina loved to go for escape. Especially in the mornings, when the odds of finding someone else up there were slim. He stopped and looked at her from behind a tree, knowing she'd heard him approach but glad she was pretending she hadn't.

Man, she was pretty. Leaning back against a huge granite boulder that seemed as if it had been placed there by a decorating giant, she held a thick book in her lap. She turned a page, her green eyes following the words. She was wearing a black T-shirt and a pair of worn jeans, sneakers that looked a hundred years old. Her short blond hair shifted in the wind, and she appeared the very definition of peace and comfort. Like she belonged in the world that had existed before everything was scorched.

Mark had always felt like she was his as a simple matter of the situation. Pretty much everyone else she'd ever known had died; he was a scrap left over for her to take, the alternative to being forever alone. But he gladly played his part, even considered himself lucky—he didn't know what he'd do without her.

"This book would be so much better if I didn't have some creepy guy stalking me while I tried to read it." Trina spoke without the slightest hint of a smile. She flipped another page and continued to read.

"It's just me," he said. Half of what he said around her still came out sounding dumb. He stepped from behind the tree.

She laughed and finally looked up at him. "It's about time you got here! I was just about ready to start talking to myself—I've been reading since before dawn."

He walked over and plopped down on the ground beside her. They hugged, tight and warm and full of the promise he'd made upon waking up.

He pulled back and looked at her, not caring about the goofy grin that was most likely plastered across his face. "You know what?"

"What?" she asked.

"Today is going to be a perfect, perfect day."

Trina smiled and the waters of the stream continued to rush by, as if his words meant nothing.

CHAPTER 2

"I haven't had a perfect day since I turned sixteen," Trina said as she thumbed down the corner of her page and placed the book by her side. "Three days later and you and I were running for our lives through a tunnel that was hotter than the sun."

"Good times," Mark mused as he got more comfortable. He leaned up against the same boulder, crossed his legs in front of him. "Good times."

Trina gave him a sideways glance. "My birthday party or the sun flares?"

"Neither. You liked that idiot John Stidham at your party. Remember?"

A guilty look flashed across her face. "Um, yeah. Seems like that was about three thousand years ago."

"It took half the world being wiped out for you to finally notice me." Mark smiled, but it felt empty. The truth was kind of depressing—even to joke about—and a dark cloud was forming over his head. "Let's change the subject."

"I vote for that." She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the stone. "I don't want to think about that stuff for one more second."

Mark nodded even though she couldn't see. He'd suddenly lost any desire to talk, and his plans for a perfect day washed away with the stream. The memories. They never let him go, not even for a half hour. They always had to rush back in, bringing all the horror.

"You okay?" Trina asked. She reached out and grabbed his hand, but Mark pulled it away, knowing it was all sweaty.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just wish we could go one day without something taking us back. I could be perfectly happy in this place if we could just *forget*. Things are getting better. We just need to ... let it go!" He almost shouted the last part, but he had no idea where his anger was directed. He just hated the things in his head. The images. The sounds. The smells.

"We will, Mark. We will." She reached for him again, and this time he took her hand.

"We better get back down there." He always did this. When the memories came, he always slipped into business mode. Take care of business and work and stop using your brain. It was the only thing that helped. "I'm sure Alec and Lana have about forty jobs for us."

"That have to be done *today*," Trina added. "Today! Or the world will end!"

She smiled, and that helped lighten things up. At least a little.

"You can read more of your boring book later." He climbed to his feet, pulling her up along with him. Then they set off down the mountain path, heading for the makeshift village they called home.

The smells hit Mark first. It was always that way when going to the Central Shack. Rotting undergrowth, cooking meat, pine sap. All laced with that scent of burning that defined the world after the sun flares. Not unpleasant, really, just haunting.

He and Trina wound their way past the crooked and seemingly slapped-together buildings of the settlement. Most of the buildings on this side of the camp had been put up

in the early months, before they'd found people who'd been architects and contractors and put them in charge. Huts made of tree trunks and mud and bristles of pine needles. Empty gaps for windows and oddly shaped doorways. In some spots there were nothing but holes in the ground, the bottom lined with plastic sheets, a few logs lashed together to cover it when the rains came. It was a far cry from the towering skyscrapers and concrete landscape of where he'd grown up.

Alec greeted Mark and Trina with a grunt when they walked through the lopsided doorway in the Central Shack's log structure. Before they could say hello, Lana came marching briskly up to them. A stout woman with black hair that was always pulled tightly into a bun, she'd been a nurse in the army and was younger than Alec, but older than Mark's parents—she and Alec had been together when Mark had met them in the tunnels below New York City. Back then, they'd both worked for the defense department. Alec was her boss; they'd been on their way to a meeting of some sort that day. Before everything changed.

"And where have you two been?" Lana asked when she came to a stop just a few inches from Mark's face. "We were supposed to start at dawn today, head out to the southern valley and scout for another branch location. A few more weeks of this overcrowding and I might get snippy."

"Good morning," Mark said in response. "You seem chipper today."

She smiled at that; Mark had known she would. "I do tend to get straight to business sometimes, don't I? Though I have a lot of wiggle room before I get as grumpy as Alec."

"The sarge? Yeah, you're right."

On cue, the old bear grunted.

"Sorry about being late," Trina said. "I'd make up a great excuse, but honesty's the best policy. Mark made me go up to the stream and we ... you know."

It took a lot to surprise Mark these days, even more to make him blush, but Trina had the ability to do both. He stammered as Lana rolled her eyes.

"Oh, spare me." Lana waved and added, "Now go grab some breakfast if you haven't already and let's get packed and marching. I want to be back within a week."

A week out in the wilderness, seeing new things, getting some fresher air ... it all sounded great to Mark, lifting his spirits out of the hole into which they'd fallen earlier. He swore to keep his mind on the present while they traveled and just try to enjoy the hike.

"Have you seen Darnell and the Toad?" Trina asked. "What about Misty?"

"The Three Stooges?" Alec asked, followed by a bark of a laugh. The man thought the weirdest things were funny. "At least they remembered the plan. Already eaten, gone to pack. Should be back in a jiffy."

Mark and Trina were halfway through their pancakes and deer sausage when they heard the familiar sound of the other three friends they'd picked up in the tunnels of New York.

"Take that off your head!" came a whiny voice, right before a teenage boy appeared at the door with a pair of underwear pulled over his brown hair like a hat. Darnell. Mark was convinced the kid had never taken a thing seriously in his entire life. Even when the sun had been trying to boil him alive a year past, he seemed to be ready with a joke.

"But I like it!" he was saying as he entered the Shack. "Helps keep my hair in place and protects me from the elements. Two for the price of one!"

A girl walked in after him, tall and thin with long red hair, just a little younger than Mark. They called her Misty, though she'd never told them whether that was her real name. She was looking at Darnell with an expression of half disgust and half amusement. The Toad—short and squat, as his nickname implied—bounded in and pushed his way past her, grabbing for the undies atop Darnell's head.

"Give me those!" he shouted, leaping as he reached. He was the shortest nineteen-year-old Mark had ever seen, but thick as an oak tree—all muscle and sinew and veins. Which for some reason made the others think it was okay to pick on him, because they all knew he could beat the crap out of them if he really wanted to. But the Toad liked being the center of attention. And Darnell liked being goofy and annoying.

"Why would you even *want* those nasty things on your head?" Misty asked. "You do realize where that's been, right? Covering up the Toad's nether regions?"

"Excellent point," Darnell replied with his own look of feigned disgust, just as the Toad finally was able to snatch the underwear off of his head. "Very poor judgment on my part." Darnell shrugged. "Seemed funny at the time."

The Toad was stuffing his recaptured possession into his backpack. "Well, I get the last laugh. I haven't washed those suckers in at least two weeks."

He started up with that laugh, a noise that made Mark think of a dog fighting over a piece of meat. Whenever the Toad let it out, every other person in the room couldn't help but join in, and the ice officially melted. Mark still couldn't tell if he was laughing at the subject matter or just at the sounds coming out of the Toad. Either way, such moments were few and far between, and it felt good to laugh, as it did to see Trina's face light up.

Even Alec and Lana were chuckling, which made Mark think maybe it was going to be a perfect day after all.

But then their laughter was cut off by a strange sound. Something Mark hadn't heard in over a year, and hadn't expected to hear ever again.

The sound of engines in the sky.

CHAPTER 3

It was a rumbling, cranking noise that shook the Shack from top to bottom. Puffs of dust shot between the hastily stacked and mortared logs. A coughing roar swept past just overhead. Mark covered his ears until the sound faded enough that the Shack stopped shaking. Alec was already on his feet and heading for the door before anyone else could even process the turn of events. Lana was quickly at his heels, with everyone else following.

No one said a word until they were all outside, the bright morning sun beating down. Mark squinted, hand shielding the glare, as he searched the sky for the source of the noise.

“It’s a Berg,” the Toad announced needlessly. “What the ...”

It was the first time Mark had seen one of the enormous airships since the sun flares happened, and the sight of it was jolting. He couldn’t think of any reason a Berg—one that had survived the disaster—would have to come flying through the mountains. But there it was, big and shiny and round, blue thrusters burning hot and loud as it lowered toward the middle of the settlement.

“What’s it doing here?” Trina asked as their little group jogged through the cramped alleys of the village, following the path of the Berg. “They’ve always left supplies in the bigger settlements, like Asheville.”

“Maybe ...,” Misty began. “Maybe they’re rescuing us or something? Taking us somewhere else?”

“No way,” Darnell scoffed. “They would’ve done that a long time ago.”

Mark didn’t say anything as he ran along at the back of the group, still a bit stunned by the sudden appearance of the huge Berg. The others kept referencing some mysterious *they*, even though no one knew who *they* were. There’d been signs and rumors that some kind of central government was organizing itself, but no news that was even close to reliable. And certainly no official contact yet. It was true that supplies and food had been brought to the camps around Asheville, and the people there usually shared with the outlying settlements.

The Berg stopped up ahead, its blue thrusters pointing downward now as it hovered fifty feet or so above the Town Square, a roughly square-shaped area they’d left bare when building the settlement. The group picked up their pace and arrived in the Square to find that a crowd had already gathered, the people gawking up at the flying machine as if it were a mythical beast. With its roar and its dazzling display of blue light, it almost seemed so. Especially after such a long time since they’d seen any signs of advanced technology.

Most of the crowd had gathered in the center of the Square, their faces pictures of expectation and excitement. Like they’d all jumped to the same conclusion as Misty—that the Berg was here for rescue, or at least some spot of good news. Mark was wary, though. After the year he’d just been through, he’d been taught many times over to never get his hopes up.

Trina pulled on his sleeve, then leaned in to talk to him. “What’s it doing? There’s not enough room here for it to land.”

“I don’t know. There aren’t any markings or anything to say whose Berg it is or where it

came from."

Alec was close and somehow overheard their conversation over the burning snarl of the thrusters. Probably with his superpowered soldier hearing. "They say the ones that drop off supplies in Asheville have *PFC* painted in big letters on the side. Post-Flares Coalition." He was practically shouting. "Seems strange that this one has nothing on it."

Mark shrugged back at him, not sure Alec's information really meant anything. He realized he was sort of in a daze. He looked back up, wondered who could possibly be inside the vessel and what their purpose might be. Trina squeezed his hand and he squeezed hers back. They were both sweating.

"Maybe it's God inside," the Toad said in a high-pitched voice—it always came out that way when he shouted. "Come to say he's sorry for all the sun flare business."

Out of the corner of his eye, Mark noticed Darnell taking in a breath, his mouth opening, probably to say something smart and funny back at the Toad. But the action was cut off by a loud wrenching sound from above, followed by the groan and squeal of hydraulics. Mark watched in fascination as a large, square-shaped hatch on the bottom of the Berg began to open, pivoting on hinges to lower like a ramp. It was dark inside, and little wisps of mist came swirling out as the gap grew wider.

Gasps and shouts rippled throughout the crowd; hands raised and fingers pointed upward. Mark tore his gaze from the Berg for a moment to take everything in, struck by the sense of awe surrounding him. They'd become a desperate, desperate people, living each day with the weighty feeling that the next one could be their last. And here they all were, looking toward the sky as if the Toad's joke had been more than that. There was a longing in many of the eyes he saw, like people truly thought they were being saved by some divine power. It made Mark feel a little sick.

A fresh wave of gasps spilled through the Square, and Mark snapped his head to look up again. Five people had emerged from the darkness of the Berg, dressed in outfits that sent a chill racing down Mark's spinal cord. Green and rubbery and bulky—one-piece suits that covered the strangers from head to toe. The suits had clear visors in the headpiece through which the wearers could see, but the glare and distance made it impossible for Mark to make out their faces. They stepped carefully in big black boots pulled up over the green material until the five of them lined the outer edge of the lowered hatch door, their tense body language showing the effort it took to maintain balance.

Each of them held a black tube in their hands as if it were a gun.

But the tubes didn't look like any guns Mark had ever seen. They were thin and long, with an attachment at the end that made them resemble plumbing parts someone had ripped out of an industrial pump. And once the strangers settled into their positions, they held up the tubelike things and aimed them directly at the people below.

Mark realized that Alec was screaming at the top of his lungs, pushing and shoving people to move them away. Everything around them was erupting in chaos—shouts and panic—yet Mark had fallen into a trance, watching the strangers with their odd outfits and their menacing weapons come out of the Berg as everyone else in the crowd finally woke up to the fact that these people weren't there to save anyone. What had happened to the Mark who could act fast? Who had survived the year of hell after the flares ravaged the earth?

He was still frozen, watching, as the first shot was fired from above. A blur of movement, a quick flash of something dark and small and fast bursting from one of those tubes. Mark's eyes followed the trajectory. He heard a sickening thunk, his head twisting to the side just in time to see that Darnell had a five-inch-long dart sticking out of his shoulder, its thin metal shaft planted deep within the muscle. Blood trickled down from the wound. The boy made a strange grunt as he collapsed to the ground.

That finally snapped Mark out of it.

CHAPTER 4

Screams tore through the air as panicked people fled in every direction. Mark bent down, grabbing Darnell by hooking his elbows under the boy's arms. The sound of flying darts cutting through the air to his left and right, finding targets, urged him to hurry, erasing any other thoughts from his mind.

Mark pulled on Darnell, dragging his body along the ground. Trina had fallen but Lana was there, helping her up. Both of them ran over to help, each grabbing one of Darnell's feet. With synchronized grunts they hefted him up and moved away from the Square, away from the open space. It was a miracle no one else in their little group had been struck by a dart.

Swish, swish, swish. Thunk, thunk, thunk. Screams and bodies falling.

The projectiles kept coming, landing all around them, and Mark and Trina and Lana shuffled as quickly as they could, awkwardly carrying Darnell between them. They passed behind a group of trees—Mark heard a few hard thunks as darts buried themselves in the branches and trunks—then they were in the open again. They hurried across a small clearing and into an alley between several haphazardly built log cabins. There were people everywhere, knocking frantically on doors, jumping through open windows.

Then Mark heard the roar of the thrusters and a warm wind blew across his face. The roar grew louder, the wind stronger. He looked up, following the noise, to see that the Berg had shifted position, pursuing the fleeing crowds. He saw the Toad and Misty. They were urging people to hurry, their shouts lost in the Berg's blast.

Mark didn't know what to do. Finding shelter was the best bet, but there were too many people trying to do the same thing and joining the chaos with Darnell in tow would only get them trampled. The Berg stopped again, and once more the strangers in their odd suits lifted their weapons and opened fire.

Swish, swish, swish. Thunk, thunk, thunk.

A dart grazed Mark's shirt and hit the ground; someone stepped on it, driving it deeper. Another dart hit home in the neck of a man just as he was running past—he screamed and dove forward as blood spurted from the wound. When he landed, he lay still and three people tripped over him. Mark only realized that he'd stopped, appalled by what was happening around him, when Lana yelled at him to keep moving.

The shooters above them had obviously improved their aim. The darts were hitting people left and right and the air was filled with screams of pain and terror. Mark felt utterly helpless—there was no way to shield himself from the barrage. All he could do was lamely try to outrun a flying machine, an impossible task.

Where was Alec? The tough guy with all the battle instincts? Where had he run off to?

Mark kept moving, yanking Darnell's body along, forcing Trina and Lana to match his speed. The Toad and Misty ran alongside them, trying to help without getting in the way. Darts continued to rain down from above, more screams, more falling bodies. Mark turned a corner and lurched down the alley that led back to the Shack, sticking close to the building on his right for a partial shield. Not as many people had come this way, and there

were fewer darts to dodge.

The little group hobbled as fast as they could with their unconscious friend. The structures were built practically on top of each other in this section of the settlement, and there was no room to cut through and escape into the surrounding woods of the mountains.

"We're almost to the Shack!" Trina yelled. "Hurry, before the Berg is back on top of us!"

Mark twisted his body around so that he was facing front, gripping Darnell by his shirt behind him. Shuffling backward had strained his leg muscles to the max, and they burned with heat and were beginning to cramp. There was nothing in their way now to slow them down, so Mark sped up, Lana and Trina keeping pace, each holding one of Darnell's legs. The Toad and Misty squeezed in and each grabbed an arm, taking some of the load. They slipped through the narrow paths and alleys, over jutting roots and hard-packed dirt, turning left and then right and then left again. The roar of the Berg was coming from their right, muted by the dwellings and rows of trees in between.

Mark finally turned a corner and saw the Shack across a small clearing. He moved to make a final sprint for it, just as a horde of fleeing residents swarmed in from the other side, frantic and wild, scattering in all directions, heading for every door in sight. He froze as the Berg rushed in overhead, closer to the ground than Mark had seen it before. There were only three people standing on the hatch door of the craft now, but they opened fire as soon as the Berg settled into a hovering position.

Little silver streaks shot through the air, rained down on the people surging into the clearing. Every projectile seemed to find its mark, slamming into the necks and arms of men and women and children. They screamed and crumpled to the ground almost instantly, others tripping over their bodies in the mad rush for cover.

Mark and his little group hugged the side of the closest building and laid Darnell on the ground. Pain and weariness slogged through Mark's arms and legs, making him want to collapse beside their unconscious friend.

"We should've just left him back there," Trina said, hands on knees, struggling to catch her breath. "He slowed us down, and he's still right in the thick of things anyway."

"Dead, for all we know," the Toad's voice croaked.

Mark looked sharply at him—but the man was probably right. They might've jeopardized their own lives to save someone who had no chance in the first place.

"What's happening now?" Lana asked as she moved up to the corner of the building to look around at the clearing. She glanced back at them over her shoulder. "They're just picking people off, left and right. Why are they using darts instead of bullets?"

"Makes no sense," Mark replied.

"Can't we do something?" Trina said, her body trembling with what looked like frustration more than fear. "Why are we letting these people do this?"

Mark stepped up to Lana and peeked out with her. Bodies littered the clearing now, impaled darts sticking up toward the sky like a miniature forest. Still the Berg hovered overhead, its thrusters raging with blue heat.

"Where are our security guys?" Mark whispered to no one in particular. "They take the day off or something?"

No one answered, but movement over at the door of the Shack caught Mark's attention and he sighed in relief. It was Alec, waving frantically, urging them to join him. The man

held what looked like two huge rifles with grappling hooks on the ends attached to big coils of rope.

Ever the soldier—even after all these years—the man had a plan, and he needed help. He was going to fight back against these monsters. And so was Mark.

Mark pulled back from the wall and looked around. He saw a piece of wood on the other side of the alley. Without telling the others what he was doing, he ran over to grab it, then sprinted out into the clearing, heading straight for the Shack and for Alec, using the wood as a shield.

Mark didn't need to look up—he could hear the distinct swoosh of darts being shot at him. Heard the solid thunk of one of them hitting the wood. He ran on.

Mark varied his steps, speeding up and slowing down, dodging to the left and right, making his way toward Alec. Darts thunked into the ground around his feet; a second one hit his makeshift shield. As he ran through the open space, Alec—still clutching those rifles—made a beeline for the middle of the clearing. The two of them almost crashed into each other directly under the Berg, and Mark immediately leaned in to try to protect both of them with his shield.

Alec's eyes burned with intensity and purpose. Gray hair or not, he suddenly looked twenty years younger.

"We've got to hurry!" he yelled. "Before that thing decides to take off!"

The thrusters burned overhead and the darts continued to slam into people all around them. The screams were awful.

"What do I do?" Mark shouted. The now familiar blend of adrenaline and terror surged through him as he awaited his friend's instructions.

"You cover me, with this."

Alec shifted his rifles under one arm and pulled a pistol—a dull black one that Mark had never seen before—out of the back of his pants. There was no time to hesitate. Mark took the gun with his free hand, and by the weight of the weapon he knew it was loaded. A dart slammed into the wood as he cocked the pistol. Then another one. The strangers on the Berg had taken notice of the two people scheming in the middle of the clearing. More darts thumped into the ground like a sudden hailstorm.

"Fire away, boy," Alec growled. "And aim well, 'cause you've only got twelve bullets. Don't miss. Now!"

With that, Alec spun and ran to a spot about ten feet away. Mark pointed the gun at the people on the hatch door of the Berg and fired off two quick shots, knowing he needed to get their attention immediately so they wouldn't notice Alec. The three green suits backed up and dropped to their knees, hunching down to get the metal ramp between them and the shooter. One of them turned and clambered to get back into the ship.

Mark tossed the wood shield to the side. He clutched the gun with both hands, steadied himself and concentrated. A head peeked over the edge of the hatch above and Mark quickly set it in his sights, fired a shot. His hands jumped with the recoil, but he saw the red mist, a spray of blood in the air; a body tumbled off the ramp and crashed into a group of three people below. Fresh waves of screams erupted from all directions as people saw what was happening.

An arm stretched around the Berg door above, holding the tube-weapon out to take random shots. Mark fired, heard a sharp ping as the bullet hit the metal contraption, then watched the weapon fall to the ground. A woman scooped it up and started examining it, trying to figure out how to use it to fight back. That could only help.

Mark risked a quick glance back at Alec. He was holding up the grappling-hook weapon as if he were a seaman about to harpoon a whale. A pop sounded and suddenly the hook was flying toward the Berg, the rope spinning out behind it like a trail of smoke. The hook

clanged against one of the hydraulic shafts keeping the hatch door open and twisted around it, catching hold. Alec pulled the rope taut.

"Throw me the gun!" the soldier yelled at him.

Mark looked up to make sure no one had reappeared from inside to shoot another volley of darts; then he sprinted to Alec, handed him the pistol. The man had barely taken it when Mark heard a click and Alec was shooting into the sky, his device pulling him up the rope, toward the hovering Berg. He held on to the grappling-hook weapon with one hand and pointed the pistol above him with the other. As soon as he cleared the edge of the hatch door, three shots rang out in quick succession. Mark watched as the man climbed onto the ramp, his feet the last things to disappear from sight. A few seconds later, another green-suited body was launched over the edge, slamming onto empty dirt.

"The other hook!" Alec screamed down at him. "Hurry, before more come out or they take off!" He didn't wait for a reply before turning to face the main body of the Berg.

Mark's heart raced, almost hurting as it thumped rapidly against his ribs. He looked around, spotted the other hulking device on the ground where Alec had dropped it. Mark picked it up, examined it, felt a rush of panic that he wouldn't know how to use the stupid thing.

"Just aim it up here!" Alec shouted down. "If it doesn't catch, I'll tie it on myself. Hurry!"

Mark held it like a rifle and pointed it directly toward the middle of the hatch door. He pulled the trigger. The recoil was strong but he leaned into it this time, felt the bump of pain on his shoulder. The hook and trailing rope shot toward the Berg, up and over the edge of the open hatch. It clanged and slipped backward, but Alec grabbed it just in time. Mark watched as Alec hurried to one of the hydraulic shafts and wrapped the hook tightly around it.

"Okay!" Alec yelled. "Push the green retractor butt—"

He was cut off when the Berg's engines roared to a higher pitch and the vehicle vaulted into the air. Mark gripped the end of the grappling device just as it pulled him off his feet, yanking him skyward. He heard Trina shout at him from below, but the ground fell away, the people growing smaller by the second. Fear suffused Mark as he held on, squeezing his fingers so tightly they turned bone-white. Looking down made his head spin and his stomach lurch, so he forced his gaze to the hatch door.

Alec was just scrambling back over the edge of the ramp door—he'd almost been sent sailing to his death. He kicked and pulled himself to safety, using the same rope to which Mark clung for dear life. Then he flopped onto his stomach and peered down at Mark with wide eyes.

"Find the green button, Mark!" he yelled. "Push it!"

The air was rushing around Mark's body, the wind combined with the power of the thrusters. The Berg was ascending, now at least two hundred feet off the ground, and moving forward, heading for the trees. They'd clip Mark within seconds and either tear him to pieces or rip him from the rope. He held on as he frantically searched the device for the button.

There it was, a few inches down from the trigger that had shot out the hook and rope. He hated to let go, even for a second, but he focused all his strength into his right hand, clenching his fingers even tighter, then went for it with his left. His entire body flopped

back and forth in the air, swaying against the wind and jolting at every bump of the Berg. The tops of the pines and oaks rushed in. He couldn't get enough control to push the button.

Suddenly there was a clank and a clanging and the squeal of metal above him and he looked up. The hatch door was closing.

“Hurry!” Alec screamed at him from above.

Mark was just about to try for the button again when they reached the trees. He slapped his left hand back on the weapon and gripped it as hard as he could. He curled into a ball and squeezed his eyes shut. The top branches of the tallest pine slammed into his body as the Berg swung him into it. Needles poked his skin and the spiky points of tree limbs snagged his clothes and scratched his face. They were like skeleton hands trying to claw him free, pull him to his death. Every inch of his body seemed scraped by something.

But he made it through, the Berg’s momentum and the rope jerking him from the tree’s clutches. He relaxed his legs, then kicked out wildly as the ship swung around, sending him flying in a huge arc. The hatch door was halfway closed and Alec leaned out and over, trying to pull the rope up, his face almost purple from yelling. His words were lost in the noise of it all.

Mark’s stomach was churning, but he knew he had only one more chance. He let go of the device with his left hand, felt along the side until he found the trigger again, fingered his way to where he knew the green button to be. His peripheral vision showed more trees coming his way, the Berg dipping lower now so that there’d be no chance of his making it through.

He found the button, pressed it, but his fingers slipped. Branches reached for him, and he tried again, pressing the device against his body for leverage, then pushing the button hard. It clicked in and he shot upward just as his body swung into the thick foliage of the trees. He barreled through them, vaulting toward the hatch above, branches smacking him in the face. There was a whirring sound as the rope retracted into the device, yanking him to Alec, who had a hand outstretched. The metal slab of the door was only two or three feet from sealing shut.

Mark let go of the device just before he hit the sharp corner of the slowly rising hatch door, leaping to catch Alec’s hand and grab at the metal with his other. He lost his grip, but Alec held him firmly, pulling him headfirst through the narrowing gap. It was a tight fit and Mark had to squirm and kick, but he finally squeezed through just in time, though he had to yank the sole of his shoe loose from the closing jaws of the hatch. It slammed shut with a thunderous boom that echoed off the dark walls of the Berg’s interior.

It was cool inside, and once the echo faded, the only thing Mark could hear was the sound of his own heavy breathing. The darkness was complete—at least for his unadjusted eyes, after being out in the blinding sun. He sensed Alec nearby, also sucking in air to catch his breath. Every last inch of Mark’s body ached, and he felt blood oozing in several spots. The Berg had come to a stop, humming as it hovered in place.

“I can’t believe we just did that,” Mark said, his voice echoing. “But why isn’t there an army of people waiting here to take care of us, throw us overboard? Shoot us with those darts?”

Alec let out a heavy sigh. “I don’t know. They might have a skeleton crew, but I think there’s at least one guy in there waiting on us.”

"He could be aiming one of those dart guns at my head right now."

"Bah!" Alec spat. "It's my guess those guys were nobodies, sent in to do the job professionals should've done. Maybe we cleaned out their crew. Everyone except the pilot, at least."

"Or maybe there are ten guys with guns waiting outside this room," Mark muttered.

"Well, one of those two scenarios, anyway," Alec answered. "Come on, let's go." The soldier shuffled forward; Mark could only track his movement from the sounds he made. It seemed like he was crawling.

"But ..." Mark began, then realized he had nothing to say. What else were they going to do, sit there and play blind hopscotch until someone came out to greet them with cookies and milk? He got on his hands and knees, wincing from the beating he just took, and followed his friend.

A faint light source appeared a few feet ahead, and as they got closer their surroundings began to come into focus a bit. They seemed to be in some sort of storage room, with shelves along all the walls and straps or chain-link doors to keep everything in place. But at least half of the shelves were empty.

The light was a glowing panel above a squat metal door with bolts lining its edges.

"I wonder if they locked us in," Alec said as he finally stood. He walked over to the door and tried the handle. Sure enough, it wouldn't budge.

Mark was relieved to stand up—the floor was hard against his knees—but his muscles complained as he pulled himself to his feet. It'd been a while since he'd exerted so much energy, and getting the tar beaten out of him by a bunch of trees was an absolute first.

"What's going on, anyway?" he asked. "What does anyone want with our little nothing of a village? And shooting us with *darts*? I mean, what was that?"

"I wish I knew." Alec pulled at the door harder, yanking on the handle, still to no avail. "But those people sure dropped like flies once those suckers stuck in 'em." He turned away from the door with a frustrated look, then put his hands on his hips like an old lady.

"Dropped like flies," Mark repeated quietly. "One of them happened to be Darnell. You think he's okay?"

Alec shot him a look that said *You're smarter than that*. And Mark knew it was true. His heart sank a little. Everything had been such a mad rush since the Berg had arrived that it registered only now: Darnell was probably dead.

"Why are we up here?" Mark asked.

Alec pointed a finger at him. "Because it's what you do when someone comes to *your* house and attacks *your* people. You fight back. I'm not going to let these bloodsuckers get away with that crap."

Mark thought about Darnell, about all those people hurt and confused, and he realized that Alec was right. "Okay. I'm in. So what do we do?"

"First, we've got to get this blasted door open. Help me look, see if we can find something to make that happen."

Mark wandered around the room, though the light was pitiful. "Why are we just hovering right now anyway?"

"You sure like to ask questions I got no way of answering. Just peel those eyeballs and get searching."

“Okay, okay.”

At first Mark only saw junk and more junk. Spare parts, tools, boxes full of supplies—everything from soap to toilet paper. Then he saw something strapped against the wall that he knew Alec would like: a sledgehammer.

“Hey, over here!” Mark shouted. He lifted the thing out of the straps, weighing it in his hands. “It’s nice and heavy—perfect for you to beat the door down with your gargantuan soldier arms.”

“Not as strong as they used to be.”

The old bear grinned, the faint light glinting in his eyes, as he took the wooden shaft of the hammer. He marched over to the sealed door and started whacking at it. The thing had no chance, but Mark figured it might take a good minute or two of work to break it down. He just hoped that when it opened there wasn’t an army of green-suited thugs waiting on the other side.

Clang. Clang. Clang. Alec kept at it, the dents getting bigger.

Mark poked around more, hoping to find some kind of weapon for when that door finally came open. At least Alec had a huge sledgehammer to swing. Something in the darkest corner of the room caught Mark’s eye, a section full of hard-cased boxes maybe two feet long and a foot high and deep that looked like they were made to protect something important. Some were open and empty; others were sealed.

He hurried over and strained his eyes to see, but it was too dark to make anything out. He picked up one of the sealed boxes—it was lighter than he would’ve guessed—and moved back into the light, then set the box down on the metal grate of the floor. Leaning over, he finally got a good look.

There was a warning symbol plastered across the top, the kind that indicated the contents were some sort of biohazard. A label below the symbol said:

Virus VC321xb47
Highly Contagious
24 Darts, Extreme Caution

Mark suddenly wished he hadn’t touched the thing.

CHAPTER 7

Mark straightened up and moved a few feet away. He couldn't believe he'd handled the box. He might even have opened it if he hadn't brought it into the light first. For all he knew, those darts had broken during the flight of the Berg. Maybe the virus had even seeped through the small cracks in the container. Not to mention there were open boxes on the shelves, though they appeared to be empty.

He wiped his hands on his pants, stepped away even farther.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

Alec stopped, breathing heavily. "One or two more whacks and I think this baby will bust open. We need to be ready. Find any weapons?"

Mark felt sick. As if microscopic bugs had leapt from the box to his skin and were burrowing their way to his blood even as he stood there. "No, just a box holding darts filled with a deadly virus. Maybe we can throw some at them?" It was meant as a joke but somehow made him feel even worse as the words came out.

"What? A virus?" Alec repeated in a doubtful tone. He walked over and peered down at the box on the floor. "I'll be ... So *that's* what they were shooting at us? Who *are* these people?"

Mark panicked. "What if they're waiting on the other side of that door?" he asked. "Waiting to put darts in *our* necks? What are we even doing up here?" He could hear the rising alarm in his own voice and was ashamed of it.

"Calm down, boy. We've been in a lot tougher situations than this," Alec answered. "Just find something—anything—you can get your hands on and bang away at somebody's head if they come charging. You wanna let these people get away with dart-gunning some of our friends? We're up here now. There's no turning back."

The fight in Alec's voice made Mark feel better, more sure of himself.

"Okay. I'll look."

"Hurry!"

Mark had seen a wrench strapped to the wall near the sledgehammer. He ran over and grabbed it. He'd been hoping a real weapon might reveal itself, but the foot-long piece of metal would have to do.

Alec had the sledgehammer in his hands, ready to slam it against the beaten-up handle of the door. "You're right that they might fire at us as soon as this pops open. Let's not charge through like a couple of dumb gorillas. Get over there and wait for my command."

Mark did as he was told, pressing his back against the wall on the other side of the door, holding the wrench tightly. "I'm ready." Fear pulsed within him.

"All right, then."

Alec lifted the sledgehammer high, then brought it crashing down against the handle. It took two more hits for the whole thing to finally break off with a crunch. One more swing and the door swung open, shooting outward and slamming into the wall on the other side. Almost immediately three darts cut through the air, swoosh, swoosh, swoosh, clanging off the far wall. Then there was the sound of something clattering against the floor, followed by

footsteps running away. Just one person.

Alec held up a hand as if he thought Mark would go charging after the guy. Then he peeked around the edge of the doorframe.

"All clear. And the rat must've run out of darts, because he threw his gun on the ground. I'm beginning to think this Berg only has a few people on it. Come on, let's go catch that weasel."

Alec leaned out into the open a bit farther, sweeping his gaze back and forth one last time. Then he moved into the dimly lit area beyond. Mark took a deep breath and followed him into the hallway, kicking the dart gun away in disgust. As it clattered across the room and hit a wall, he pictured Darnell, that dart sticking straight out of his shoulder. Mark wished he had more than a wrench in his hands.

Alec held the sledgehammer in both fists, cocked at an angle as he crept through the narrow hallway. It was slightly curved, as if it followed the circular outer edge of the craft. Glowing panels like the one they'd seen in the hatch room were spaced about ten feet apart, providing the only light. They passed several doors, but each was locked when Alec tried them.

Mark battled his nerves as they walked, trying to be ready if anything jumped out at him. He was just about to ask Alec about the layout of a Berg—he remembered that the man had once been a pilot—when he heard a door slam up ahead, then more footsteps.

"Go!" Alec yelled.

Mark's heart lurched and he broke into a sprint, following Alec down the curved passage. Mark could only catch a glimpse of a running shadow up ahead, but it looked like someone in one of the green suits they'd seen earlier, without the headgear. The person yelled something, but the words were indecipherable as they echoed off the walls of the hallway. It was definitely a man. Most likely the one who'd shot at them.

Engines revved all around them and the Berg jerked into motion, blasting forward in a rush of power. Mark lost his balance and crashed into a wall, bounced off, then tripped over Alec, who was sprawled on the floor. The two of them scrambled to their feet, grabbed their weapons.

"Cockpit's right up there," Alec yelled. "Hurry!"

He didn't wait for a reply—the man bounded down the passage and Mark followed. They reached an open area with chairs and a table just as the man they were chasing disappeared through a round hatch into what had to be the cockpit. He started pulling the door closed, but Alec threw the sledgehammer just in time. It hit the wall next to the hatch and fell to the floor, blocking the door from closing. Mark hadn't stopped—he ran past Alec and reached the cockpit first, leaning inside without letting himself stop to think about it.

He caught a quick glance of two pilot chairs, windows above wide panels full of instruments and dials and screens flashing information. One of the chairs was occupied by a woman frantically pressing buttons as the Berg shot forward, trees disappearing below them at an increasing rate. Mark had barely taken it all in when someone tackled him from the right, both of their bodies crashing to the floor.

Mark's breath was knocked out of him as his attacker tried to pin him down. Then the man was whacked in the shoulder by Alec's sledgehammer and was sent flying. He landed with a grunt of pain and Mark scrambled to his feet, struggling to suck air into his lungs.

Alec grabbed the man by his green shirt and pulled him up close to his face.

"What's going on here?" the former soldier shouted, spit flying.

The pilot continued to work the controls, ignoring the chaotic scene behind her. Mark stepped up to her, not sure what to do. He steadied himself and put all the authority he could into his voice.

"Stop this thing right now. Turn it back, take us home."

She acted like she hadn't heard him.

"Talk to me!" Alec was yelling at his man.

"We're nothing!" the guy said through a pitiful moan. "We were just sent to do their dirty work."

"Sent?" Alec repeated. "Who sent you?"

"I can't tell you."

Mark was listening to what was going on across the room. He was annoyed that the pilot had ignored his directions. "I said to stop this thing! Now!" He held up his wrench but felt completely ridiculous.

"Just following orders, son," the lady replied. Not a hint of emotion in her voice.

Mark was searching for a comeback when the sound of Alec punching the man on the floor tore his attention away.

"Who sent you?" Alec repeated. "What was in those darts you shot at us? Some kind of virus?"

"I don't know," the man said through a whimper. "Please, please don't hurt me." Mark's attention was fully on the man in the green suit now, and a sudden gray tinge washed over the man's face, as if he'd been possessed by some ghostly presence. "Do it," he said, almost robotically. "Take her down."

"What?" Alec said. "What is this?"

The pilot turned her head to face Mark, who stared back, perplexed. She had the same flat, dead-looking eyes as the green-suit guy. "Just following orders."

She reached out and pushed a lever, slamming it forward until it couldn't go any farther. The entire Berg lurched and plunged toward the ground, the windows of the cockpit suddenly full of greenery.

Mark flew off the floor and smashed into the control panels. Something huge shattered and the roar of engines filled his ears; there was a loud crash, followed by an explosion. The Berg jerked to a stop and something hard came flying across the room and smacked Mark in the head.

He felt the pain and closed his eyes before the blood could ooze into his vision. And then he slowly faded from consciousness as he heard Alec calling his name down a dark, endless tunnel.

A tunnel; how appropriate, he thought before he blacked out completely. That was where it had started, after all....

Mark leans his head back against the seat of the subtrans as it speeds along. He closes his eyes, smiles. School was a load that day, but it was over. Over for two weeks. Now he can relax and chill—just veg. Play the virtbox and eat outrageous amounts of food. Hang out with Trina, talk to Trina, bug Trina. Maybe he'd just say adios to his parents and kidnap her, run away. There you go.

He opens his eyes.

She's sitting across from him, completely ignoring him. She has no idea that he's daydreaming about her, or even that he's mad for her. They've been friends for a long time, by circumstance more than anything. When you live next door to a kid, that kid is your buddy by the rules of the universe. Male, female, alien—doesn't matter. But how could he have known she'd turn into this beautiful thing with the hot body and the dazzling eyes? Of course, the only problem with that is that every other dude in the school likes her, too. And Trina likes being liked. *That* is obvious.

"Hey," he says. The subtrans bullets through the tunnels beneath New York City, whisper quiet, its movement almost soothing. It makes him want to close his eyes again. "What're you thinking about over there?"

Her eyes meet his; then her face brightens into a smile. "Absolutely nothing. That's what I'm going to do for two weeks. Not think. If I start to think, I'm going to think really hard about not thinking until I quit thinking."

"Wow. That almost sounds hard."

"No. Just fun. Only brilliant prodigies know how to do it."

This is one of those moments where Mark has the ridiculous urge to say something about liking her, ask her out on an official date, reach out and take her hand. Instead, the usual dumb words come tumbling out. "O wisest of the wise, maybe you can teach me this method of thinking to not think."

Her face scrunches up a little. "You are such a dork."

Oh yeah. He has her wrapped around his finger for sure. He feels like groaning, maybe punching himself in the face.

"But I like dorks," she says to soften the blow.

And he feels good again. "So ... what *are* your plans? You guys going anywhere, staying home, what?"

"We might go to my granny's for a few days, but we'll be home most of the break. I'm supposed to go out with Danny sometime, but nothing solid. You?"

He's been knocked down a few notches. So much up-and-down with this girl. "Um, yeah. I mean, no. We're just ... Nothing. I'll be sitting around eating chips. Lots of burping. Lots of watching my little sister get spoiled with presents." Madison. Yeah, she's spoiled, but half of that is Mark's fault.

"Maybe we can hang out, then."

And back up the scale he goes. "That'd be awesome. How about every day?" It's the boldest statement he's ever made to her.

"Okay. Maybe we can even ..." She looks around with exaggerated caution, then focuses back on him. "Sneak a kiss in your basement."

For one long second, he thinks she's serious and his heart stops completely, goose bumps rising like soldiers across his skin. A flush of feeling burns in his chest.

But then she starts laughing like a crazy person. Not really maliciously, and maybe he even notes a hint of real flirtation in there somewhere. But mostly he can tell that she sees them as lifelong buds, nothing more. That the thought of kissing in his basement is just plain silly. Mark officially decides to abandon his own notions for a while.

"You are so hilarious," he says. "I'm laughing on the inside."

She stops her giggling and uses her hand to fan her face. "I really would, ya know."

The last word has barely come out of her mouth when the lights go out.

The subtrans loses all power and begins to slow; Mark almost falls out of his seat and into Trina's lap. Any other time and maybe that would be a good thing, but now he just feels scared. He's heard stories about this sort of thing happening in the olden days, but in his lifetime the power underground never fails. They are in absolute, complete darkness. People are beginning to scream. The brain isn't wired to be plunged into such darkness without warning. It's just scary. Finally the glow from a few wristphones breaks it a little.

Trina grabs his hand and squeezes. "What in the world?" she asks simply.

He feels reassured because she doesn't seem all that scared really. And it brings him back to his senses. Even though it's never happened before, surely the subtrans is bound to break down eventually.

"Malfunction, I guess." He pulls out his palmphone—he's not rich enough for one of those fancy wrist things—but strangely, there's no service. He puts it back in his pocket.

Soft yellow emergency lights come on, strips that run down the roof of the train. They're dim but still a welcome relief after the blindness of before. People are standing up all around him, looking up and down the train, whispering furiously to each other. Whispering seems like what you're supposed to do in such a situation.

"At least we're not in a hurry," Trina says. In a whisper, of course.

Mark has lost that initial sense of panic. Now all he wants to do is ask her what she meant when she said, "I really would, ya know." But that moment has been shot down and killed for good. Of all the rotten timing.

The train shakes. Just a little. Trembling more than anything, like a heavy vibration. But it's unsettling and people scream again, move about. Mark and Trina exchange a look full of curiosity with a spark of fear.

Two men stomp over to the exit doors, working to force them apart. They finally slide open and the men jump out onto the walkway that runs the length of the tunnel. Like a bunch of rats fleeing a fire, the rest of the passengers follow them, pushing and shoving and cursing until everyone is out. In a matter of two or three minutes, Mark and Trina are left alone on the subtrans car, the pale lights glowing above them.

"Not sure that's really what we should do," Trina says, for some reason *still* whispering. "I'm sure this thing will flip back on soon."

"Yeah," Mark says. The train continues to quake slightly, and that's beginning to worry him more. "I don't know. Something seems really wrong, actually."

"You think we should go?"

He thinks about it for a second. "Yeah. If we just sit here I might go crazy." "Okay. Maybe you're right."

Mark stands up, as does Trina. They walk to the open doors, then climb out onto the walkway. It's narrow and has no railing, which makes it seem really dangerous if the trains start again. Emergency lights have come on in the tunnel as well, but they barely do anything to break the almost tangible darkness of a place so far underground.

"They went that way," Trina says, pointing to their left. And something in her tone makes Mark think she means they should go in the opposite direction. He agrees with her.

"So ... to the right, then," he says, giving a nod.

"Yeah. I don't want to be near any of those people. Can't even say why."

"Seemed like a mob."

"Come on."

She pulls him by his arm as she begins walking down the narrow ledge. They both run a hand along the wall, almost leaning into it to make sure they don't topple onto the tracks. The wall is vibrating, but not as strongly as the train. Maybe whatever caused the power outage has finally begun to calm. Maybe it was just a simple earthquake and everything will be okay.

They've been walking for ten minutes, not saying a word to each other, when they hear the screams up ahead. No. Not just screams. Something beyond screams. Pure terror, like people being slaughtered. Trina stops, turns to look back at Mark. Any doubts—or hopes, rather—vanish.

Something horrible has happened.

Mark's instinct is to turn and run in the opposite direction, but he's ashamed of himself when Trina opens her mouth and shows how brave she is.

"We need to get up there, see what's going on—see if we can help."

How can he say no to that? They run, as carefully and as quickly as they can, until they reach the wide platform of a substation. And then they stop. The scene before them is too horrific for Mark's mind to compute. But he knows that nothing in his life will ever, ever be the same.

Bodies litter the floor, naked and burned. Screams and cries of pain pierce his eardrums and echo off the walls. People are limping about, arms outstretched, their clothes on fire and their faces half melted like wax. Blood everywhere. And an impossible surge of heat washes through the air, like they're inside an oven.

Trina turns, grabs his hand, a look of terror on her face that he thinks may be seared into his mind forever. She pulls him once again, running back to where they came from.

All the while, he thinks of his parents. His little sister.

In his mind he sees them burning somewhere. He sees Madison screaming.

And his heart breaks.

“Mark!”

The vision was gone, but the memory of the tunnel still darkened his mind like some kind of seeping sludge.

“Mark! Wake up!”

That was Alec’s voice. No doubt. Yelling at him. Why? What had happened?

“Wake up, dammit!”

Mark opened his eyes, blinked against the bright sun breaking through branches high above him. Then Alec’s face appeared, cutting the light off, and he could see more clearly.

“It’s about time,” the old bear said through an exaggerated sigh. “I was starting to panic, kid.”

That was when Mark was hit with the bolt of pain in his head—it had just been slower to wake than he had. The pain raged inside his skull, felt as big as his brain. He groaned and put his hands on his forehead, touched the slickness of drying blood.

“Ow” was all he could say before he groaned again.

“Yeah, you took quite the hit when we crashed. You’re lucky to be alive. Lucky to have a guardian angel like me to save your hide.”

Mark thought it might kill him, but he had to do it. Bracing for the agony, he sat up. He blinked back the spots in his vision and waited for the pain in his head and body to subside. Then he looked around.

They were sitting in a clearing surrounded by trees. Gnarled roots wove their way through pine needles and fallen leaves. About a hundred feet away, the wreckage of the Berg lay cradled between two giant oaks almost as if it had grown there like some sort of giant metal flower. Twisted and bent, it smoldered and smoked, though there was no sign of fire.

“What happened?” Mark asked, still disoriented.

“You don’t remember?”

“Well, not since whatever it was smacked me in the head.”

Alec threw his hands up in the air. “Not much to it. We crashed and I dragged your butt out here. Then I sat here and watched you roll around like you were having a bad dream. Memories again?”

All Mark could do was nod. He didn’t want to think about it.

“I rummaged around in the Berg as much as I could,” Alec said, changing the subject. Mark appreciated him not digging any further. “But the smoke from the engines got to be too much. Once you can walk around without going eyeball up, I want to search some more. I’ll find out who these people are—and why they did what they did—if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Okay,” Mark answered. Then a thought hit him, followed by a surge of alarm. “What about that virus stuff we saw? What if the containers and darts were broken and it’s all over the place now?”

Alec held a hand out and patted Mark’s chest. “I know, I know. Don’t worry. Had to go

through that hatch room to get out and saw the boxes—still sealed and safe.”

“Well ... how does a virus work? I mean ... is there a chance we caught it? Would we be able to tell?” He didn’t like the uncertainty. “What kind of virus do you think it is, anyway?”

Alec let out a small chuckle. “Son, those are a lot of good questions that I don’t have answers to. We’ll just have to ask our expert when we get back. Maybe Lana’s heard of that strain before. But my guess is unless you get a bad case of the sniffles, I wouldn’t worry too much about it. Remember, it knocked the others out immediately and you’re still standing.”

The words from the box flashed through Mark’s head and he tried to relax. *Highly Contagious.* “I’ll keep that in mind,” he said warily. “How far from the settlement do you think we flew?”

“No idea. Might be a pretty piece gettin’ back, but not too bad.”

Mark lay back down on the ground and closed his eyes, put his arm over them. “Just give me a few minutes. Then I think we should search the ship. Who knows what we might find.”

“You got it.”

Half an hour later, Mark was back inside the Berg, kicking through debris, only now he was walking on a wall instead of the grated floor.

The Berg being on its side was disorienting—it played tricks on his mind and upset his already queasy stomach and throbbing head—but he was as determined as Alec to find something to tell them who the Berg belonged to. They were obviously no longer safe in their little mountain abode.

The biggest score would’ve been the computer systems, but Alec had tried that route to no avail. They were shut down, dead. Though odds were that he and Alec would find a portable phone or workpad somewhere in the wreckage—and if they got lucky it wouldn’t be broken. It had been an age since Mark had seen technology like that. After the flares struck they’d been left with only whatever they had that hadn’t fried, and batteries only lasted so long. But if you had a Berg, chances were you probably had batteries, too.

A Berg. He was inside a Berg. It was all really starting to hit him how much his world had changed in just over a year. At one time, seeing a Berg had been as exciting as seeing a tree. And just yesterday he would’ve guessed he’d never see one again. Now here he was rummaging through one that he’d helped wreck, looking for secrets. It was exciting even though all he’d seen so far was garbage, clothes, broken ship parts and more garbage.

And then he struck gold. A fully functioning workpad. It was on; the bright display was what caught Mark’s eye. It was lodged between a mattress and the bottom of a bunk in one of the small cabins. He turned it off as soon as he pulled it out—if the battery drained on the sucker, there’d be no way to recharge it.

He found Alec in a different cabin, leaning over a personal trunk, cursing as he tried to break into it.

“Hey, lookie what I got,” Mark announced proudly, holding up the workpad for the man to see. “What about you?”

Alec had straightened, his eyes lighting up at the discovery. “I didn’t find a damn thing and I’m just about fed up trying. Let’s go have a look-see at that.”

“I’m worried about the battery running out,” Mark said.

"Yeah, well, all the more reason to study it now, don't ya think?"

"Let's do it outside, then. I'm sick of this hunk of junk."

Mark and Alec huddled over the workpad together, sitting under the shade of a tree as the sun continued to trudge its way across the sky. Mark swore that time slowed down when that thing was up there, beating down on them with its abnormally powerful rays. He had to keep wiping the sweat off his hands as he controlled the screen functions of the workpad.

Workpad. It seemed anything but. Games, books, old news programs that predated the sun flares. There was a personal journal that could provide a ton of interesting information if it had been updated recently. But there wasn't much work-related stuff on the device.

Until they finally found the mapping feature. It obviously wasn't functioning from the old GPS satellites—they'd all been destroyed in the radiation holocaust of the sun flares. But it seemed to have a link to a tracer on the Berg, maybe controlled by old-school radar or other shortwave technology. And there was a log of every trip the now ruined ship had taken.

"Look at that," Alec said, pointing to a spot on the map. Every line tracking the Berg's flights returned to it eventually. "That's obviously their headquarters or base or whatever you want to call it. And judging by the coordinates and what I know about this ridge of hills we call home, it can't be more than fifty or sixty miles away."

"Maybe it's an old military base," Mark offered.

Alec thought about it. "A bunker, maybe. Having something like that would make sense up in the mountains. And we're going there, boy. Sooner rather than later."

"Right now?" Mark knew his brain was still jumbled up from being hit during the crash, but surely the old man didn't want to hike all that way before going back to the settlement.

"No, not right now. We need to get home and sort out what happened there. See if Darnell's okay. And the others."

Mark's heart sank at the mention of Darnell. "You know what we saw on that Berg? The boxes of darts? There's no way those people went to all that trouble to do a flyby flu ambush."

"You're right. I hate it, but you're right, kid. I don't expect much good news upon our grand return. But we need to get our butts there all the same. So come on."

Alec stood up and Mark followed suit, slipping the workpad into the back of his pants. He'd rather return to the village than search for a bunker any day.

They set off, Mark's head still woozy and achy. But the farther they went, and the more his pulse quickened, the better he felt. Trees and sun and bushes and roots, squirrels and bugs and snakes. The air was warm but fresh, smelling like sap and burnt toast, filling his lungs.

The Berg had taken them a lot farther from home than they'd thought, and they ended up camping in the woods for two nights, resting just long enough to feel strong again. Small game hunted by Alec and his knife provided their only food. They finally got close to the settlement in the late afternoon of the third day after the Berg attack.

Mark and the old soldier were about a mile away from the village when the stench of death hit them like a fresh wave of unbearable heat.

The sun was just a few hours from setting when they arrived at the base of the hill below the outlying shacks and huts.

Mark had ripped a wide strip of cloth from the bottom of his shirt to wrap around his nose and mouth. He pressed his hand against it as they came up the last rise before the village. The smell was awful. He could taste it on his tongue—dank, rotten, moldy—all the way to his stomach, as if he'd swallowed something that had begun to decompose. Fighting the urge to throw up, he took one step after another, breathlessly waiting to see what horrors lay in the aftermath of the attack.

Darnell.

Mark had no expectations there, had accepted, with a heavy heart, that his friend might be dead. But what about Trina? Lana? Misty and the Toad? Were they alive? Or sick from some crazy virus? He stopped when Alec reached a hand out and touched Mark's chest.

"Okay, listen to me," the old man said, his voice muffled behind his own swath of fabric. "We need to set some things straight before we get up there. We can't let our emotions rule everything. No matter what we see, our number one priority has to be saving as many people as possible."

Mark nodded, then moved to resume walking, but Alec stopped him.

"Mark, I need to know we're on the same page here." Alec spoke with a stern scowl—a look that reminded Mark of an upset schoolteacher. "If we go up there and start hugging people and crying and attempting things that make no sense with people who have no chance—all because we're distraught ... it'll just hurt more folks in the long run. You understand? We need to think long-term. And as selfish as it sounds, we need to protect ourselves first. You get me? Ourselves. Saving the most people means we can't help anybody if we're dead."

Mark looked him in the eyes and saw something rock hard in them. He knew Alec was right. With the workpad, the map and the things they knew about the people on the Berg, it was clear there was something bigger going on.

"Mark?" Alec said, snapping his fingers to get the boy's attention. "Talk to me, buddy."

"So what're you saying?" Mark asked him. "If people look sick—if those darts really made people sick—stay away from them?"

Alec took a step back, his face pinched with an expression Mark didn't quite get. "When you say it like that, it doesn't sound so brotherly, but you're dead-on. We can't risk getting sick, Mark. We don't know what we're going to find up there—what we're dealing with. I'm just saying that we need to be prepared ... and if there's any doubt about someone ..."'

"Leave them behind to be eaten by animals," Mark said with a coldness that he hoped would hurt Alec.

The former soldier just shook his head. "We don't even know what to expect, boy. Let's just get up there and see what we see. Find our friends. But don't be stupid, that's all I'm saying. Don't get close to anyone, certainly don't touch anyone. Keep that cloth wrapped around your pretty little head. Do you understand?"

Mark did. At the very least, it made sense to keep a distance from the people shot with darts. *Highly Contagious*. The words went through his head again and he knew Alec was right. “I understand. I won’t be stupid. I promise. I’ll follow your lead.”

A look of compassion came across Alec’s face, something Mark hadn’t seen often. There was true kindness in those eyes of his. “We’ve been through hell and back, kid. I know it. But it’s toughened us up, right? We can do what it takes to live through one more challenge.” He glanced up the path toward the village. “Let’s hope our friends are okay.”

“Let’s hope,” Mark repeated. He tightened the cloth mask around his face.

Alec gave him a stiff nod—professional again—and started up the hill. Mark pulled himself together, swearing to put emotions aside for now, and followed.

They’d just crested the hill when the source of the horrific smell came clearly into view.

So many bodies.

On the very outskirts of the village, there was a large, simple wooden structure originally meant to provide cover in a rainstorm, then, when more solid buildings were built, to store things temporarily. It had three walls and an open front. A thatched roof had been layered with mud to keep the inside as dry as possible. Everyone called it the Leaner because, despite being pretty sturdy, it looked like it was tilting down the slope of the mountain.

Someone had made the decision to put the dead in the Leaner.

Mark was horrified. He shouldn’t have been—he’d seen more dead people in the last year than a hundred morticians of the past would have seen in a lifetime. But it was shocking all the same.

There were at least twenty bodies, laid out side by side, filling the entire floor. Most of them had blood covering their faces—around the nose, mouth, eyes and ears. And judging from the color of their skin and the smell, all of them had been dead for a day or two. A quick scan revealed that Darnell wasn’t in the group. But Mark didn’t dare allow himself to hope. He pressed the cloth tighter to his nose and mouth and forced himself to look away from the carnage. There’d be no way he could eat anytime in the near future.

It didn’t seem to faze Alec quite as much. He was still staring at the bodies with a look more of frustration than disgust. Maybe he wanted to get in there, examine the bodies and try to figure out what was going on, but knew how foolish it would be.

“Let’s get into town,” Mark said. “Find our friends.”

“Okay” was Alec’s response.

The place was a ghost town. All dust and dry wood and hot air.

Not one person could be seen on the paths or in the alleys, but Mark kept catching glimpses of eyes peering out through windows and slats and cracks in the haphazard structures. He didn’t know everyone in their camp—not by a long shot—but he was sure someone had to have recognized him by now.

“Hey!” Alec shouted, startling him. “It’s Alec. Somebody come out here and tell us what’s happened since we left!”

A voice responded, slightly muffled, coming from somewhere up ahead. “Everyone’s been inside since the morning after that Berg came. The ones who helped the people who got shot ... most of them got sick and died, too. Just took a little longer.”

“It was the darts,” Alec yelled in reply, making sure everyone within earshot could hear

him. "It might be a virus. We got up in that Berg—crashed it about two days from here. We found a box of the darts they shot at us. They could very well have infected the people who got hit with ... something."

There were people murmuring now and whispers coming from inside the shelters, but no one answered Alec.

He turned to Mark. "Let's be glad they were smart enough to hole up in their homes. If there is some kind of virus, maybe that kept the thing from spreading like wildfire. Who knows? If everyone's been inside and no one else is sick, it could've died out with those poor saps in the Leaner."

Mark gave him a doubtful look. "I sure hope you're right."

Footsteps cut Alec off before he could respond. They both turned to face the center of the village just in time to see Trina run around a corner, toward them. She was dirty and sweaty, her expression frantic. But her eyes lit up at the sight of Mark, and he knew that his did, too. She looked healthy, which filled him with relief. She was sprinting toward him and showing no intention of slowing down until Alec stopped her.

He stepped between her and Mark, holding both hands out. Trina skidded to a stop.

"Okay, kids," Alec said. "Let's be careful before we go around hugging each other. Can't be too cautious."

Mark expected Trina to argue a little, but she nodded, sucking in deep breaths. "Okay. I was just ... I'm just so glad to see you guys here. But hurry, I need to show you something. Come on!" She waved her arms at them, then turned and ran back the way she'd come.

Mark and Alec followed without hesitation, sprinting through the main alley of the town. Mark heard gasps and whispers and saw fingers pointing out of the closed quarters they passed. After several minutes, Trina finally stopped in front of a small shack that had been boarded up with three wooden slats nailed across the door.

From the outside.

Someone had been imprisoned.

And that someone was screaming.

CHAPTER 11

The screams barely sounded human.

Trina jumped back a couple of steps when she reached the boarded-up shack, then turned to face Mark and Alec. Tears were leaking from her eyes, and as she stood there taking deep breaths, Mark thought he'd never seen someone look so incredibly sad. Even after all the end-of-the-world crap they'd been through.

"I know it's terrible," she said over the screams of the prisoner. Mark could tell it was a man or boy but had no idea whether it was someone he knew. The sounds were terrifying. "But he made us do it. Said he'd slit his wrists if we didn't. And it's just gotten worse and worse since. We don't know why he didn't just die like the others. But Lana made sure from the get-go that we were careful. She was worried that there was a chance something contagious was loose. As soon as more people started getting sick, she quarantined him. It happened fast."

Mark was stunned. He opened his mouth to ask a question but shut it. He thought he knew the answer.

Alec said it for him. "It's Darnell in there, isn't it."

Trina nodded, and a fresh wave of tears poured down her face. Mark wanted nothing else but to hug her, hold her for the rest of the day and night. But all he had were his words now.

"It's okay, Trina. It's okay. You both did the right thing. Like Lana said, Darnell knew they might've infected him with something. We all need to be careful until we know whatever this thing is has stopped spreading."

Fresh screams erupted from the hut, seeping through the cracks. It sounded like Darnell was tearing his throat apart and Mark wanted nothing more than to cover his ears.

"My head!"

Mark turned sharply, eyeing the hut. It was the first time Darnell had used actual words. Mark couldn't help himself; he hurried over to a boarded-up window with a gap about two inches wide running across the middle.

"Mark!" Alec yelled. "Get back here!"

"It's fine!" Mark replied. "I'm not gonna touch anything."

"I won't be a bit happy if you catch some nasty disease. Not a bit."

Mark tried to give him a reassuring look. "I just want to see my friend." He pressed the cloth tightly against his nose and raised his eyebrows dramatically at Alec.

The man grunted and looked away. But Trina was staring him down, obviously torn between stopping Mark and joining him.

"Just stay there," he called to her before she could make a move. His voice was muffled through the mask, but she heard him clearly enough. She gave a slight nod; then her gaze fell to the ground.

Mark faced the gap between the two boards of the window. The screaming had stopped inside, but he could hear Darnell whimpering softly now, moaning those same two words every few seconds.

“My head, my head, my head.”

Mark took another step forward, then another. The slit was just a few inches from his face now. He cinched the strip of cloth behind his neck, making sure his mouth and nose were entirely covered. Then he leaned forward and peeked in.

Broken beams of the fading sunlight arrowed across the dirt floor, but it was mostly dark. He saw Darnell’s feet and legs in one spot of light, tucked up tightly to his body, but his face was hidden. He had his head buried in his arms, by the looks of it.

Still the whimpering and the muttering. And he was shivering from top to bottom, as if he were caught outside in a blizzard.

“Darnell?” Mark asked. “Hey … it’s Mark. I know you’ve been put through the wringer, man. I’m … I’m really sorry.... Hey, we got the suckers who did this to you. Crashed their Berg and everything.”

His friend didn’t respond, just lay there, half in shadow, shaking and moaning. Muttering those two words.

“My head, my head, my head.”

Mark’s insides plummeted to some dark place and he felt hollow inside. He’d seen so much of terror and death, but looking at his friend, suffering alone … it killed Mark. Especially because it was so pointless. Needless. Why would someone do this to others after all the hell that happened to the world? Weren’t things bad enough?

A sudden rage came over him. Mark punched the rough wood of the shack, bloodying his knuckles. He hoped somebody paid for all this one day.

“Darnell?” Mark called again. He had to say something, make it better. “Maybe … maybe you’re stronger than the others—that’s why you haven’t died. Just hang tough, man. Wait it out. You’ll …” Empty words. That was what it felt like. As if he were lying to his friend.

“Anyway, the sergeant and I, Trina, Lana, whoever—we’re gonna make it right, somehow. You just—”

Darnell’s body suddenly stiffened, his legs shooting straight out and his arms going rigid at his sides. Another scream, worse than before, erupted from his ravaged throat—it came out sounding like the roar of an enraged animal. Mark jumped back in surprise but quickly leaned in again, his eye as close as possible to the opening without touching it. Darnell had rolled out into the middle of the floor, his face now in full view under a shaft of sunlight as he shook and shook.

Blood covered his forehead, his cheeks, his chin, his neck. Matted his hair. It was seeping from his eyes and ears, dripping off his lips. The boy finally got control of his arms and pressed them against the sides of his head, twisting this way and that as if he were trying to screw the thing right off his neck. And the screams kept coming, broken up by the only two words he seemed to know.

“My head! My head! My head!”

“Darnell,” Mark whispered, knowing there was no way he could talk to his friend now. And despite how guilty and sick it made him feel, Mark also knew he couldn’t possibly go in there to try and help. It would be beyond stupid.

“My heeeeeaaaaad!” Darnell shouted in one long, drawn-out wail of such ferocity that Mark stepped back again. He didn’t know if he could bear to look anymore.

There was the sound of movement inside, the shuffling of feet. Then a loud thunk against

the door. Then another. And another.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

Mark closed his eyes. He knew what that horrible sound was. Trina was suddenly there, pulling him into her arms, squeezing him tightly as she shook with sobs. Alec protested but only halfheartedly. It was too late now.

There were a few more thunks, and then a last, long, piercing scream that ended in a wet, gurgly burst. After that, Mark heard Darnell slump to the floor with an exhale of breath.

He was ashamed of himself, but all Mark felt in that quiet moment was relief that the ordeal had finally ended. And that it hadn't been Trina.

CHAPTER 12

Mark had never thought of Alec as a gentle man. Not even remotely. But when the soldier walked over and separated Mark from Trina, he did it with a warm look on his face. Then he spoke.

"I know we've been through a lot together." Alec flicked his eyes over at the shack where Darnell was. "But that might've been the worst yet, hearing what we just heard." The man paused for a moment before he continued. "We can't give up now, though. From day one we've been about living."

Mark nodded and looked at Trina.

She wiped a tear away, giving Alec a cold look. "I'm kinda sick of surviving. At least Darnell is done with this world."

In all the years Mark had known her, she had never sounded so angry.

"Don't talk like that," he said. "I know for a fact you don't mean that."

Her gaze swept to him and softened. "When will it end? We survive months of the sun beating the tar out of the planet, find a place where we can build shelter, find food. A few days ago we were laughing! And then guys come in a Berg and shoot us with darts and people die? What is this, some kind of joke? Is someone up there laughing at us, playing us like some kind of virtgame?"

Her voice cracked and she started crying again, covering her face with her hands as she sat down on the hard-packed earth, her legs crossed under her. Her shoulders shook with her silent sobs.

Mark looked at Alec, whose eyes narrowed back at him as if to say, *She's your friend—say something.*

"Trina?" Mark said quietly. He walked over and knelt behind her, then reached out and squeezed her shoulders. "I know—just when we thought things couldn't get any worse. I'm sorry." He knew better than to make things seem less terrible than they actually were. That was a pointless trick they'd all promised to stop a long time ago.

"But I promise we'll stay together on all this," he continued. "And we'll do everything we can not to catch whatever it was that killed Darnell and the others. But if we're going to do that ..." He rubbed her back and looked up at Alec for help.

"Then we need to be vigilant," the man said. "We need to be cautious and smart and ruthless if it comes to that."

Mark knew it might be foolish to be touching Trina. But he didn't care. If Trina died, he seriously didn't know if he could keep going.

Trina dropped her hands from her face and looked at Alec. "Mark, stand up and walk away from me."

"Trina ..."

"Do it. Now. Go stand near Alec so I can see both of you."

Mark did as she asked. He rejoined the man about ten feet away and turned to see that any trace of the crying, helpless, I-want-to-quit Trina was gone, replaced with the firmly resolved woman Mark was used to seeing. She got to her feet and folded her arms.

"I've been really careful since you two got up on that Berg. The suits those jerks were wearing, the darts, how quickly the people who were shot collapsed and got sick ... Even before Lana told us anything, it was obvious something was going on. The only person I've interacted with was Darnell, but he knew to keep his distance. He was the one who barricaded himself in that place and forced me to board it up."

She paused to take a breath and eyed each of them. "My point is that I don't think I'm sick. Especially since it acted so quickly on everyone who was."

"I can see that, but—" Alec began, but Trina cut him off.

"I'm not finished," she said with a sharp glare. "I know we need to be careful. I *could* be sick. I know we've touched, but let's try not to anymore. Not until we're totally sure. And all three of us need to make new masks and to wash our hands and faces like crazy."

Mark liked that she was taking charge. "Sounds good to me."

"Absolutely," Alec agreed. "Now, where are the others? Lana, Misty, the Toad?"

Trina pointed in a few directions. "Everyone is holed up somewhere, keeping their distance. Just to be safe until no one shows any signs of sickness. Maybe another couple of days."

Sitting around for a day or two sounded like the worst idea possible to Mark. "I'll go nuts if we do that. We found a workpad with a map of where that Berg came from. Let's gather supplies and get out of here—maybe we can learn something."

"Agreed," Alec chimed in. "We should get as far as we can from this place."

"Wait—what about Darnell?" Mark asked. Though he knew what they would say, it made him feel better to at least ask. "Should we bury him?"

Trina's and Alec's eyes said it all. They couldn't risk being anywhere close to his body.

"Take us to Lana and the others," Alec said to Trina. "Then we go."

As they searched the town for their friends, Mark worried about people trying to join them. But fear had struck deep, and no one dared venture out of their home. The village was eerily quiet, but he could feel the eyes following him down the alleys and paths. It didn't surprise him, the more he thought about it. The world had punished everyone enough—why should they risk bringing anything more upon themselves?

They collected Misty and the Toad from the second floor of a log cabin on the outskirts of town, across the village from the Leaner and its bodies. Trina wasn't sure where Lana would be. They found her about an hour after they set out, sleeping behind some bushes by the river. She was upset that they'd found her sleeping, but she'd worn herself out. As soon as Mark and Alec had boarded the Berg and disappeared in the woods, she'd taken charge. Quarantining people and getting the bodies in one place—she said they'd been sure to wear gloves and masks—and helping deliver food from house to house. No one in the settlement knew exactly what had happened, but Lana had insisted from the start that care needed to be taken in case they were dealing with something contagious.

"I'm not sick," she concluded as they readied to leave the stream and go back to the village. "It happened so quickly—and the ones who got sick afterward have already died. I think I'd have symptoms by now."

"How fast?" Mark asked her. "How fast did it take effect?"

"All but Darnell were dead within twelve hours," she replied. "They woke up and showed symptoms within two or three. I really think if anyone is still alive and symptom-free right

now, they're clear."

Mark took in their group: The Toad, fidgeting nervously. Misty, looking at the ground. Alec and Lana, staring at each other intently in what appeared to be a silent conversation. And Trina, looking at Mark. Her eyes said it all—they were going to live through this just like they'd lived through everything else.

They were back at the Shack an hour later, filling backpacks with as much food and supplies as they could carry. As they worked, they kept their distance from each other. Caution seemed to come naturally now. Mark washed his hands at least three times during the packing frenzy.

They had just finished up, each of them with a loaded pack on his or her back, when Misty groaned. Mark turned to agree with her—the packs *were* heavy—but when he saw her face, his stomach sank.

She was pale and leaning on a table with both hands. Mark was stunned—the last time he'd looked at her, she was fine. But then her legs gave out and she collapsed to one knee. She touched the side of her face, tentatively, almost as if she was worried about what she'd feel there.

"My ... head hurts," she whispered.

“Everyone get out of here!” Lana yelled. “Out! Now!”

Mark was speechless. Everything in him wanted to do the opposite of what she’d just ordered. He wanted to help his friend.

“Get outside. Then we can talk!” Lana insisted. She pointed to the door.

“Go,” Misty said weakly. “Do what she says.”

Mark and Trina exchanged a look, but she only hesitated a second before marching out the door. Alec was right on her heels, then Lana.

Mark turned to leave but then noticed that the Toad hadn’t moved.

“Hey … come on, man. Let’s just go out there and talk about this. Misty, tell him.”

“He’s right, Toadie,” she said. She’d slipped her backpack to the floor and sat down next to it. Mark couldn’t believe how quickly she’d gone from totally fine to literally on the ground, too weak to stand. “Go and let me figure this thing out. Maybe I just ate something weird.” But Mark could tell she didn’t believe that.

“We can’t just keep abandoning people,” the Toad said, glaring at Mark.

“Who cares what you do if it makes you end up dead!” Misty countered. “How would you feel if it was reversed? You’d want me to leave. Now go!” That seemed to drain a good chunk of her energy—she slumped and almost lay down.

“Come on,” Mark said. “We’re not abandoning her. We’re just going outside to talk.”

The Toad stomped out of the Shack, muttering under his breath the whole way. “This is all so messed up. Totally messed up.”

Mark looked at Misty, but she was staring at the floor, taking long, deep breaths. “Sorry” was all he could get out. Then he joined the others.

They decided to give her one hour. They’d see what happened. See if she got better or worse.

Or if she stayed the same.

It was a maddening hour. Mark was unable to sit still. He paced outside the Shack, worried on so many levels. The thought that a virus might be slinking its way through his system … it was unbearable. And Trina’s, too. He wanted to *know*. Now. It was so overwhelming that he found himself forgetting that Misty could very well have it and die soon.

“I think we need to readjust our outlook here,” Lana said toward the end of their allotted time. Misty hadn’t improved or gotten worse—she still lay on the floor in the Shack, breathing evenly. Not moving at all. Not speaking.

“What do you mean?” Mark asked. He was grateful the silence had been broken.

“Darnell and Misty prove that whatever this is doesn’t necessarily take effect right away.”

Alec spoke up. “I think we should use the time we have. We should hike to that place on the map. And we need to do it as soon as possible.” He lowered his voice and added, “I’m sorry, but we have to get out of here, and what better place to go than where we can learn

what's going on? Whatever was in those darts caused this—we need to go where the darts came from. Maybe there's something—some medicine that can cure this sickness. Who knows?"

It all came out sounding a little cold. Harsh. But Mark couldn't disagree with him. He felt like he had to get away from here, if nothing else.

"We can't leave Misty," Trina said. But even her statement had no strength behind it.

"We don't have a choice," Alec countered.

Lana stood from where she'd been sitting against a wall and brushed off her pants. "We don't have to bear the guilt of this," she murmured. "Let's ask Misty. She deserves that. And we'll do whatever she decides."

Mark raised his eyebrows and looked around at the others, who were doing the same.

Lana took that as agreement and walked to the open door of the Shack. Without going in, she knocked on the frame and spoke in a loud voice. "Misty? How's it going in there?"

Mark was perched on the ground where he could see inside. Misty was on her back but slowly turned to look at them.

"You guys need to go," she said weakly. "Something is seriously wrong with my head. It feels like bugs are up there, eating away at my brain." She took several deep breaths, as if saying just that much had sapped her strength.

"But, honey, how can we leave you here?" Lana asked.

"Don't make me talk anymore. Just go." Another deep breath. Mark could see the pain in her eyes.

Lana turned toward the others. "Misty says we need to go."

Mark knew they'd become hardened—they'd had to, to survive the world since the sun flares struck. But this was the first time they were faced with leaving someone who still seemed so alive. Misty's decision or not, he thought the guilt would eat away at him.

When he looked at Trina his resolve hardened. Still, he let Alec be the bad guy.

The former soldier had gotten to his feet and slung his backpack onto his shoulders. "The best way to honor Misty right now is to get moving and learn something that could end up helping."

Mark nodded and followed suit, cinching tight the straps of his pack. Trina hesitated, then stepped up to the doorway, faced Misty.

"Misty ..." she began, but no more words came.

"Go!" the girl shouted, almost making Trina stumble backward. "Go before the things in my brain jump out and bite you. Go! Go!" She'd risen to rest on her elbows and screamed with such ferocity that Mark thought she might've hurt herself. Might have realized that she was about to face the horror that Darnell had gone through.

"Okay," Trina said sadly. "Okay."

The Toad was by far the closest friend to Misty, and he hadn't said a word. He just stood staring at the ground, tears in his eyes. But as Mark and the others prepared to leave, the stout man didn't move. Alec finally asked him what he was doing.

"I'm not going," the Toad said.

As soon as he said it, Mark realized he'd been expecting it. No surprise at all. He also knew that there'd be no changing the guy's mind. They'd be saying goodbye to two of their friends now.

Alec argued with him, as did Lana. Trina didn't bother, obviously having come to the same conclusion as Mark. And just as Mark had predicted, the Toad didn't budge.

"She's my best friend. I'm not leaving her."

"But she *wants* you to," Lana said. "She doesn't want you to stay here and potentially die with her. She wants you to live."

"I'm not leaving her," he repeated, and gave Lana a cold stare. Misty said nothing from inside, either not hearing or too weak to respond.

"Fine," Lana said, not bothering to hide her annoyance. "Catch up with us if you change your mind."

Mark just wanted to leave. The situation had become unbearable. He took one last look at Misty through the doorway before moving on. She was curled up into a ball, speaking in an odd voice, though it was too low to make out what she was saying. But as they walked away, he was pretty sure that the girl had been singing.

She'd snapped, he thought. She'd definitely snapped.

CHAPTER 14

They only made it about three miles before it got too dark to continue. And Mark was more than ready to stop, exhausted from the crazy day. Alec had to have known they couldn't go far, but staying in that village was not an option. They were finally gone from it all, in the thick trees and fresh air of the woods, which helped drain some of the tension and emotional ups and downs of those last couple of hours.

No one said much as they made a simple camp and ate a dinner of packaged food brought up from the Asheville factories. Lana insisted they keep their distance from each other, so Mark lay on his side, several feet from Trina, the two of them staring at each other, wishing they could cuddle, at least. Mark almost scooted over to her about a hundred times but stopped himself. He knew she wouldn't let him, anyway. They didn't say much, just held each other's gaze.

And Mark was sure she was thinking the same things he was. How their world had fallen apart once again. How they'd just lost three friends who'd survived the trek of horror they'd made—from the devastation that was New York City to the Appalachian Mountains. And of course she was wondering about the virus. Not a whole lot of happy thoughts.

Alec ignored everyone, studying the workpad they'd retrieved from the Berg. He'd made a rough copy of the map they'd found on it with a pencil and some paper, but he wanted to see if he could unearth anything else useful. He had his compass out, was making notes, and Lana was next to him, offering pointers.

Mark realized his eyelids were drooping. Trina smiled at him. He smiled back. Pathetic or not, at least they were smiles. He fell asleep, and then the memories came rushing in once again. Never letting him forget.

Someone is on their tail.

It's only been a couple of hours since it happened in the city above them. Mark has no idea what it was, but he assumes it was a bomb set by terrorists or an explosion from a gas leak. Something that burned.

The heat is unbearable. As are the screams. He and Trina have fled through the subtrans tunnels, finding abandoned offshoots, going deeper and deeper. But people are everywhere, most of them crazy with terror. Bad things are happening all around—theft, harassment, worse. It's like the only people who escaped the catastrophe above them are hardened criminals.

Trina found a box of instafood, left behind by someone in the chaos. Mark is carrying it now, both of them having already switched into some kind of instinctual survival mode. But others obviously have, too, and every person they look at as they run seems to know that Mark and Trina have something they want. And maybe not just the food.

No matter how many twists and turns they take in the underground labyrinth of filthy, sweltering hot passages, they can't lose the man on their tail. He's big and fast and has become like a shadow. Yet every time Mark looks back at him, he seems to disappear into some nook or cranny.

They're running down a long hallway filled with water to their ankles, splashing with every step they take. Mark's cell phone is providing the only light, and he dreads the moment it runs out of power. The thought of being in this place, alone and clueless as to where they should go, in complete *darkness*, terrifies him. Trina suddenly stops and grabs Mark's arm, pulls him through an opening to the right that he didn't see. They're in a small room—looks to be an old storage closet from when this part of the system was still being used, back in the old subway days.

"Turn it off!" she says in a fierce whisper as she pulls him deeper into the room and stands behind him.

Mark shuts down his phone, pitching them into the darkness he was just worrying about. His first instinct is to panic and scream and wander blindly about. But it's a brief moment of insanity and it passes. He calms his breathing and is thankful he can feel the touch of Trina's hand on his back.

"There's no way he was close enough to see us come in here," she whispers in his ear from behind. "And he can't be quiet in that water. Let's wait him out."

Mark nods, then remembers she can't see him. "Okay," he says quietly. "But if he somehow finds his way in here, I'm done running. We're going to gang up and beat him down."

"Okay. We'll fight."

Trina squeezes his arms and leans into him. Despite the absurdity of feeling such a thing at that moment, in those circumstances, he flushes from top to bottom, tingles and goose bumps all over. If only this girl knew how much he likes her. He feels a twinge of guilt that on some deep level, he's thankful for whatever tragedy has occurred, because it's forced them together.

He hears a couple of splashes in the distance. Then a few more, obviously footsteps in the water of the small tunnel outside their room. Then a steady beat of them, getting louder as their pursuer—he assumes it's their pursuer—gets closer. Mark presses against Trina and the wall behind her, wishing they could somehow disappear into the brick.

A light flicks on to Mark's right, almost making him cry out in surprise. The approaching footsteps stop. Mark squints—his eyes have already grown used to the darkness—and tries to see the source of the light. It moves and shines about the room, then settles on Mark's eyes, blinding. He looks down. It has to be someone with a flashlight.

"Who are you?" Trina asks. She's whispering, but her voice sounds like it came out of a bullhorn because Mark is so nervous.

The flashlight moves again as someone crawls out of a hole in the wall and stands up. Mark can barely make out any details, but it looks to be a man. A filthy man, his hair a mess and his clothes tattered. Another man appears behind him, and then another. They all look the same—dirty and desperate and dangerous. Three of them.

"I think we'll be askin' the questions," the first stranger says. "We were here way before you, and we don't like visitors none too much. Why are people runnin' around here like cats anyway? What happened? You two don't look like the type that comes a-callin' for the likes of us."

Mark is scared to the core. Nothing even remotely like this has ever happened to him. He fumbles for words, feeling like he needs to answer, but Trina beats him to it.

"Look, use your head. We wouldn't be down here unless something horrible happened up there. In the city."

Mark finds his voice. "Haven't you noticed how hot it is? We think it was a bomb, a gas explosion, something."

The man shrugs. "You think we care? All I care about is my next meal. And ... maybe something nice dropped in our laps today. A little surprise for me and the boys." He eyes Trina up and down.

"You won't touch her," Mark says, the look in the man's eyes filling him with the bravery he couldn't find a few minutes earlier. "We have some food—you can take that if you'll just leave us alone."

"We're not giving him our food!" Trina snaps.

Mark turns to face her and whispers, "Better than getting our throats slit."

He hears a clicking sound, then another. When he faces the men again, he sees the light glinting off silver blades.

"Something you should learn about us," one of the men says. "We don't do much negotiatin' around this neighborhood. We'll take the food and whatever else we want."

They start moving forward, and then a figure suddenly flashes in from the left, coming through the doorway from the passage outside. Mark barely takes a breath as he watches a short but violent burst of chaos happen right before his eyes. Bodies spinning and arms flailing and knives being tossed aside and punches and grunts. It's like some kind of superhero has entered the room, using speed and strength to beat the hell out of the three intruders. In less than a minute they're all lying on the floor, curled up, groaning and cursing. The flashlight has been tossed to the floor, shining on the boots of a very large man.

The one who's been following them.

"You can thank me later," he says in a deep, grinding voice. "My name is Alec. And I think we have a much bigger problem than these losers."

Mark woke up with a deep ache in his side. He'd been lying on a rock for hours, by the feel of it. He rolled onto his back with a groan and looked at the lightening sky through the branches overhead ... and remembered the dream of his past as vividly as if it had been shown to him as a movie on a screen.

Alec had saved them that day, and countless times since. But Mark felt solid knowing that he'd returned the favor on more than one occasion. Their lives were as linked together as the rocks and earth of the mountain they'd just slept upon.

The others were up within a half hour. Alec made them all a quick breakfast using some eggs he'd rustled up at the Shack. They'd have to hunt soon; Mark was glad he didn't have to be the expert on that, although he'd done his share. As they sat and ate, still staying relatively quiet and doing their best to avoid touching each other or touching things that had been touched, Mark brooded. It made him sick that someone had ruined everything just as they were on the cusp of feeling somewhat normal.

"We ready to get marching?" Alec asked when all the food was gone.

"Yeah," Mark responded. Trina and Lana just nodded.

"That workpad was a godsend," Alec said. "With this map and compass, I'm pretty sure we'll get there, straight and true. And who knows what we'll find."

They headed out, through the half-burnt trees and over the freshly grown brush.

* * *

They walked all day, down the face of one mountain and up another. Mark kept wondering if they'd run into another camp or village—rumor had it that there were settlements throughout the Appalachians. It was the only place fit enough after the sun flares and the risen sea levels, the massive destruction of all the towns and cities and vegetation. Mark just hoped that one day it could all go back to normal. Maybe even during his lifetime.

They'd stopped for an afternoon break by a small stream, when Trina snapped her fingers and caught his attention. When he looked at her, she motioned with her head toward the woods. Then she got up and announced she had to use the bathroom. After she left, Mark waited two long minutes, then said he had to do the same.

They met up about a hundred yards away by a big oak tree. The air smelled fresher than it had in a long time, almost green and full of life.

"What's up?" he asked. They stood about five feet apart, following orders even though no one was around to watch.

"I'm sick of being like this," she replied. "Look at us. We've barely hugged since that Berg attacked the village. We both look and feel fine, so it seems kind of silly to stay apart."

Her words filled him with relief. Even though he knew the circumstances couldn't possibly be worse, he was glad to hear she still wanted to be close to him.

Mark smiled. "So ... let's bag this lame quarantine crap." It seemed so silly when he said it like that.

"Even if we keep it a secret from Lana so she doesn't pitch a fit." She walked up to him, put her arms around his middle and kissed him. "Like I said, I think the game is pointless anyway. We're not showing signs, so hopefully we're in the clear."

Mark couldn't have talked if he'd wanted to. He leaned down and kissed her, and this time the kiss was much longer.

They held hands until they got close to the camp, then separated. Based on the feelings pumping through Mark at the moment, he didn't know how long he could pretend. But for now he didn't want to deal with the wrath of Lana or Alec.

"I think we can be there the day after tomorrow," Alec announced when they returned. "Maybe not until the sun pops out, but we can get there. We'll rest up and then try to figure what to do the next morning."

"Sounds good," Mark said absently as he repacked his stuff. He was still kind of floating, at least temporarily relieved from all the crap.

"Then let's quit yappin' and let's get slappin'," Alec said.

The statement didn't make much sense to Mark, but he shrugged and looked at Trina. She had a smile on her face. He hoped the other two fell asleep really early tonight.

They had to resist the urge to hold hands again as they set off after the old grizzly bear and Lana.

That night, the camp was dark and quiet except for the sound of Alec snoring and the soft sighs of Trina's breath on Mark's chest. They'd waited until Alec and Lana zonked out, then scooted together and cuddled.

Mark looked up at the branches of the trees, finding a clear spot that revealed brilliant stars overhead. His mom had taught him the constellations when he was really young, and he'd passed the valuable information on to his little sister, Madison. The stories behind the constellations were his favorite part, and he loved sharing them. Especially since it was such a rarity to see the starry sky when you lived in a huge city like New York. Every trip out to the country was a huge treat. They'd spend hours pointing out the different myths and legends hanging far above them.

He spotted Orion, the belt brighter than he'd ever seen it before. Orion. That had been Madison's favorite constellation because it was so easy to find and had such a cool story behind it—the hunter and his sword, his dogs, all of them fighting a demonic bull. Mark embellished the tale a little more each time he'd told it. The thought brought a lump to his throat, and his eyes moistened. He missed Madison so much. So much. The darker part of him almost wanted to forget her because it hurt so deeply.

He heard the crack of breaking branches out in the woods.

His thoughts of his little sister evaporated as he bolted upright, practically shoving Trina off his chest before he could think about what he was doing. She muttered something, then rolled over onto her side, falling back into her obviously deep sleep just as another crack sounded from the forest.

He put a hand on her shoulder as he got to his knees and then scanned the area around them. It was way too dark to see anything out in the thick of trees, even with the moon-and starlight. But his hearing had sharpened considerably since power and artificial lights had mostly become a thing of his past. He calmed himself and concentrated. *Listened*. He

knew it could be a deer, a squirrel, lots of things. But he hadn't survived a year of the sun-ravaged world by making assumptions.

There were more snapping of twigs and cracking of branches. Heavy and definitely two-footed.

He was just about to shout Alec's name when a shadow appeared in front of him, stepping out from behind a tree. There was the scratching sound of a match being lit right before it flared to life, revealing the man who held it.

The Toad.

"What...," Mark said, relief like a bursting cloud in his chest. "Toad. Sheesh, man, you about scared me to death."

The Toad dropped to his knees and held the lit match closer to his face. He looked gaunt, and his eyes were moist and haunted.

"Are ... you okay?" Mark asked, hoping his friend was just tired.

"I'm not," the Toad answered, his face quivering as if he were about to cry. "I'm not, Mark. I'm not okay at all. There are things living inside my skull."

CHAPTER 16

Mark shook Trina awake and scrambled to his feet, pulling her up with him. The Toad was definitely sick, and he was standing just a few feet from their camp. They didn't know anything about this sickness, but that only made it scarier. Trina seemed disoriented, but Mark didn't relent, half dragging her to the other side of the dead coals of their fire from earlier that night.

"Alec!" he shouted. "Lana! Wake up!"

As if the two were still soldiers, they were on their feet in three seconds. But neither of them had noticed the visitor yet.

Mark didn't waste time explaining. "Toad. I'm glad you came, that you're safe. But ... are you feeling sick?"

"Why?" Toad asked, still on his knees. His face was only a shadow. "Why did you leave me like that after all we've been through?"

Mark's heart was breaking. The question had no good answer. "I ... I ... we tried to get you to come with us."

Toad acted as if he hadn't heard. "I have things in my skull. I need help getting them out of there. Before they eat my brain and start heading for my heart." He whimpered, a sound that seemed to Mark more like it would come from an injured dog than from a human.

"What symptoms are you feeling?" Lana asked. "What happened to Misty?"

Mark watched as the Toad raised his hands up and pressed them against the sides of his head. Even his silhouette was creepy doing such a thing.

"There ... are ... *things* in my head," he repeated slowly. Deliberately. His voice was laced with anger. "Of all the people on this forsaken planet, I thought my friends of over a year would be willing to help me get them out." He got to his feet and began to shout. "Get these things out of my head!"

"Just calm down there, Toad," Alec said, the threat clear in his voice.

Mark didn't want the situation to explode into something they'd all regret. "Toad, listen to me. We're going to help you however we can. But we need you to sit down and stop shouting. Screaming at us won't help."

The Toad didn't respond, but his figure seemed rigid. Mark could tell his hands were clenched into fists.

"Toad? We need you to sit down. And then tell us everything that's happened since we left the village."

The guy didn't move.

"Come on," Mark pushed. "We want to help. Just sit down and relax."

After a few seconds, Toad obeyed, collapsing to the ground in a heap, lying there like he'd been shot. Several moans escaped him as he shifted, rocking back and forth on his side.

Mark took a deep breath, feeling like the situation was back under some kind of control. He realized that he and Trina were standing right next to each other, but neither Alec nor Lana seemed to have noticed yet. Mark took a few steps forward, to the side of the fire pit,

and sat down.

"That poor kid," he heard Alec mutter behind him, thankfully not loud enough for the Toad to hear. Sometimes the old man said exactly what he was thinking.

Thankfully, Lana's nursing instincts won out and she took the reins of the conversation.

"Okay," she began. "Toad. It seems like you're in a lot of pain. I'm really sorry about that. But if we're going to help you, we need to know some things. Are you feeling well enough to talk about it?"

The Toad continued rocking and moaning softly. But he answered. "I'll do my best, guys. I don't know how long the things in my head will let me do it, though. Better hurry."

"Good," Lana responded. "Good. Let's begin from the second we left you at the village. What did you do?"

"I sat at the door and talked to Misty," the Toad said in a tired voice. "What else would I do? She's my best friend—the best friend I've ever had. I don't care about anything else. How can anyone abandon their best friend?"

"Right. I understand that. I'm glad she had someone to be there with her."

"She needed me. I could tell when it got bad for her, so I went in and held her. Held her to my chest and hugged her and kissed her forehead. Like a baby. Like my baby. I've never felt so happy as when I held her, watching her die slowly in my arms."

Mark squirmed in his seat, sickened by the Toad's words. He hoped Lana was able to learn something about what was going on.

"How did she die?" Lana asked. "Did she have a lot of pain, like Darnell?"

"Yes. Yes, Lana. She had a lot of pain. She screamed and screamed until the things left her head and crawled into mine. Then we put her out of her misery."

The forest seemed to fall deathly silent at that last remark, and Mark's breath froze in his lungs. He sensed Alec moving behind him but Lana shushed him.

"We?" she repeated. "What do you mean, Toad? And what're you talking about when you say things crawled into your head?"

Their friend pressed his hands against his head. "How can you be so stupid? How many times do I have to tell you? We! Me and the things in my head! I don't know what they are! Do you hear me? I ... don't ... know ... what they are! You stupid, stupid kid!"

A wail escaped from his mouth, inhuman and piercingly loud, rising in pitch and volume. Mark jumped to his feet and took a couple of steps backward. It seemed as if the trees shook with the sound exploding from the Toad and every last creature within a mile fled to safety. There was only that one awful noise.

"Toad!" Lana yelled at him, but the word was lost in the shrieking.

The Toad was seesawing his head back and forth with his hands as he continued to scream. Mark looked at his friends even though he couldn't really see their faces—he had no idea what to do, and neither did Lana, evidently.

"That's it," he barely heard Alec say as the man moved forward and past Mark, bumping him along the way. Mark stumbled, then got his balance, wondering what the former soldier had planned.

Alec walked straight at the Toad, then grabbed him by the shirt and yanked him to his feet, dragging him deeper into the woods. The screams didn't stop, just became more hitched and sporadic as he sucked in breaths and struggled to break free. Soon they were

lost in the shadows of the trees, but Mark could hear the scraping of the Toad's body along the ground. The sound of his wailing faded as they got farther away.

"What is that man up to?" Lana asked tightly.

"Alec!" Mark yelled after him. "Alec!"

There was no response, just the continued cries and shouts of the Toad. And then they ceased, abruptly. Cut off as if Alec had thrown him into a soundproof room and slammed the door shut.

"What the ...," Trina breathed behind Mark.

Soon there were footsteps marching back toward them at a determined pace. For a second Mark panicked, thinking the Toad had somehow broken free and hurt Alec, gone completely insane, and was coming back to finish off the others. Thirsting for blood.

But then Alec appeared out of the dark gloom of the trees, his face hidden in shadow. Mark could only imagine the sadness that must have been stamped in his features.

"I couldn't risk him doing anything crazy," the old man said, his voice surprisingly shaky. "I couldn't. Not if this has something to do with a virus. I ... I need to go wash myself in the stream."

He spread out his hands before him, looking at them for a long moment. Then he marched off toward the brook nearby. Mark thought he heard him sniffle just before he vanished back into the trees.

After all that, they were supposed to go back to sleep. Dawn was still hours away.

No one said a word after Alec had done ... whatever he'd done ... to the Toad. Mark thought he might explode, so confused was he by what had transpired over the last half an hour or so. He *wanted* to talk. But Trina turned away from him when he faced her. She slumped to the ground and curled up with a blanket, stifling some sobs. It broke Mark's heart—they'd gone several months without tears, and now it was happening all over again.

She was an enigma to him. From the beginning she'd been stronger, tougher and braver than he ever was. At first it had embarrassed and shamed him, but he loved it in her so much that he got over it. Yet she also wore her emotions on her sleeve and wasn't scared at all to let them all out in a good cry.

Lana went about her business silently, eventually lying down next to a tree on the outskirts of their small camp. Mark tried to settle into a comfortable position himself, but he was wide awake. Alec finally returned. No one had anything to say, and the sounds of the forest slowly came back to Mark's awareness: insects and a soft breeze through the trees. But his thoughts still spun wildly.

What had just happened? What had Alec done to the Toad? Could it really be what Mark thought? Had it been painful? How in the world could things be so messed up?

At least he had the small blessing of a dreamless sleep after he finally drifted off.

"This virus from the darts," Lana said the next morning as they all sat, zombielike, around a crackling fire. "I think there's something wrong with it."

It was a strange statement. Mark looked up at her. He had been staring at the flames, going over the events of the night before, until she'd spoken, and he was suddenly back in the present.

Alec voiced his thoughts bluntly. "I think there's something wrong with most viruses."

Lana gave him a sharp glare. "Come on. You know what I mean. Can't you all see it?"

"See what?" Mark asked.

"That it seems to be affecting people differently?" Trina asked.

"Exactly," Lana responded, pointing at her as if she were proud. "The people who were hit by those darts died within hours. Then Darnell and the people who'd helped the ones who were shot took a couple of days to die. Their main symptom was intense pressure in their skulls—they acted like their heads were being squeezed in vises. Then there's Misty, who didn't have symptoms for several days."

Mark remembered the moment they'd left her all too well. "Yeah," he murmured. "She was singing the last time we saw her. Curled up in a ball on the ground. She said her head hurt."

"There was just something different about her," Lana pointed out. "You weren't there when Darnell first got sick. He didn't die as fast as the others, but he started acting strangely really quickly. Misty seemed fine up until her head started hurting. But something was off up here with both of them." She tapped on her temple several times.

"And we all saw the Toad last night," Alec added. "Who knows when he got it—if he had it as long as Misty, or just got it from being with her when she died—but he was crazy like mad cow disease."

"Show some respect," Trina snapped at him.

Mark expected Alec to retaliate or defend himself, but he appeared humbled by the rebuke. "I'm sorry, Trina. Really I am. But Lana and I are just trying to assess our situation as best we can. Figure things out. And the Toad was obviously not lucid last night."

Trina didn't back down. "So you killed him."

"That's not fair," Alec said coolly. "If Misty died that quickly after her symptoms hit, it's fair to say that the Toad was going to die also. He was a threat to all of us, but he was also a friend. I did him a mercy and hopefully bought us another day or two."

"Unless you caught something from him," Lana said tonelessly.

"I was careful. And I immediately scrubbed myself clean."

"Seems pointless," Mark said. He was sinking farther into the doldrums with every second. "Maybe we all have it and it just takes longer to kill you depending on your immune system."

Alec shifted up on to his knees. "We've strayed from Lana's point. There's something wrong with this virus. It's not consistent. I'm not a scientist, but could it be mutating or something? Changing as it jumps from one person to the next?"

Lana nodded. "Mutating, adapting, strengthening—who knows. But something. And it seems to take longer to kill you as it spreads, which—contrary to what you'd assume—actually means the virus is more effectively spreading. You and Mark weren't there, but you should've seen how quickly those first victims went. Nothing like Misty. It was bloody and brutal and awful for an hour or two, but then it was over. They convulsed and bled, which only helped it to spread to more human incubators."

Mark was glad he'd missed it. But considering what he'd seen Darnell go through at the end, those people might've been lucky that it had happened so fast. With way too much clarity, Mark recalled the sound of the boy beating his skull against the inside of the door.

"It has something to do with their head," Trina murmured.

Everyone looked at her. She'd just voiced something obvious, but vital.

"It definitely had something to do with their head," Mark chimed in. "They all had massive pain. And loss of sanity. Darnell was hallucinating—plain crazy. And then Misty. And the Toad..."

Trina posed a question. "Maybe they shot people with different things—how do we know it all started the same?"

Mark shook his head. "I went through the boxes on the Berg," he said. "They all seemed to have the same identification number."

Alec stood up. "Well, if it *is* mutating and if any of us have caught it, let's hope it gives us a week or two before we lose our wits. Come on. Let's get moving."

"Nice," Trina muttered as she got to her feet.

A few minutes later, they were on the march again.

Sometime in the middle of the afternoon they came within sight of another settlement. It was off the path Alec had scrawled on his makeshift map, but Mark spotted several wooden structures through the trees, big ones. His heart lifted at the idea of seeing large groups of

people again.

"Should we go over there?" Lana asked.

Alec seemed to be weighing the pros and cons before he answered. "Hmm. I don't know. I'm eager to keep moving and follow our map. We don't know anything about these people."

"But maybe we should," Mark argued. "They might actually know something about the bunker, headquarters, whatever we're calling the place the Berg came from."

Alec looked at him, obviously considering all their options.

"I think we should check it out," Trina said. "If nothing else, we can warn them about what's happened to us."

"Okay," Alec relented. "One hour."

The smell hit them when the wind shifted, just as they were approaching the first buildings, small huts made of logs with thatched roofs.

It was the same smell that had assaulted Mark and Alec when they'd approached their own village after chasing down the Berg and marching back. The smell of rotting flesh.

"Whoa!" Alec called out. "That's it. We're turning around right now."

Even as he said it, it became clear where the stench was coming from. Farther down the path several bodies had been stacked on top of each other. Then a figure appeared. A little girl was walking toward them from the direction of the dead. She must have been five or six years old, with matted dark hair and filthy clothes.

"Guys," Mark said. When the others looked at him, he nodded toward the approaching girl. She stopped about twenty feet from them. Her face was dirty and her expression sad, and she didn't say anything. Just looked at them with hollow eyes. The stench of rot hung in the air.

"Hey there," Trina called out. "Are you okay, sweetie? Where are your parents? Where are the others from your village? Are they ..." She didn't need to finish—the stack of bodies spoke for itself.

The girl answered in a quiet voice and pointed out toward the woods behind Mark and the others.

"They all ran into the forest. They all ran away."

CHAPTER 18

Mark didn't know what it was about her words that made him shiver, but they did, and he couldn't fight the urge to look over his shoulder toward where she was staring. There was nothing back there but the trees and the brush and the sunlight dappling the ground.

He turned to face the girl again. Trina walked toward her, which of course made Alec protest.

"You can't do this," he said, but even his gravelly rebuke didn't have any strength. It was one thing to leave adults behind, people who were able to fend for themselves. Maybe it was even one thing to put a teenager—almost an adult—out of his or her misery, like Alec had done to the Toad. But this was a child, and that made everything different. "At least try not to touch her, for the sake of all of us."

The girl flinched and took a few steps back when Trina got close to her.

"It's okay," Trina said, stopping. She got down on one knee. "We're friendly, I promise. We came from a village just like yours, where they had lots of kids. Do you have friends here?"

The girl nodded, then seemed to remember something. She shook her head sadly.

"They're gone now?"

A nod.

Trina looked back at Mark, heartbreak in her eyes, then returned her attention to the girl.

"What's your name?" Trina asked. "Mine is Trina. Can you tell me yours?"

After a long pause, the girl said, "Deedee."

"Deedee, huh? I love that name. It's really cute."

"My brother's name is Ricky."

It seemed such a childlike thing to say, and for some reason it brought memories of Madison slamming to the forefront of Mark's thoughts. His heart ached. He wished this girl were his little sister. And as always, he tried his hardest to keep his mind from wandering down the darkest road of all. Imagining what might've happened to her when the sun flares struck.

"Where is Ricky?" Trina asked.

Deedee shrugged. "I don't know. He went with the others. Into the forest."

"With your mom and your dad?"

The girl shook her head. "No. They got hit by the arrows from the sky. Both of them. They died real nasty." Tears welled up until they spilled over and washed down her dirty cheeks.

"I'm so sorry to hear that, sweetheart," Trina said, her voice full of the deepest sincerity. Mark was sure he'd never liked her as much as he did right then. "Some of our friends were ... hurt by the same people. Nasty, like you said. I'm so, so sorry."

Deedee was crying but also rocking back and forth on her heels, something that again reminded Mark of Madison. "It's okay," she said, so sweetly that Mark didn't know how much more of this he could take. "I know it wasn't your fault. It was the bad men's fault.

The ones who wear the funny green suits.”

Mark pictured that day, remembered looking up at the same people on the Berg. Or friends of the same people. Who knew how many Bergs were out there, flying around with dart guns full of who knew what. Why, though? Why?

Trina kept digging, as tenderly as she could, for more information. “Why did the others leave? Why didn’t you go with them?”

Deedee held up her right arm, the hand balled into a fist. She pulled up her ratty sleeve to reveal a circular wound near her shoulder, scabbed over but looking poorly cared for. She didn’t say anything, just held the arm straight out for everyone to inspect.

Mark took in a quick breath. “Looks like she was shot by a dart!”

“I’m sorry about your owie,” Trina said, shooting a glare at Mark. “But … do you know why they left? Where they went? Why didn’t you go with them?”

The girl jabbed her arm out again, pointing at the wound. Mark exchanged a look with Alec and Lana, sure that they understood the deep significance as much as he did. Why was this girl okay if she’d been shot?

“I really am sorry they hurt you,” Trina said. “Looks like you’re one lucky girl. Do you not want to answer any more questions? It’s okay if you don’t.”

Deedee groaned in frustration and pointed at her wound once again. “This is why! This is why they left me here! They’re bad, like the green men.”

“I’m really sorry, sweetie.”

Mark couldn’t hold it in anymore. “I’ll tell you what happened. They probably thought she was sick from the dart and left without her.” The words sounded wrong, though. How could anyone actually do that? To a little kid?

“Is that what happened?” Trina asked her. “They left you because they thought you might be sick? Like the others?”

Deedee nodded and fresh tears streamed down her cheeks.

Trina stood up and turned to face Alec.

The soldier held a hand up. “I’ll stop you before you even start. I may look like I was chewed up and spit out by the meanest beast in the jungle, but I’m not heartless. We’ll take the girl with us.”

Trina nodded and genuinely smiled for the first time that day.

“It probably is true that she’s infected,” Lana pointed out. “It’s just taking longer to manifest itself.”

“Odds are we’re all sick,” Alec grumbled as he readjusted the straps of his backpack.

“We’ll be careful with her,” Trina said. “We just need to keep our hands clean and away from our nose and mouth. Wear a mask as much as possible. But I’m not letting this sweet thing out of my sight until …” She didn’t finish, and Mark was glad for that.

“It’s another mouth to feed,” Alec said, “but I guess she won’t eat much.” He smiled to show he was joking—something that didn’t happen very often. “Part of me wants to ransack this place to look for supplies, food, but whatever is taking everyone down is probably camped up nice and cozy on every dirty inch of the place. Let’s get out of here.”

Trina motioned to Deedee to come along, and surprisingly, she did so without any argument. Alec headed back the way they’d come, to the path he’d so carefully mapped out. As they walked, Mark tried not to think about the fact that they were going exactly

where Deedee had pointed earlier.

They didn't run into anyone—living or dead—for the next few hours, and Mark almost forgot about the people who had left Deedee behind. The girl stayed quiet through the journey, never complaining as they maintained a brisk pace, up and down the rocky terrain and then up and down all over again. Trina stayed by her side, wearing a cloth over her face.

Deedee eagerly devoured her dinner, probably the first decent meal she'd had in a while. Then they hiked for another hour or two before setting up camp. Alec announced that, according to his calculations, they only had one full day of traveling to go.

Mark watched Trina with Deedee. She took such good care of the little girl—making her a spot to sleep, helping her wash up in the stream, telling her a story as darkness settled on the wooded valley.

Mark watched, and hoped for a day when life could be good and safe again. When the horrors might end and boredom became their worst problem. When a girl like Deedee could run around and laugh like kids were supposed to.

He settled down next to Trina and the little girl, thinking about the past, and drifted off to sleep, only for the darker memories to come and stamp out his foolish hopes.

It takes Mark only ten minutes or so to realize that Alec is the person he wants to be close to until they're back safe and sound in their homes. Not only did he disarm three men and put them out of commission in less than thirty seconds, he is also a former soldier who wastes no time taking charge and telling them how it is.

"Sometimes you can believe the rumors and chitchat," the older man says as they slosh through the water of the passageway outside the storage closet where they encountered the armed thugs. "Most times it's some lame-brained numbskull trying to impress a lady or two. But once the majority of the rumors are saying the same thing, you better perk up and pay attention. You're probably wondering what in the hell I'm trying to say here."

Mark looks over at Trina—he can barely see her face in the dim glow from the flashlight that Alec is holding in front of them. She gives him a look that says, *Who is this guy?* She's carrying the box of food she found earlier. It's like her security blanket or something—she won't let anyone else touch it. Not yet.

"Yeah, we're wondering," Mark finally replies.

Alec stops and whirls around, quick as a striking snake. At first Mark thinks his answer came out wrong, sarcastically, and the man might punch his lights out. But instead the tough old man just holds up a finger.

"We have one hour, tops, to get out of these rat tunnels. You hear me? One hour." He turns back around and starts marching again.

"Wait, what?" Mark asks as they hurry to keep pace. "What do you mean? Why? Isn't it a bad idea to go up there until ... well, I don't know."

"Sun flares."

He says the two words like he needs to say nothing else. Like the others should instantly know everything going on in his mind.

"Sun flares?" Trina repeats. "That's what you think happened up there?"

"Pretty sure, my lovely lady. Pretty sure."

Mark's bad feelings about it all have escalated exponentially upon the news. If it's not an isolated incident, if it's truly something as global as sun flares, then the little hope he held out for his family is gone. "How do you know?"

He hears the quaver in his voice. Alec answers with no shaking in his whatsoever.

"Because there were too many people from too many places describing the same thing before I got away from the masses. And supposedly the news agencies put out warnings right before they struck. It's sun flares, all right. Extreme heat and radiation. Double whammy. It was something the world thought it was trained and prepared for. The world was wrong, in my humble judgment."

All three of them fall silent. Alec keeps moving, Mark and Trina keep following. They turn corners, enter different tunnels, steer clear of other people when they get close. All the while, Mark's heart is sinking further and further into a dark place. He doesn't know how to handle something like this. He refuses to believe his family is gone and swears to himself that he won't rest until he finds them safe and sound. Finally Alec stops in the middle of a

long passageway that looks much like all the others.

"I have a few other friends in here," he says. "Left them to go look for food, learn some things. I've worked with Lana for years and years. We were contractors for the defense department—she's a former soldier, like me. Army nurse. The others are strays we picked up. You two max us out—we can't take one more or we'll never make it."

"Make it where?" Mark asks.

"To the world above," Alec replies, the last thing Mark expected to hear. "Back into the city, as hellacious as it may be. As long as we stay inside for a while, we should be okay. But we have to get up there before the waters flood this place and kill us all."

Mark woke up and rolled onto his side, his eyes fully open, his breathing heavy. And he hadn't even dreamed about the bad part. He didn't want to remember any of it. He didn't want to relive the terror of that day.

Please, he thought. Please, no. Please. Not tonight. I can't.

He didn't even know who he was talking to. Was he talking to his own brain? Maybe he'd caught the disease from the Toad and was beginning to go crazy.

He flopped onto his back, stared up at the branches and the stars above. There wasn't even the slightest hint of dawn creeping into the sky. It was dark, dark, dark. He wanted it to be morning, wanted to be done with the threat of dreams for at least a few hours. Maybe he could keep himself awake somehow. He sat up, looked around. But he couldn't see much, only the outlines of trees and the shapes of his friends lying around him on the ground.

He considered waking up Trina. She'd understand that he needed company. He wouldn't even have to tell her about his dream. But she seemed so peaceful at the moment, breathing softly. With a quiet groan to himself he gave up on the idea, knowing he'd feel too guilty about depriving her of valuable sleep. Not only did they have a lot of walking to do the next day, she had the added burden of looking after little Deedee.

Mark flopped back down, shifted around until he got comfortable. He didn't want to dream. The raging waters, the screams of people drowning. The frantic, unbearable fear of fleeing it all. Even awake he could see that room beneath New York City where they'd first met Lana and the others. Alec's weathered face as he explained to them that after surviving such massive sun flares, their biggest and most immediate worry now was the surge of a tsunami. The flares must have been devastating, inflicting catastrophic damage worldwide and unleashing the heat of hell itself.

Which meant a quick melting of the polar ice caps. Which meant sea levels rising at an alarming and apocalyptic rate. Which meant that the island of Manhattan would be a dozen feet underwater within a few hours. He explained all this to them while they huddled in a room far underground, where the water would seek out and drown everything in its path.

Back in the present, these thoughts tormented Mark for at least another hour—and he knew if he dreamed it would only get worse. He was scared of being scared.

He drifted off despite his efforts. Sleep came over him like cold, crashing waves.

The Lincoln Building, one of the tallest, newest, grandest buildings in New York. One of the few with direct access to the subtrans system.

That's where Alec keeps telling them they need to go. He says he has a full subtrans map saved on his phone, but he's visibly worried about them being able to make it in time. Mark was able to see, even in the dim light before they headed out, that Alec has major doubts—which is contrary to the overall persona of the hardened man he seems to be. Mark would've guessed the man could be caged with a dozen hungry lions and he'd still only have a smirk on his face as he decided which one to kill first.

The Lincoln Building, Mark tells himself. Get there; then you can go find your family.

They are all running down one of the countless seemingly endless tunnels below the city. Alec in the lead, then the woman he said he's had the pleasure of working with for a dozen years: Lana. A boy about Mark's age named Darnell is next, then a girl named Misty—another teenager, but older, maybe eighteen—then a dude, also older than Mark, but short and loaded with muscles. Misty refers to him as the Toad, and he actually seems to like the moniker. Mark and Trina are next, with a boy named Baxter bringing up the rear. Baxter is the youngest of them all, maybe thirteen, but Mark can tell he's a tough little sucker. Insisted on being in the back, said he wanted to protect everyone from surprise attacks.

As they run, Mark hopes he has enough time left in life to become friends with the kid.

"I hope he knows what he's doing," Trina says quietly next to him. They are jogging along side by side and Mark finds himself having the ridiculous thought that it'd be nice if they were on a beach, the sun just setting on the water. He thanks the powers that be that Trina can't read his mind.

"He does," Mark insists. He also doesn't want her to know how he's almost trembling with fear of what might happen at any second, which is making it hard to run. Almost seventeen years of life, and he never knew what a coward he was.

"Tsunami." Trina says the word like it's the evilest thing to ever come out of her mouth. "We're in the middle of the subtrans system in New York City and that's supposed to be our biggest worry. A tsunami?"

"We're underground," Mark replies. "And our city is right by the ocean, in case you forgot. Water drains downward. Ya know, gravity and all that."

He can sense her giving him a nasty look, and he knows he deserves it. His nerves must be finally getting to him to be such a smart aleck. He tries to save himself the only way he knows how—honesty.

"Sorry," he mutters. The run is getting to him and he's breathing heavily. "I'm just scared out of my mind. I'm really sorry."

"It's okay. I didn't really mean it like a question. I'm just ... I don't know. Saying how crazy this is I guess. Sun flares and a tsunami. A few hours ago those words weren't even on my radar. Not by a long shot."

"It sucks" is the best Mark can come up with. He just doesn't want to talk about it anymore—the more they do, the more his insides twist with distress and worry.

Alec slows down when they reach the end of the latest tunnel. He stops and turns to face them. Everyone is breathing heavily and Mark's entire body is soaked with sweat.

"We have to go through one of the newer subtrans sections now," Alec says. "There's bound to be people out there, and who knows what kind of mood they might be in. Sometimes folks get downright nasty when they think the world's about to end."

Now that their little group is calming their breathing a bit, Mark can hear faint sounds coming from behind their leader. The hum of a crowd, people talking and bustling about. A few disturbing noises mixed in as well: distant screams, crying and wailing. The isolation of their dank little storage room doesn't seem so bad now.

Lana picks up the line of conversation. "We just need to get through it. Walk fast, but don't look like you know where you're going. We can't afford to carry anything—empty your arms and pockets or we might get attacked. We'll just have to hope we can find things in the Lincoln Building."

A few of them have been carrying packets of the food Trina found earlier. They dump them on the ground. The act seems to suck some of the life out of Trina.

"We'll go through this door," Alec says as he looks at his phone—the battery has to be close to dying. "And then jump onto the tracks. If we stay off the concourse maybe we'll come across fewer people. Straight for about half a mile; then we can enter the doors of the stairwell for the Lincoln Building. That sucker goes all the way up to the ninetieth floor. It's our only shot."

Mark takes a quick look around and sees that the others are fidgety and nervous. The Toad is hopping up and down, which seems ridiculously appropriate.

"Let's go," Alec says. "Stay close together, tight. Defend each other to the death."

Trina groans at that, and Mark really wishes the man hadn't said it.

"Go, go, go!" Lana shouts, whether from frustration or to psych them up, Mark may never know.

Alec opens the door and walks through. The others follow as a blast of heat surges past and washes over them. Mark feels as if the oxygen is being burned out of his chest; he fights for each breath until he gets used to it.

He enters the larger tunnel on Trina's heels. They're on a narrow ledge a few feet above the actual tracks for the trains—Alec and Lana have already jumped down, are reaching up to help the others. One by one they take hands, leap off the edge, land with a thump and a jolt to the legs. Mark looks up. Light is spilling in from the stairs that eventually lead up to the devastated world above them. He studies the people milling about on the landing across from where he stands, every one of them with their gaze locked on the new arrivals.

What Mark sees up there makes his heart want to stop.

The place is packed. At least half of the crowd is wounded in some way. Cuts and slashes. Terrible burns. There are people lying on the ground screaming. Children of all ages, many of them hurt, too. That's what breaks Mark inside the most. Two men are fighting brutally in one spot, pounding each other, scratching and clawing. No one even makes a move to break them up. There's a lady slumped on the edge of the landing and her face is gone, replaced by melted skin and blood. Mark feels as if he's been given a glimpse into hell.

"Walk," Alec orders once everyone is down on the tracks.

They do, staying as close together as possible. Mark has Trina on his left, the boy named

Baxter on his right. The kid looks terrified and Mark wants to say something to help him feel better but can't find the words. They'd be empty anyway. Alec and Lana are right in front of Mark, their body language daring anyone to be stupid enough to confront them.

They've made it halfway across the main section of the concourse when two men and a lady jump down onto the tracks and stand directly in their path, forcing them to stop. The strangers are dirty but look unhurt. Physically, anyway. Their eyes are haunted by things they've seen.

"And where do you think you're going?" the woman asks.

"Yeah," one of her friends adds. "You seem mighty important. You know about some place to go that we don't?"

The other man steps up closer to Alec. "Not sure if you've noticed or not, but the sun decided to belch all over us. People are dead, sir. Lots of people. And I don't like how you think you can just march through here and pretend everything's okay."

A few other people are jumping down from the landing, congregating behind the first three strangers. Blocking their path.

"Let's see if they have any food!" someone shouts.

Alec rears back and punches the man standing in front of him. The guy's head snaps back and blood sprays from his nose; he collapses to the ground. It's so sudden and shocking that no one moves for a second. Then several people charge into Mark's group, screaming and shouting.

Chaos ensues. Fists are flying, feet kicking, fingers grasping hair and yanking. Mark is punched in the face just as he sees Trina yanked away by a man. Rage explodes inside of Mark and he fights back at whoever hit him, swinging his arms wildly until he connects twice. Then he pushes the guy away to see a man on top of Trina—he's struggling with her on the ground, working to get control of her arms as she desperately tries to fight him off.

Mark flies in, throwing his body at the man. They tumble off Trina and roll onto the ground. The man punches Mark and Mark punches back, barely feeling where he's been hit. Then they're in a tangle, squirming, arms flailing, kicking. Mark breaks free, crawls away, checks to see that Trina is okay. She's gotten up, runs over and kicks at her attacker's face but slips when she does it, lands on her back. The stranger goes after her, but Mark's on him again, diving shoulder-first into his gut. The man grunts and curls into a ball as Mark climbs to his feet, grabs Trina by the hand. They both push out of the crowd, then look to see what's going on with the others.

Everyone's still fighting, but at least no one else has joined in from the landing above. Mark sees the Toad punch a man; Alec and Lana are fighting a man and a woman off of Misty and Baxter. Two other people run away from their group. It might almost be over.

That's when it happens.

There's a rumbling sound that is low at first but begins to build in volume. The tunnel trembles slightly. All the fighting stops immediately; people get to their feet, look around. Mark's doing the same, trying to find the source of the noise. He's still holding Trina's hand.

"What is that?" she shouts.

Mark shakes his head, keeps sweeping his gaze around the tunnel. The floor vibrates below his feet and the rumbling sound gets louder, becomes an outright roar. His eyes fall

upon the stairs that lead up from the subtrans concourse just as the screams erupt—countless, countless screams and the blur of panicked movement in the crowd.

A monstrous wall of filthy water is pouring down the wide steps.

Mark woke up. Not with a scream or a shout, and he didn't bolt upright or gasp or anything as dramatic as that. He just opened his eyes, and realized right away that they were moist with tears and his face was wet. The sun had come up, shining brightly through the trees.

The wall of water.

He'd never, never forget what it had been like to see it rushing down those stairs like some kind of living beast. And the horror of watching it sweep away the first people at the bottom.

"Are you okay?"

Trina. Great.

He quickly wiped at his face and turned toward her, hoping that somehow she didn't know he'd been bawling his eyes out while sleeping. But one glance at her killed that hope. She looked like a concerned parent.

"Um, hey," he murmured. He felt so awkward. "Good morning. How's it going?"

"Mark, I'm not an idiot. Tell me what's wrong."

He looked at her, trying to communicate with his eyes that he didn't want to talk about it. Then he saw Deedee, leaning against a tree a few feet away, peeling the bark off a twig. Her face wasn't necessarily happy, but at least that look of utter gloom was gone. That was a start.

"Mark?"

He turned back to Trina. "I just ... I had a bad dream."

"About what?"

"You know what."

She frowned. "But what part of it? It might help to talk about it."

"I don't think so." Mark sighed, then realized he wasn't being very nice. She was just trying to help him feel better. "It was right before the water rushed in at that concourse. When we fought off those wannabe gangsters. I woke up just as the bad part began." The bad part. Like everything before that was a picnic in the park with Grandma.

Trina's gaze fell to the ground. "I wish you could stop having those dreams. We made it, and that's all that matters. Somehow you need to let go of the past." An apologetic expression came over her face. "I mean, easier said than done. I guess I just *wish* you could let go of the past. That's all."

"I know, I know. Me too."

He reached out and patted her on the knee, which seemed stupid in that situation, but Alec and Lana were just returning from getting fresh water from the stream.

"How's she doing?" he asked Trina, shooting a glance at Deedee.

"Really well, I think. She hasn't opened up yet about much, but at least she seems comfortable around me. I can't imagine the terror that poor thing was going through after she was left behind."

That stirred up the anger once again inside Mark. "How could they? I mean ... what kind of losers ..."

Trina nodded. "Yeah ... but I don't know. Desperate times and all that."

"Yeah, but she can't be more than four years old!" He was doing that combination of whispering and shouting at the same time. He didn't want Deedee to hear, but he couldn't help it. It made him so angry.

"I know," Trina said softly. "I know."

Lana stepped up to them, her eyes showing that she understood how he felt.

"We better get on the road," she said. "We'll figure things out."

The day dragged and dragged.

At first Mark was wary of the people from Deedee's village, still worried about the direction she'd pointed when they'd asked her where they went. If the girl had been right, that meant they were out here somewhere, doing who knew what. He had no real reason to fear them—they were just people like anyone else. Running from an attack, running from a disease. There was just something ominous about the way Deedee had spoken of them. And he could see so clearly in his mind her pointing at her wound with such an accusatory glare. It all unsettled him.

After a few hours of not seeing any sign of them, he relaxed into the drudgery of walking, walking and then more walking. Through the forest, crossing streams and pushing through the brush. Wondering if there was any purpose in going to this place they sought.

It was midafternoon and they'd stopped for a break. They were eating granola bars and drinking water from a nearby river. Mark thought constantly about how there was one thing they always had. Plenty of water sources. At least there was that.

"We're getting close," Alec said as he ate. "We might have to be more careful—they could have guards surrounding the place. I bet there's a lot of people who'd like to have a nice bunker or whatever it is as their new digs. I bet the place was packed with food for emergencies."

"We sure did have an emergency," Lana muttered. "Whoever these people are, they better have some good explanations."

Alec took another bite and pushed it to the side of his mouth. "That's the spirit."

"Do they not teach manners in the army?" Trina asked. "You know, it's just as easy to take a bite *after* you say something as right before it."

Alec chomped on his bar. "It is?" He croaked a laugh and little pieces of granola shot out. Which made him roar even harder. He choked out a cough, composed himself, then was laughing all over again.

It was such a rare sight to see Alec acting like this, Mark didn't know how to respond at first. But then he soaked it in, chuckling right along even though he'd forgotten what was funny in the first place. Trina had a smile on her face, and little Deedee was giggling heartily. The sound of it filled Mark up and washed away the doldrums.

"You'd think someone farted, the way you're all getting on," Lana said with a deadpan look.

That sent everyone into an even bigger fit that went on for several minutes, resparked every time it began to die down by Alec making gassy noises. Mark laughed until his face hurt and he tried his best to stop smiling, which made him laugh even harder.

Finally it did settle down, ending with one big sigh from the former soldier. Then he stood up.

"I feel like I could run twenty miles," he said. "Let's get moving."

As they headed off, Mark realized that the dream from the night before seemed like a distant memory again.

Alec and Lana were much more cautious during the next part of their journey, stopping every fifteen minutes or so to listen intently, looking for telltale signs of guards or traps, keeping more to the cover of the trees whenever possible.

The sun was sinking, maybe two hours from fully setting, when Alec stopped and had everyone huddle around him. At some point it seemed like the two adults had decided to stop worrying about people keeping their distance from each other. They were all in a small clearing completely surrounded by thick oak trees and towering pines—older ones that hadn't been completely consumed by the sun flares—standing on dry, brittle undergrowth. The clearing was in a little valley between two midsized hills. Mark was still in a good mood and was curious about what the older man had planned.

"I've tried to do this as little as possible," Alec said, "but it's time to look at the workpad and make sure my scribbled map is still accurate. Let's hope my aging brain hasn't failed us."

"Yes," Lana added. "Let's hope we're not in Canada or Mexico by now."

"Very funny."

Alec powered on the device and pulled up the maps feature, finding the one that had the Berg's voyages documented, all the lines converging in one spot. He also retrieved his compass. While everyone else stayed quiet and observed, he spent a minute or so studying the workpad, running his finger this way and that, comparing it to his handwritten copy, pausing every once in a while to close his eyes and think. Mark thought he was probably retracing their path in his mind, trying to match it to what he was reading on the maps. Finally he stood up and turned in a full circle, looking up at the sun, then checking his compass.

"Yep," he grumbled. "Yep, yep."

Then he crouched back down and studied the maps for another full minute, making some small changes to the paper version. Mark was getting impatient, mainly worried that the man had concluded they were way off course. But his next words put that to rest.

"Oh, I'm good. Seriously, after all these years, you'd think I would stop amazing myself. But here I am, still doing it."

"Oh, brother," Lana moaned.

Alec tapped the map just to the left of the spot that marked the center of the Berg routes on the workpad screen. "Unless I've got that virus eating my brain and don't know what I'm talking about, we're standing right here. Probably five miles from the place this Berg parks every night."

"Are you sure?" Trina asked.

"I know how to read maps and I know how to read the lay of the land. And I know how to read a compass and the sun. All these mountains and hills and valleys may seem exactly the same to your pretty little eyes, but trust me. They aren't. And look here." He pointed to a dot on the map. "That's Asheville, just a few miles east. We're close. I think the next few days could be very interesting."

Mark had a feeling his good mood wouldn't last much longer.

They moved about a mile closer, heading deep into one of the thickest areas of woods they'd crossed yet. Alec wanted the cover in case the people they were planning to confront sent canvassers out at night. They settled in, had a quick dinner, then sat around an empty spot in their tight quarters—no fire for fear of being seen. There'd be no chances taken of being discovered so close to the Berg's headquarters.

So they sat in a circle, staring at each other as the light faded into dusk and the crickets began chirping out in the forest. Mark asked about plans for the next day but Alec insisted they weren't ready yet. He wanted to think, then talk things through with Lana before laying it out for the others.

"You don't think we can contribute?" Trina asked.

"Eventually," he responded gruffly. And that was that.

Trina let out an exaggerated sigh. "Just when you started getting likable again."

"Yeah, well." He leaned back against a tree and closed his eyes. "Now let me use my brain for a while."

Trina looked to Mark for consolation, but he just smiled in return. He'd gotten used to the old bear's ways a long time ago. Plus, he kind of agreed with him. Mark didn't know the first thing about what they should do in the morning. How were they going to gather information from a place—and people—they knew nothing about?

"How're you doing, Deedee?" he asked. The girl was sitting with her legs crossed under her, staring at a spot on the ground. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

She shrugged and gave him a half grin.

He realized she might be worried about her role the next day. "Hey, listen, you don't need to be scared about tomorrow. There's no way we're going to let anything bad happen to you. Okay?"

"You promise?"

"I promise."

Trina leaned over and gave the girl a hug. If there'd been any doubt before that Alec and Lana had given up the battle on people getting close to each other—much less touching—they were washed away. Neither one of them said a word.

"This is all grown-up stuff," Trina said to the girl. "Don't you worry, okay? We'll put you somewhere safe and then all we're going to do is try to talk to some people. Nothing else. Everything is going to be perfectly fine."

Mark was just about to add to Trina's words of comfort when he heard a noise off in the distance. It sounded like someone singing.

"Do you hear that?" he whispered.

The others perked up—especially Alec. His eyes snapped open and he sat up straighter.

"What?" Trina asked.

"Listen." Mark held a finger to his lips and tilted his head toward the distant voice.

It was faint but definitely there. The sound of a woman singing some type of chant, not as far off as he thought at first. Chills ran up his skin—it brought back the memory of Misty singing as she began to succumb to the illness.

"What the hell is that?" Alec whispered.

No one answered; they just kept listening. It was high-pitched and lilting, would almost

have been pretty if it didn't seem so completely out of place. If there really was someone out there singing like that, well ... that was just weird. A man joined in, then a few other people, until it sounded like a full-blown chorus.

"What in the world?" Trina asked. "Is there some kind of church out here or what?"

Alec leaned forward, a grave look on his face. "I hate to say this, but we need to check that out. I'll go—you guys stay here and keep quiet. For all I know this is some kind of trap."

"I'll go with you," Mark said, almost blurting it out. He couldn't stand just sitting there. Plus, he was madly curious.

Alec didn't seem so certain. He looked at Lana and then at Trina.

"What?" Trina asked him. "You don't think we womenfolk can handle ourselves? You guys go—we'll be perfectly fine. Won't we, Deedee?"

The little girl didn't look so well; the singing really seemed to have freaked her out. But she nodded up at Trina and tried her best to smile.

"Okay, then," Alec said. "Come on, Mark. Let's go check it out."

Deedee cleared her throat and held her hands out as if she wanted to say something.

"What is it?" Trina asked her. "Do you know something?"

The girl nodded vigorously, still with a mask of fear, then burst out talking—saying more than she had in all the time since they'd found her. "The people I lived with. It's them. I know it's them. They turned weird, started ... doing things. Saying trees and plants and animals are magic. They left me because they said I was ... evil." She broke into a whimper on the last word. "Because I got shot and didn't get sick."

Mark and the others looked at each other—things had just gotten weirder.

"We better take a look, then," Lana said. "You need to at least make sure they're far enough away from us, or not heading our way. But be careful!"

Alec nodded, seeming anxious to go check it out. He lightly slapped Mark's shoulder and was about to walk away when Deedee said one last thing.

"Watch out for the ugly man with no ears."

She leaned into Trina's shoulder and started sobbing. Mark looked at Alec, who shook his head not to press the girl. He gestured to Mark, and without a word, the two headed out into the forest.

CHAPTER 23

The singing didn't stop as they marched through the woods. They tried their best to be quiet, but every once in a while Mark would step on a twig or fallen branch and break it, the crack of wood sounding like a little bomb in the relative silence of the forest. Alec gave him a sharp look each time it happened, as if such an act were the single dumbest thing a human had ever done.

All Mark could say was "Sorry." He tried his best to step carefully but he seemed to be drawn to things that made terrible noises.

There was almost no sign of sunlight left as they crept among the trees, closer and closer to the chorus of creepy chanting. The trees became standing shadows, ominous and tall and pressing. Almost as if they leaned toward Mark no matter where he was standing or walking. And it was harder for him to stay quiet, which drew more reproachful glares from Alec. At least he couldn't see the expressions as well in the dark. He kept moving, following the old bear's lead.

They'd made their way through the woods another few hundred yards when it became obvious that there was a source of light up ahead. It was orange and flickering. A fire. A big one. And the volume of the singing had gotten louder and louder. As had the ... intensity. These people were really getting into whatever it was they were doing.

Alec crept up to a fat, old tree and squatted behind it. Mark was right at his back, doing his best to keep silent. They knelt side by side with plenty of room to spare.

"What do you think about the things Deedee said?" Mark whispered.

He must've said it too loud, because the man gave him his standard *Be quiet* look, just visible in the faint light. Then, in a soft voice, he spoke back. "This could very well be the people who left her behind. And they sound like they've got scrambled eggs for brains. Now try not to make any noises, would ya?"

Mark rolled his eyes, but Alec had already turned away and was leaning forward to peek around the edge of the tree trunk. After a few seconds he faced Mark again.

"I can't make out all of them," he said, "but there's at least four or five yahoos dancing around that fire like they're trying to call back the dead."

"Maybe that's exactly what they're doing," Mark offered. "Sounds like a cult to me."

Alec nodded slowly. "Maybe they've always been that way."

"Deedee said they called her evil. Maybe the virus or whatever it is has made them a lot worse." A cult with a disease that drove them even crazier. That sounded fun. "Gives me the creeps and I haven't even seen them yet."

"Yeah, we better get closer. I want to get one last glimpse, make sure they're not something we have to worry about."

They bent low and inched out of their hiding spot, slowly walking from tree to tree, Alec checking each time to make sure it was clear to move on to the next one. Mark was proud of himself—he hadn't made a loud noise in quite a while.

They continued until they got within a hundred yards or so—the singing was crystal clear and the shadows from the flames circled and flashed in the canopy of branches above

them. Mark squatted behind a different tree from Alec this time and leaned his head out to take a look down the long slope.

The fire roared, at least ten feet wide with its tongues of flame licking far up into the air, almost threatening the lower limbs of the trees surrounding it. Mark couldn't believe how these goons were risking burning the whole forest down. Especially with how dry everything still was in the aftermath of the sun flares.

Five or six people were dancing and gyrating around the bonfire, throwing their arms up and bringing them down again, bowing toward the earth and then shuffling to the side, where they started all over again. Mark half expected them to be wearing crazy robes or be flat-out naked, but they wore simple clothes—T-shirts, tank tops, jeans, shorts, tennis shoes. A crowd of a dozen or so others were lined up in two rows on the other side of the fire, singing the weird chant that Mark had been hearing. He didn't understand a word of it.

Alec tapped him on the shoulder, making him jump.

He turned to face the man and had to restrain himself to keep his voice low. "You scared the crap out of me."

"Sorry. Look, I have a bad feeling about these people. Whether they're a threat or not—the people at this bunker we're headed for have surely noticed them by now and are going to be on high alert."

Mark wondered if maybe that would be a good thing. "But if they're a distraction, it'll be easier for us to sneak up on the place. Don't you think?"

Alec seemed to consider his words. "Yeah, I guess. We should probably—"

"Who's up there?"

Mark froze, as did Alec. They stared at each other with open mouths now. Mark could see the light from below flickering in the reflection in Alec's eyes.

"I said who's up there?" It was a woman, calling from the group at the fire. "We mean you no harm. We just want to invite you to join us in our praises to nature and the spirits."

"Hoo boy," Alec whispered. "I think not."

"I definitely think not," Mark said back.

There was the crunch of footsteps and before they could do anything two people were standing over them. Their backs were to the fire, so Mark couldn't make out their faces. But it looked to be a man and a woman.

"You're welcome to dance and sing with us," the woman said. Her tone seemed way too ... calm for the circumstances. In this new world, strangers should be met with more caution.

Alec stood up straight—there was no point in crouching there like kids spying—and Mark did the same. Alec folded his arms and stuck his chest out like a bear trying to defend its territory.

"Look," he began with his typical bark, "I'm flattered you came here with an invite, but we'll have to respectfully decline. No hard feelings, I'm sure."

Mark grimaced, thinking these two people were far too unpredictable—maybe even unstable—to risk being sarcastic or rude to them. He wished he could see their faces for a reaction, but they were still hidden in shadow.

"Why are you here?" the man asked, as if he hadn't heard the comments from Alec. "Why are you here, spying on us? I would think you'd be honored that we offered an invitation."

Alec sucked in a short breath, and Mark sensed him tensing up.

"We were curious," Alec said evenly.

"Why did you leave Deedee behind?" Mark suddenly blurted out, having no idea where it came from. He didn't even know for sure if these people really were from the same village or not. "She's just a little girl. Why did you leave her behind like a dog?"

The woman didn't answer his question. "I have a bad feeling about both of you," she replied. "And we can take no chances. Seize them."

Before Mark could process her words, there was a rope around his neck, cinched tightly, yanking him off his feet. He croaked and threw his hands up to try to relieve the pressure as he fell on his back and the wind was knocked out of his lungs. Alec had been restrained the same way; Mark could hear him cursing through his choking sounds. Mark kicked and twisted his body, trying to turn and face his attacker, but strong hands gripped him under the arms and yanked him off the ground.

They started dragging him down the slope of the mountain.

Toward the fire.

Mark finally stopped struggling when someone punched him in the face, sending a burst of pain through his cheek. The effort to escape was pointless, he realized. He relaxed and let them drag him wherever it was they wanted to take him. He saw Alec struggling against two large men and watched as they tightened the rope further around his neck. The old man's choking sounds made Mark's heart want to break open.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "Alec, just stop! They're going to kill you!"

Of course the old bear paid no attention, just kept fighting.

Eventually they were dragged into the clearing where the fire still roared. Even as Mark saw it he noticed a woman step up and throw two more logs on top of the inferno. It flared and spit out glowing red sparks. His captor dragged him around the bonfire and dumped him in front of the two rows of people. They stopped chanting, and all their eyes focused on Mark and Alec.

He coughed and spit, his neck burning from the rope, then tried to sit up. A tall man—probably the guy who'd dragged him down there—put his big boot on Mark's chest and pressed him back to the ground.

"Stay down," he said. Not angry or upset; he just said it matter-of-factly, like he didn't think Mark would even consider disobeying.

It had taken two men to bring Alec down the mountain, and Mark was shocked they'd succeeded even then. They dumped him next to Mark. The soldier grunted and groaned but didn't resist because they still had the other end of the rope that was tied around his neck. He went into a long coughing fit, then spit a wad of blood into the dirt.

"Why are you doing this?" Mark asked no one in particular. He lay flat on his back and stared up at the canopy of branches and the reflection of the flames on the leaves. "We're not here to hurt you guys. We just want to know who you are, what you're doing!"

"That's why you asked about Deedee?"

He looked and saw a woman standing a few feet away. By the shape of her body he could tell it was the lady who'd spoke to them higher on the mountain.

Mark was incredulous at her lack of emotion. "So it *was* you who left her. Why? And why are we prisoners now? We just want some answers!"

Alec suddenly burst into a flurry of movement, grabbing the rope and pulling it as he leapt to his feet. It came loose from the men holding it and Alec jumped at them, hurtling forward with his shoulder out like a battering ram. He slammed into the side of one of the men, tackling him to the ground. They landed with a heavy thump and Alec punched away, landing a couple of shots before two other men were on him, jerking him off the guy's body. Another one came in as well, and between the three of them they were able to throw Alec on his back, pin his arms and legs down. The guy he'd tackled scrambled to his feet and came at the old man, kicked him in the ribs three times in a row.

"Stop it!" Mark yelled. "Stop it!"

He jerked on his own rope and started to get up, but the boot came back, slamming him into the dirt once again.

"Do not, I repeat, do not move again," his captor said, once more using that flat monotone.

The others were still punching and kicking Alec, but the former soldier refused to give in, struggling to fight back despite his odds.

"Alec," Mark pleaded. "You need to stop or they're really going to kill you. What good will you be to us if you're dead?"

The words finally got through the man's thick, stubborn skull. He stilled, then slowly curled into a ball, his face set in a fierce grimace of pain.

Almost shaking with rage, Mark turned his attention back to the woman, who was just standing there, watching it all with that maddening lack of emotion.

"Who are you people?" he asked. It was all he could get out, but he tried to inject as much anger as he could into the words.

The woman stared at him for a few seconds before answering. "You are unwelcome intruders. And now you'll tell me about Deedee. Is the girl with you? At your camp somewhere?"

"Why do you care? You left her behind! What, are you scared she's going to sneak into your camp and make you all sick? She's *fine*. There's nothing wrong with her!"

"We have our reasons," the woman replied. "The spirits speak and we follow their orders. Since the rain of demons from the sky, we've left our village, seeking holier places. Many of our people broke away, refused to join us. They're out there somewhere, probably scheming with the demons themselves. Perhaps you are a spy for them."

Mark couldn't believe the absurd words coming out of this lady's mouth. "You'd leave a sweet little girl to die because she *might* be sick? No wonder the other people from your village didn't stick with you."

The woman looked genuinely confused. "Listen, boy. The others are much more dangerous than we are—they attack without warning, kill without conscience. The world is beset with evil in many forms. And we can take no risks, especially since you invoked the name of Deedee. You are prisoners, and you'll be dealt with. To release you would risk alerting those who wish us harm."

Mark stared at her, his mind spinning. He had a sudden feeling of foreboding. The more this woman spoke, the more he felt it. "Deedee told us that the darts came from the sky. We saw the dead bodies in your little settlement. The same thing happened to us. All we're trying to do is find out *why*."

"That girl *brought* the evil upon us. Her evil ways led to it. Why do you think we left her behind? If you've rescued her and brought her near to us, then you've done something more horrible than you could dream."

"What is this load of horse crap?" Alec finally choked out. "We've got bigger problems than *you* can dream, lady."

"You need to let us go," Mark quickly added before Alec could say anything more. The man might have been the toughest guy in their group, but he was the last choice to be a negotiator. "We're just trying to find a safe place to live. Please. I promise we'll just walk away. We won't tell anyone about you and we won't bring Deedee anywhere close if you don't want us to. We can take care of her."

"It saddens me how little you grasp," the woman responded. "Truly."

Mark wanted to scream but forced himself to stay composed. "Look, let's take turns explaining things to each other, then. Would that be fair? I *want* to understand. And I really, really need you to understand us. Can you just talk instead of treating us like animals?" When she didn't respond, he grasped for something to keep the conversation going. "So ... how about we start from the beginning? How we got to these mountains."

She had a wide, vacant look in her eyes now. "I always believed that the demons would try to be nice when they came for us. You tricked us into bringing you down here, tying you up. So you could be nice and trick us again. Demons. All of you." She gave a stiff nod to one of the men standing near Mark and Alec.

The man drew his foot back and kicked Mark in the ribs. Pain exploded in his side and he cried out, unable to help himself. The man kicked him again, this time in the back, right in the kidney. A deep ache washed through Mark, and tears stung his eyes as he cried out even louder.

Alec protested. "Stop it, you sorry son of a—" His words were cut off when one of his captors reached down and punched him in the face.

"Why are you doing this?" Mark yelled. "We're not demons! You people have lost your minds!" Another kick pierced him in the ribs, the pain unbearable. He balled up, wrapped his arms around himself. Prepared for the continued onslaught, knowing he had no chance of escape.

"Stop."

The word rumbled through the air from the other side of the fire, the deep, bellowing voice of a man. The men beating Mark and Alec immediately jumped back from them and knelt down, their faces lowered. The woman also got to her knees and looked at the ground.

Mark, still wincing from the pain, straightened out his legs, trying to see who had spoken the simple but effective command. He caught movement through the flames and followed it as a man stepped into view and approached him. When he was within a few feet, he stopped, and Mark's eyes traced a path from his booted feet, up his denim-clad legs, his tight plaid shirt, to his face, which was hideously scarred, almost inhuman. It made Mark want to look away, but he didn't let himself. He matched gazes with the disfigured stranger, staring into those piercing, wounded eyes.

The man had no hair. And he had no ears.

CHAPTER 25

"My name is Jedidiah," the man said. His lips were yellow and malformed, twisted to one side. He had a strange lisp, and there was a ... *tonelessness* to his voice. "But my followers call me Jed. You will call me Jed, because I can see that you've been mistreated and you are now my friends. Is this understood?"

Mark nodded, but all Alec did was grunt something unintelligible. Defiant to the end, the old soldier had sat up when their attackers had ordered the two of them to lie on their backs. But the men who'd been beating them just moments earlier were all kneeling as if in prayer. Mark sat up, too, hoping there would be no consequence. If anything, Jed looked pleased.

"Very good," the man said. "It looks like we're finally making some kind of peace." He walked over and sat down between them and the fire, the flames at his back. Their flickering light made the outline of his head appear wet and glistening, almost as if it were melting all over again. Melting. That was what Mark had concluded had happened to the poor guy.

"Did the sun flares do that to you?" he asked.

Jed chuckled for a few seconds, but there was nothing pleasant or cheerful about the sound. More like disturbing. "It always tickles my funny bone when someone refers to the demon plague that way. When it occurred, yes, I thought it was merely a celestial event that happened to take place in Earth's path. *Coincidence. Misfortune. Bad luck.* Those are words that went through my head at the time."

"And now you think it was big bad demons raining from the sky?" Alec asked, his tone making it clear what a crackpot idea he thought it was. Mark shot him a glance and felt awful. Blood covered the man's face, and welts and bruises had already appeared from the brutal beating he'd been given.

"It's happened twice now," Jed replied, showing no sign that he'd noticed Alec's sarcasm. "Both times it came from the heavens—once from the sun, once from the ships. We think they may visit annually, to punish us for becoming lax and to remind us of what we need to become."

"Twice ... sun and ships," Mark repeated. "So the sun flares and then the darts from the Berg?"

Jed's head snapped right and left, then focused on Mark again. *What in the world?*

"Yes, twice," the man said as if what he'd just done was totally normal. "And again, it both saddens and humors me that you don't see the importance of the events. It means your mind hasn't evolved yet to be able to see them for what they really are."

"Demons," Mark said, almost rolling his eyes before he stopped himself just in time.

"Demons. Yes, demons. They burned my face, melted it into what you see today. That way I can never forget my calling. And then came the little arrows from the ships, filled with their hatred. It's been two months now, and we still mourn those who lost their lives that day. It's why we build the fires and sing the songs and dance the dance. And we fear those from our village who decided not to join us. They work with the demons,

undoubtedly.”

“Wait, two months?” Alec asked. “What do you mean, two months?”

“Yes,” Jed replied slowly, as if talking to a confused child. “We count the days solemnly, every one. It’s been two months and three days.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Mark said. “It couldn’t have been that long. It happened to us just a few days ago.”

“I don’t like it … when people doubt my words,” Jed said, his tone changing drastically in the middle of his sentence. It suddenly turned threatening. “How can you sit there and accuse me of lying? Why would I lie about such a thing? I’ve tried to make peace with you, give you a second chance in this life, and this is how you repay me?” His voice had risen in volume with every passing word until he was shouting, his body trembling. “It … it makes my head hurt.”

Mark could tell Alec was about to explode, so he quickly reached over and squeezed his arm. “Don’t,” he whispered. “Just don’t.” Then he returned his attention to Jed. “No, listen, please. It’s not like that. We just want to understand. Our village had the … arrows from the ships rain down on us less than a week ago. So we assumed the same about you. And … you said that people died the day it happened. We saw bodies of people who seemed to have died more recently. Just help us understand.”

Mark had the feeling that there was some important information to be learned from these people. He didn’t think the man was lying about the time frame. There was something here.

Jed had raised his hands to place them where his ears should’ve been on his head and was slowly swaying from side to side. “People died right away. Then others later. More suffering as time passed. More dying. Our village split into factions. All the demons’ work.” He started moaning, almost chanting.

“We believe you,” Mark said. “We just want to understand. Please just talk to us, tell us what happened, step by step.” He tried to keep the frustration out of his voice, but he couldn’t. How was he supposed to do this?

“You’ve made the pain come back,” Jed said tightly, still swaying. His arms were rigid, his elbows sticking straight out as he continued to hold his head in his hands. It looked as if he were trying to crush his own skull. “It hurts so much. I can’t … I have to … You must be from the demons. It’s the only explanation.”

Mark knew his time was running out. “We’re not, I swear. We’re here because we want to learn from you. Maybe your head is hurting because … you have knowledge that you’re supposed to share with us.”

Alec dropped his head forward.

“They came two months ago,” Jed said, his voice distant somehow. “And then the death has come in waves. Taking longer each time. Two days. Five days. Two weeks. A month. And we have people from our own village—people we once called friends—trying to kill us. We don’t understand what the demons want. We don’t understand. We … don’t … understand. We dance, we sing, we make sacrifices....”

He fell to his knees, then collapsed to the ground, still pressing his hands against his head. He let out a long, pain-filled moan.

Mark had reached the end of his patience. This was complete lunacy as far as he was

concerned, and there was no way to deal with it rationally. He looked over at Alec, and he could tell by the fire in the man's eyes that he was ready to take another shot at escape. Their captors were still kneeling, faces lowered in some kind of sick worship of the man writhing in pain. It was now or never.

Mark was just about to consider his next move, trying to focus over the moans and groans coming from Jed, when new sounds arose in the woods behind them. People yelling and screaming, laughing. Making birdcalls and other animal noises. Accompanied by the crunch of footsteps on the dry undergrowth of the forest, the creepy sounds continued, getting louder as the people got closer. Then, more alarmingly, the noises spread in a circle around the clearing of the bonfire until it was completely surrounded by a chorus of caws and cuckoos and roars and hysterical laughter. There had to be several dozen people making the noises.

"What now?" Alec said with clear disgust.

"We warned you about them," the woman said from where she knelt. "They used to be our friends, our family. Now the demons have taken them and all they want is to torment us, to kill us."

Jed suddenly reared up on his knees again, screaming at the top of his lungs. Violently, he jerked his head down, then left and right, as if he were trying to knock something loose from his skull. Mark couldn't help but scoot backward, crab-walking until the rope around his neck grew taut. The other end was still in the hands of one of the kneeling men.

Jed let out a piercing, horrific sound that cut off all the new ones coming from the forest around them.

"They've killed me!" he yelled, the words ripping from his throat. "The demons ... finally ... killed me!"

His body went rigid, his arms stiff at his sides, and he fell over, a last breath rushing from his mouth. His body stilled, and blood began to seep from his nose and mouth.

Mark was completely frozen, staring at Jed's body lying in an unnatural twisted position. In all his life, Mark was pretty sure he'd never endured such a strange hour as he had since arriving at this camp of madness. And as if it couldn't have gotten any stranger, now crazy people surrounded them out in the woods, making animal sounds and laughing hysterically.

Mark slowly looked over at Alec. The man was stunned into silence, motionless as he stared at Jed.

The movement and noises in the woods continued. Catcalls and whistles and cheering and hooting. The cricks and cracks of footsteps.

The men who'd been kneeling—and before that beating up Mark and Alec—stood up, looking at their ropes as if they weren't quite sure what to do with them. They glanced at their prisoners, then at each other, then back at the ropes. The two lines of singers behind them were doing much the same, searching about like someone should be telling them how to react. It was as if Jed had been some kind of link they all shared, and now that it had been severed, his followers were confused and unable to function.

Alec acted first, clearly wanting to take advantage of the situation. He began fumbling with the rope tied around his neck, finally getting his fingers underneath it enough to work it loose. Mark was scared that would snap the men out of their dazed state and cause them to retaliate, but they actually dropped their ends of the ropes in response. Mark immediately followed Alec's example and worked at his own noose, finally getting it loose. He pulled it up and around his head until he was free, just as Alec was slamming his to the ground.

"Let's get out of this place," the older man grumbled.

"But what about their friends out there?" Mark asked. "They have us surrounded."

He let out a big sigh. "Come on. We'll just have to fight our way through if they try to stop us. Leave them to these yahoos."

The woman who'd first spoken to them came over, her gait hurried and her face filled with worry. "All we've done is try to keep the demons at bay. Nothing more. And look how you've ruined our efforts. How could you lead our enemies here?"

She winced after saying it and stumbled a step backward, holding a hand up to her temple. "How could you?" she whispered.

"I'm really sorry," Alec grumbled as he stepped around her and moved toward the fire. There was a long piece of wood that was half in and half out of the roaring flames. He picked up the unburnt side and held the thing up like a torch. "This ought to make 'em think twice before they try anything. Come on, kid."

Mark looked back at the woman, who was obviously experiencing head pain, and things began to click into place.

"I said come on!" Alec yelled at him.

In that moment, dozens of people came tearing out of the surrounding woods with fists raised in the air, yelling. There were women and men and children, all with the same crazed expression of rage mixed with glee. Mark—sure he'd never seen anything like it—

sprang into action, following Alec's lead and grabbing a log out of the fire. Flames erupted from its tip as he swung it through the air, and he held it in front of him like a sword.

The wave of attackers crashed into the rows of singers, jumping on them with animalistic cries of battle. Two men leaped into the air and straight into the bonfire. As Mark watched in horror, their clothes and hair ignited. Screams tore from their throats as they stumbled out of the flames, but it was too late. Engulfed and burning alive, they ran out into the woods, sure to set the whole forest on fire. Mark turned back to the chanting villagers. They were being beaten and choked, he was surrounded by chaos—it was too much to take in.

"Mark!" Alec screamed from nearby. "Not sure if you noticed, but we're being attacked!"

"Please," a woman cried behind Mark, "take me with you."

He whipped around to see the lady who'd ordered them beaten, and almost burned her with the end of his torch. She seemed transformed, meek. But before he could respond they were suddenly in the middle of what seemed like a thousand-person fistfight. Mark was pushed and shoved. To his surprise, he realized that it wasn't just the new people versus the old. Many of the attackers were actually pummeling each other—he saw a woman fall into the fire, her screams filling the air.

Someone grabbed Mark by the shirt and yanked him to the side. He was just about to rear back with his weapon when he realized it was Alec.

"You have a knack for trying to get yourself killed!" the man yelled.

"I didn't know where to start or what to do!" Mark countered.

"Sometimes you just act!" He let go of Mark's shirt and they took off in the same direction—up the slope, away from the fire. But there were people all around them.

Mark swung his torch in front of him as he ran. But then someone tackled him from behind; he dropped the burning log and landed facefirst in the dirt. An instant later he heard a thump and a cry of pain and the body flew off of him. He looked up to see Alec bringing his foot down from a kick.

"Get up!" the man yelled. But the last word had barely come out of his mouth when he was slammed to the ground by a man and a woman.

Mark scrambled to his feet, grabbed the torch he'd dropped, ran to where Alec was struggling with his two attackers. He drove the burning point into the back of the man's neck—the guy screamed and grabbed his throat, falling off Alec. Then Mark hauled the log back and swung it as hard as he could, connecting with the side of the woman's head. All Mark could hear was fire burning as she toppled off Alec.

Mark reached down, grabbed Alec's hand, helped him to his feet.

More people rushed in on them. At least five or six.

Mark whipped his log around, forgetting all control and just handing himself over to instinct and adrenaline. He smacked a man, then pulled his weapon back around and hit a woman right in the nose. He drove it forward at a man coming straight for him, thrust its tip into his stomach and watched as his clothes ignited.

Alec was next to Mark. He was punching and kicking and elbowing and picking people up, tossing them away like bags of garbage. At some point he'd lost the torch he'd grabbed, too busy using both hands to fight off the attackers. The man was every bit the soldier he'd once been.

An arm slipped around Mark's neck from behind and yanked him off his feet, started squeezing the breath out of him. Mark gripped the log in both hands, then hammered it backward in desperation. He missed, pulled it back, then tried again, swinging it with every bit of strength he could muster while the oxygen rushed from his lungs. He felt the solid blow as he connected, heard the crunch of cartilage and the man's scream. Sweet air rushed into his chest as the arm loosened its grip.

Mark fell to the ground, sucking the life back into his lungs. Alec was bent over to catch his own breath. They had a slight reprieve, but one look showed that more people were coming their way.

Alec helped Mark to his feet. They turned up slope and half crawled, half climbed into the thicker cover of the trees. Mark heard the cries of pursuit behind them—these people didn't want anyone escaping. He and Alec hit a spot that was a little flatter and burst into an all-out sprint. And that was when Mark spotted it, about a hundred yards ahead of them.

A huge section of the forest was engulfed in flames.

Between them and their camp. Where they'd left Trina, Lana and Deedee.

CHAPTER 27

The trees and shrubbery of the woods were already half dead—a tinderbox ready to light up. It had been a few weeks since the last torrential storm, and anything that had regrown since the flares was parched. Misty tendrils of smoke bled along the ground at their feet, and the smell of burning wood laced the air.

“It’s gonna spread like wildfire,” Alec shouted.

Mark thought he was joking, but the man looked grave. “It *is* a wildfire!” he shouted back.

But Alec had already started running straight toward the distant flames, which seemed to have grown in the moments since it had begun. Mark set off after him, knowing they had to make it to the other side of the inferno before it got too big—they had to get to Trina and Deedee and Lana. The two of them tore through the undergrowth, kicking past thick briars, dodging trees and low-hanging limbs. The sound of pursuit still rang out from behind, but it had lessened, as if even their deranged pursuers understood it was crazy to head *into* a forest fire. But Mark could hear lingering catcalls and whistles haunting the woods.

He ran on, throwing all of his focus into making it back to Trina.

The fire got closer, crackling and spitting and roaring. A wind had picked up, fanning the flames; a huge branch toppled from far above and crashed through the canopy, throwing sparks everywhere until it finally hit the ground. Alec continued to head for the heart of the blazing section of woods, not slowing down, as if his one final goal was to run to a fiery death and end it all.

“Shouldn’t we veer off?” Mark shouted up to him. “Where are you going?”

Alec answered without turning back and Mark had to strain to hear him. “I want to be as close as possible! Run along its edges so we know exactly where we are! And maybe lose those psychos while we’re at it!”

“Do you know exactly where we are?” Mark was moving as quickly as he could, but the soldier still stayed ahead of him.

“Yes” came the curt reply. But he pulled out his compass and looked at it as he ran.

The smoke had grown thicker, making it hard to breathe. The fire took up Mark’s entire field of vision now, the flames close and high and illuminating the night. The heat surged out in waves, washing across Mark’s face only to be sucked away by the wind gusting from behind him.

But as they got closer, now only a few dozen feet away, the waves didn’t matter anymore. The temperature had skyrocketed; Mark was drenched in sweat and was so hot it felt as if his skin might melt. Just when he thought Alec might’ve lost his marbles after all, the man suddenly made a sharp turn to the right, running parallel to the expanding line of flames. Mark stayed as close to him as he could, putting his life in the former soldier’s hands for the umpteenth time since they’d met in the subtrans tunnels.

Intense heat pulsed across his body as he ran; sweltering wind from the left, cooler air from the right. His clothes were so hot against his skin, they felt as if they might combust

at any second even though they were drenched in sweat. His hair was dry, though, any moisture sucked away by the searing air. He imagined the follicles on the cusp of drying out and falling to the ground like pine needles. And his eyes. They felt as if they were being baked in their sockets; he squinted and rubbed them, tried to force tears, but there was nothing.

He ran on, mimicking Alec with every step, hoping they'd round the fire and break away from it before he died of thirst and heat exhaustion. The sound of the flames was the only thing he heard now, a constant roar like the ignited thrusters of a thousand Bergs.

Suddenly, a woman came tearing through the woods from the right just ahead, the fire a glint in the madness of her eyes. Mark prepared himself for a fight, expecting the woman to turn and attack them. But she ran across their path in front of Alec—if she'd been a little slower he would've plowed right over her body. The woman ran, silent and determined, her feet crashing through the undergrowth. She tripped and fell, got back up. And then she disappeared in the wall of flames and her screams cut short.

Alec and Mark kept running.

Finally they reached the edge of the expanding inferno, the line of it far more distinct than Mark would've expected. They kept the same distance, but it felt good, sent a burst of fresh adrenaline through his body, to be turning toward the left, turning toward Trina and the others again. Mark ran even harder, almost tripped Alec's feet up when he caught up to him. Then they were side by side.

Every breath was a chore for Mark. The air scalded his throat as it went down, and the smoke was like poison. “We’ve gotta … get away … from this thing.”

“I know!” Alec shouted back, bursting into a long fit of coughing. He quickly glanced at the compass gripped in the palm of his hand. “Almost … there.”

Soon they rounded another corner of the main body of flames, and this time Alec veered to the right, heading away from the fire. Mark followed, realizing that he was completely disoriented now. He didn’t think it was time to head straight again, but he trusted the old man. They tramped through the woods with renewed energy, going faster than ever. Mark could feel the fresher air with every breath he sucked into his lungs. The volume of the inferno’s roar also died down enough that he could hear the crunching sounds of his footsteps again.

Alec stopped suddenly.

Mark ran past him a few steps before he could do the same. He turned to Alec and asked if he was okay.

The man was leaning against a tree, his chest heaving as he took in short bursts of breath. He nodded, then buried his head in the crook of his arm with a loud groan.

Mark bent over, hands on his knees, relishing the chance to rest. The wind had died down and the fire seemed at a somewhat safe distance now. “Man, you had me worried there for a while. I’m not sure that was the brightest thing ever to run so close to a raging inferno.”

Alec looked over at him, but his face was mostly hidden in shadow. “You’re probably right. But it’s easy to get turned around in a place like this at night. I was dead set on keeping the path we’d followed straight in my head.” He checked his compass, then pointed at a spot over Mark’s shoulder. “Our little camp is that way.”

Mark looked around and saw nothing that distinguished that part of the woods. "How do you know? All I see is a bunch of trees."

"Just because I know."

Strange noises filled the night, mixed in with the steady roar of the fire. Screams and laughter. It was impossible to tell which direction they were coming from.

"Looks like those crazy buggers are still runnin' around looking for trouble," Alec said through a groan.

"Crazy buggers is right—I was hoping they'd all die in the fire." Mark said it before realizing how terrible it sounded. But the side of him that wanted to survive at all costs—that had become ruthless over the last year—knew it was the truth. He didn't want to have to worry about them anymore. He didn't want to spend the rest of the night and the next day looking over his shoulder.

"If wishes were fishes ...," Alec said. He took a deep, long breath. "Okay. We better hurry and meet back up with the three ladies."

They started jogging, a little slower than earlier, but not much. The return of those sounds, even though they didn't seem too close at the moment, obviously had them both on edge.

A few minutes later, Alec changed course, changed again. He stopped at one point, got his bearings, poked around a bit, then pointed down a slope.

"Ah," he said. "It's right down there."

They set off that way, slipping and sliding as the descent got steeper. The wind had shifted, blowing back toward the fire, filling their lungs with fresh air and easing that concern—at least temporarily. Mark had grown so used to the light from the flames that he'd failed to notice that dawn had crept up on them—the sky through the branches above him was now purple instead of black, and he could faintly see where he was going. The landscape grew familiar and suddenly they were back at the camp. Their things were still laid out exactly as they'd left them.

But there was no sign of Trina or the others.

A little seed of panic sprouted inside Mark's chest. "Trina!" he yelled. "Trina!"

He and Alec quickly combed the surrounding area, calling their friends' names as they did.

But all was quiet.

Mark could barely contain himself. Of all the crap they'd been through, at least he and Trina had never really been separated before. It had only taken ten minutes of her being missing for the most sinking feeling of helplessness to hit him.

"There's no way," he said to Alec as they searched in widening circles around the camp. He heard the desperation in his own voice. "There's no way they'd just march off while we were gone. Not without at least leaving us a note or something." He ran a hand through his hair, then yelled for no reason other than anger and frustration.

Alec was doing a much better job of keeping his cool. "Calm down, boy. You need to remember two things: One, Lana is as tough as I am and a whole lot smarter. And two, you're forgetting the details."

"What do you mean?" Mark asked.

"Yes, you're right, under normal circumstances they would've stayed here until we got back. But these circumstances aren't normal. There's a forest fire raging nearby and crazy people running through the woods making horror-movie noises. Would you just sit here and twiddle your thumbs?"

That didn't make Mark feel better at all. "So ... you think they went looking for us? What if we passed them on the way back here?" He squeezed his hands into fists and pressed them against his eyes. "They could be anywhere!"

Alec marched over to him and grabbed his shoulders. "Mark! What's come over you? Calm down, son!"

Mark dropped his hands and looked into Alec's eyes, which were hard and gray in the low light of dawn, but also filled with genuine concern. "I'm sorry. I'm just ... I'm freaking out, here. What're we going to do?"

"We're going to keep our wits about us and we're going to stay calm and we're going to think. And then we're going to go out there and find Lana and the others."

"They have a little girl with them," Mark said quietly. "What if somehow those people who attacked us got here first? Took them?"

"Then we'll get them back. But I need you to pull yourself together or that'll never happen. You got it?"

Mark closed his eyes and nodded, did his best to slow his racing heart and dampen the panic that flared in him. Alec would figure things out. He always did.

Mark finally looked at the soldier again. "Okay. I'm okay. Sorry."

"Good. That's better." Alec took a step back and studied the ground. "It's getting light enough now. We need to find any sign of what path they took—broken branches, footprints, cleared undergrowth, whatever. Start searching."

Mark did, desperate to get his mind occupied with something other than imagining every horrible scenario possible. The sounds of the fire and the occasional scream or laugh still floated through the air, but they seemed distant. At least for the moment.

He swept the area, carefully studying every spot before he dared take another step, his head swiveling up and down, side to side, like some kind of robotic scavenger unit. All they

needed was one major clue and then they could probably pick up the trail more easily. Mark felt an almost competitive vibe take over him—he wanted to be the one to find something first. He had to, to make himself feel better, to feel like they'd been set on a path to relieve his panicked thoughts.

He couldn't lose Trina. Not now.

Alec was working about twenty feet farther outside the camp, actually on his hands and knees and literally sniffing along like a dog. He looked ridiculous, but there was something about it that touched Mark. The old grizzly bear rarely showed the slightest hint of emotion—unless he was yelling or screaming or pounding on something ... or someone—but he often showed how much he genuinely cared. Mark had no doubt the man would give his life today if it meant saving one of their three missing friends. Could Mark say the same about himself?

Both Mark and Alec came across obvious signs of passage—broken twigs, shoe impressions in the dirt, shifted branches on trees or bushes—but each time they concluded that they'd been the ones who'd caused it. After a half hour or so, this made Mark realize that they were combing the area between the camp and the direction they'd gone last night. He stopped and stood up straight.

"Hey, Alec," he said.

The man was on his hands and knees, leaning his face into the middle of a bush; he grunted something that kind of sounded like a "Yeah?"

"Why are we spending so much time on this side of where we left them?"

Alec pulled himself out of the bush and looked back at him. "Seemed logical. I'd think they either followed us out of here to find us, or they were taken by the same yahoos who attacked us. Or ... maybe they went to investigate the fire."

Mark thought that was all barking up the wrong tree. "Or they ran away from the fire. Not every person on earth is as wacky-brained as you, good sir. Most people see a huge roaring inferno coming at them? They decide to cut and run. Just saying."

"No, I don't think so." Alec had shifted all his weight to his knees, stretching his back. "Lana's not a coward. She wouldn't save herself and leave us to die."

Mark was shaking his head before the soldier even finished. "You've gotta think this through. Lana has the same worship complex of you that *you* have of her. She'll think you are safe and taking care of yourself just fine and dandy. She'd also consider the circumstances top to bottom and decide the best course of action to take. Am I right or am I right?"

Alec shrugged, then glared at him. "So you think after all that, Lana would leave us to die at the hands of some crazies and run for her life?"

"She didn't know we were in the hands of people like that. We told her we were just going to take a look, remember? Then she probably heard more sounds, heard and saw the fire coming. I bet she went monster logic on us and decided she better run toward the Berg headquarters and that we'd decided the same thing. Rendezvous there. You did point out the general direction we needed to go."

Alec was nodding and grumbling, impossible to read.

"Not to mention that she has a civilian"—he made quotation marks in the air when he said that last word—"and a little girl who's probably terrified. I highly doubt Lana would

leave them alone to come after us or take the others closer to danger.”

Alec got to his feet and brushed the dirt off his knees. “Okay, boy, you can quit going on about it. You sold me. But ... what’s your point?” He had the slightest smile on his face, barely there. And Mark knew why. The bear was enjoying this—watching his pupil figure things out on his own.

Mark pointed to the other side of the camp, toward the spot Alec had identified the day before as the direction they needed to go. The headquarters of that Berg awaited. The place where they’d find the people who had ruined their lives once again.

“Like I said,” Alec spoke with an exaggerated sigh, “you sold me. Come on, let’s start looking over there.” He winked at Mark as he walked past but then gave him a scowl.

Mark laughed. “You are one strange little man.”

Alec stopped and faced him. “That’s what my mama used to say. She’d wake me up in the morning, give me a little kiss and a hug, and she’d say, ‘My sweet Alec. You are one strange little man.’ Got to me every time, right here.” He patted his heart, then rolled his eyes dramatically. “Let’s get to work.”

“See?” Mark said as he followed. “Do I need any more proof? Strange. Little. Man. Officially proven.”

“You got one word right. I’m definitely a man. I’m all man, baby.” He let out a strangled choking sound that might’ve been a laugh.

They stepped more carefully when they made it to the area Mark had indicated, and soon they were back at it, searching every square inch for a telltale sign of a trail. Mark paused to take in the sounds that had become background noise, barely there until you focused on it. The roaring, crackling, spitting forest fire, still safely distant but getting closer, and the occasional hoot or holler or laugh of their new unfriendly friends. Again, safely distant—though it was hard to tell where the sounds were coming from. The air had begun to look hazy from the smoke now that the sun was up to reveal it.

“Found something,” Alec announced. “Be careful!” he yelled when Mark tramped over to see for himself.

“Oh. Sorry.” He slowed down and crept over to stand next to the soldier.

Alec was on his knees, leaning back on his feet. He had a stick in his hand and used it as a pointer. “There’s about three bushes in a row that’ve been walked through, and by more than one person for sure. See the smashed part there, the broken branch there, the footsteps here and there.” He gestured at one nearby.

Mark leaned forward and saw it. Small. Just the right size for Deedee.

“There’s only one problem,” Alec continued, something heavy in his voice.

“What?” Mark asked quickly.

Alec used the stick to poke a spot—just above the ground where the others had passed—of leaves clumped together. Their shiny green faces had been sprayed with small drops of blood.

Mark didn't allow himself to have the same panic attack this time. But he went dead silent, his insides cold and his hands slicked with sweat. He imagined that his face was pale, too. But he forced himself to remain calm as Alec stood and slowly made his way along the trail they'd found.

With growing dismay Alec pointed out more spots of blood along the path. There wasn't much, but there was enough to see. "It's hard to say how serious an injury we're talking about. I've seen bloody noses spurt this much out, but I've also seen a guy with his arm blown off who hardly bled a drop. The explosion cauterized him right clean."

"Not ... helping," Mark muttered.

Alec shot a glance back at him. "Sorry, kid. I'm trying to say I don't think this is all bad news. Whoever's hurt might just have a bad cut. People have survived more blood loss than this many a time. If anything, maybe it'll help us keep on their trail."

Alec moved on again, his head swinging back and forth as he walked, taking it all in. Mark followed on his heels, trying hard not to look at the trail of blood. He just couldn't. Not until his nerves settled a bit. He hoped this wasn't some kind of wild-goose chase or, worse, a trap.

"Anything else that lets us know it's definitely Trina and them?" he asked.

Alec stopped and leaned far down to examine some dirt next to a trampled bush. "Based on the pattern, I'd say it's our pretty little group that came through here—I can see their footsteps well enough. And ..." He flicked a nervous glance backward.

"And what?"

"Well ... I haven't seen Deedee's in a while, so my guess is that someone started carrying the poor thing back there." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder.

"So maybe she's the one who got hurt," Mark concluded, the thought of it making his stomach fall. "Maybe ... maybe she just fell and skinned a knee or something."

"Yeah," Alec replied numbly. "But the other thing is ..."

Mark had never seen the man so hesitant to speak before. "Would you just spit it out, man? What's going on?"

"When they came through here," Alec said quietly, seemingly oblivious to Mark's rebuke, "they were definitely running. And running pell-mell. All the signs add up. The length of their strides, the smashed bushes, the broken shrubbery and branches." He met Mark's eyes. "Like they were being chased."

That gave Mark a lump in the back of his throat, until he remembered something. "But you just said you could only see three sets of footprints. Is there any sign that somebody might've been going after them?"

Alec looked up, then pointed. "Things fly around these parts, remember?"

As if they needed one more thing to worry about. "Don't you think we would've heard if a Berg came swooping in and chased our friends down the mountain?"

"In the middle of what we just got done with? Maybe not. Might've been something besides a Berg, anyway."

Mark gave another weary glance upward. "Let's just keep moving."

The two of them followed the path, Mark hoping the whole time they didn't find more blood. Or worse.

* * *

The signs of Trina, Lana and Deedee's passage continued into a long, low ravine that made its way toward an almost hidden canyon. Mark hadn't noticed the walls of the mountains to their sides getting taller, and the slope was gradual enough that he didn't really feel like they were descending very quickly. Especially being surrounded by the woods and spending most of his time studying the land for clues and traces of their friends. But one minute they were traveling along through a thick copse of trees and the next they came out into a wide clearing bordered by canyon walls of gray granite. They were so steep that only a little vegetation grew in small clumps here and there.

Alec pulled out his handwritten map and stopped. "We're here." He made Mark step back and hid the two of them behind the large trunk of an oak.

"Really?"

"Almost certain this valley is where that Berg returned after every trip."

Mark peeked around the tree and examined the tall, foreboding walls. "A little dangerous to fly down into this place, don'tcha think?"

"Maybe, but also perfect to hide yourself. There has to be a landing zone somewhere close, and an entrance to wherever they call home. I still think it might be an old government bunker. Especially being this close to Asheville—the city is just on the other side of this canyon."

"Yeah." Something was troubling Mark. "So ... what're the odds that Lana and them would get chased this far? I'm really worried they got taken."

"Maybe not. Lana knows that wandering around the mountains looking for us wouldn't amount to a hill of beans. Better to make a beeline for the one spot that's most obviously a rendezvous point. Here."

"Then where are they?"

Alec didn't answer—something had caught his attention out in the clearing.

"We might both be right," he finally whispered. His gravelly voice sounded ominous.

"What is it?"

"Stay low and follow me."

Alec got on his hands and knees and crawled out from around the tree, keeping under the line of shrubs and bushes. Mark did the same and followed him out into the clearing, certain that a Berg was going to come barreling in with dart guns over their heads any second. They kept to the barely discernible path where Mark assumed Trina and the others had walked. At first he had thought that maybe the Bergs landed in the clearing, but there was no sign of such a spot whatsoever—the vegetation had grown pretty thick.

Alec hacked his way through it for about thirty feet, then stopped. Mark poked his head around the man and saw that there was a large spot where the bushes had been trampled and crushed. An obvious sign of struggle. His heart dropped.

"Oh, no" was all he could get out.

Alec's head hung low. He shifted to crouch even lower. "You were right. Somebody took

them here, no doubt. Look—the bushes are beat to death on the other side. Like twenty people marched across it.”

Mark had to push down the panic again. “So what do we do? Go back and hide or go after them?”

“Not so loud, kid. Or they’re gonna be on top of us, too.”

“Let’s just go back,” Mark whispered. “Regroup, decide what to do.” He had the urge to chase after the trail, but his wiser side told him they needed to think it through first.

“We don’t have time to—”

A loud clanging sound cut the man off, a metallic bang that shot through the air like a cannon. Mark dropped to his stomach, half expecting the canyon walls to come crashing down on top of him.

“What was that?” he asked.

But before Alec could answer the sound came again. A quick, earsplitting boom that shook the ground, which continued to tremble even after the noise ceased, vibrating so much that the bushes around them danced. Mark and Alec met each other’s gaze, not sure what was going on.

The noise rocked the air yet again, and the land beneath them suddenly started to rise toward the sky.

CHAPTER 30

Mark jumped to his feet, pulling Alec's arm. The entire area around them shook as it rose, and it took all of Mark's effort not to fall again. He knew that what was happening had to be impossible, and it made him wonder about his mental state. But the ground at their feet was slowly rising, tilting as it did so. He looked around frantically, so dumbfounded and confused he didn't know what to do. Alec seemed to be in the same stupor. Mark snapped out of it first.

His mind cleared and he noticed several things at once.

First, it wasn't like the entire valley was vaulting toward the sky because of an earthquake or massive shifting of the earth's crust. It was only a small area—the clearing where they stood. The trees surrounding them were still and calm, the branches not so much as swaying with a wind. Second, the slow—but steadily increasing—tilt of the moving land made him realize that half of it was actually sinking *into* the ground. And the whole thing looked to be in the shape of a circle. Third, there was a low, metallic grinding sound.

"It's man-made!" he yelled, already on the run with Alec. "Swinging open on some kind of pivot!"

Alec nodded briskly and picked up the pace—they were both running sideways to the angle of the slope, aiming to make it to a spot where they could jump off the shifting disk of land. It was moving slowly enough that the initial burst of panic left Mark and was replaced by curiosity. They were obviously standing on some sort of massive trapdoor. But why was it so ...

He and Alec ran the last few steps, reaching the side of the rotating section of ground at the point of the pivot, only having to jump a couple of feet to safety. They scrambled away to the line of trees and dropped down, slipping behind the same large oak as before for cover. Mark poked his head out to watch the continuation of the spectacle. The upper edge of the circular cutout was now thirty feet in the air, the lower edge fully sunk into the ground and out of sight. It kept rotating to the grind of the laboring gears, which sounded louder now.

"Looks like a coin flipping," Alec muttered.

"A really big one. Flipping really slowly," Mark agreed.

Within another minute or so the round piece of land was exactly vertical, half in the ground and half out, still rotating. Soon the earth and bushes were descending upside down and Mark could finally see what lay on the opposite side of the coin: a flat, gray, concrete-like surface with small grooves cut across it in perfectly straight lines. It wouldn't be long before the large circle rested flat on the valley floor, facing the sky and waiting for something to land on it. Hooks and chains were scattered across the circle of gray for securing whatever did land.

A landing spot, Mark thought. A landing spot for the Berg. Or Bergs.

"Why aren't the dirt and plants sliding off the other side?" he asked. "Looks like magic."

"Probably fake as a rubber glove," answered the soldier. "Wouldn't do if they had to come out and resod the whole thing every time they used it, now, would it?"

"It sure looks real. Or did." He watched in fascination. The piece of moving land had to be a couple of hundred feet across. "Do you think they saw us? Surely they have cameras out here."

Alec shrugged. "You'd think so. All we can do is hope they're not looking real hard."

The coin of land was now at a forty-five-degree angle, and within minutes of completely sealing the hole in the earth. Mark wondered if Alec was thinking the same thing he was.

"Should we do it?" he asked him. "A Berg might be landing any second—this is our chance."

At first the man seemed surprised, as if Mark had read his mind. Then a knowing grin crept across his face. "It might be the only way to get inside, eh?"

"Maybe. It's now or never."

"Cameras and guards? It's a big risk."

"But they have our friends."

Alec nodded slowly. "Said like a true soldier."

"Let's go, then."

Mark got to his feet but stayed crouched down, leaning against the tree as he snuck out from behind it. He had to move before he changed his mind, and he knew Alec would be right on his heels. There was still about a fifteen-foot open space between the edges of the moving disk and the real land that surrounded it. After a deep breath to psych himself up, Mark sprinted for the left side, wondering if shots would ring out or soldiers would rise out of the darkness in the gap, waiting for them. But nothing happened.

They reached the side of the circle. Mark stopped and dropped to his knees a few feet away, then crawled forward to peek over the edge. Alec did the same, the two of them leaning over the opening. It gave Mark a sick feeling, knowing the descending piece of land was right above him. If it suddenly dropped the last bit without warning, it'd cut them both in two.

It was dark down below, but Mark could see a walkway made of silvery metal—mostly hidden in shadow—that encircled the huge space underneath. There was no light source and no sign of people. He glanced up and was alarmed at how close the leading edge of the circle had come. They had a couple of minutes, tops.

"We need to hang our feet down and swing onto that," Mark said, pointing at the walkway—a metal ledge. "Think you can do that?" he added with a grin.

Alec was already on the move. "A lot better than you, kid," he answered with a wink.

Mark rolled onto his stomach and inched his body over the lip of the opening, lowering his feet into the abyss while he held on to the edge. He gripped the edge of the rim tightly, then began to swing his legs. Alec was two steps ahead of him. The man let go, flying forward to land on the walkway; he crumpled to the ground with a grunt but looked okay. Mark fought off the thought that tried to lodge itself in his mind—of him missing or landing awkwardly, tumbling off to disappear into the darkness. He counted to three in his mind, timing it just right with his legs swinging backward, then letting go as they swung forward.

His momentum made his gaze shift up when he let go, and he caught a last glimpse through the small crescent gap. He saw the flaming blue thrusters of a Berg and its metal underbelly coming down from the sky above. Then he lost the view and crashed on top of Alec.

CHAPTER 31

It took a moment for them to untangle their arms and legs. Alec was cursing and grunting, and at one point Mark started to slip off the edge and the old man pulled him back up, only to resume his cursing. Finally they were standing, straightening their clothes. And then a huge boom sounded throughout the chamber as the mechanism above them slammed shut. Complete darkness enveloped them.

"Great," Mark heard Alec say. "Can't see a thing."

"Pull out the workpad," Mark replied. "I know the battery's almost dead, but we don't have much choice."

After a grumble of agreement and a scuffling sound, the room lit up with the glow of the workpad's surface. For a second Mark was back in the tunnels of the subtrans, running with Trina by the glow of his phone. The memories began to flood in, to drown him fully in the horror of that day, but he pushed them away. He had a feeling that the next day or two might do enough to provide him with fresh ones anyway. Sighing, he wondered if he'd ever have a good night's sleep again.

"I saw a Berg dropping in at the last second before I swung down," Mark said, bringing his mind fully to the present and the task at hand. "So we know they had at least two before we crashed one of them."

Alec was shining the face of the workpad in different directions, scoping out the area. "Yeah, I could hear those thrusters. I'm guessing that the landing pad sinks down here and the Berg rolls off, then it goes back and up and rotates again. We better hurry before we have company we don't want."

Alec stopped moving the workpad, holding it up to illuminate the entrances to two chambers on opposite sides of the one in which they stood. Grooves in the floor showed where the Bergs were pulled off the landing pad once it sank down. Both cavernous spaces were dark and empty.

The walkway that encircled the abyss in the center chamber was about four feet wide, and as they inched along, it creaked and groaned. The structure held, though Mark's heart didn't slow until he'd crossed it completely. Breathing a sigh of relief, Mark walked up to a round door with a wheel handle in the middle, like something in a submarine.

"This place was built a long time ago," Alec said as he handed the workpad over to Mark. "Probably to protect government executives in case of a world catastrophe. Too bad no one had enough time to make it here—I'm sure most of them fried like the rest."

"Nice," Mark said, holding the workpad up so he could examine the door. "You think it's locked?"

Alec had already stepped forward and grabbed the wheel tightly with both hands, preparing as though it wouldn't budge. But when he gave it a try it spun a half circle easily, sending him lurching to the side and crashing into Mark. The two of them stumbled and fell onto the walkway, Mark on top.

"Kid," Alec said. "I've been closer to you more today than I'd hoped to be in a lifetime. Now make sure you don't fall off the edge—I need your help around here."

Mark laughed as he got to his feet, pushing off on Alec's gut a little more than he really needed to. "It's a crying shame you never had kids, old man. Just think what a good grandpa you could've been."

"Oh yeah," the former soldier replied through a grunt as he stood up. "That would've been a lot of fun imagining them all burning to death when the flares struck."

That killed the mood instantly. Mark felt his own face fall as the words made him think of his parents and Madison. Though he'd never know for sure what had happened to them, his mind was super talented at imagining the absolute worst.

Alec must have noticed. "Oh hell, I'm sorry." He reached out and squeezed Mark's shoulder. "Boy, I'm telling you right here and now, with all the sincerity an old buzzard like me can muster, that I'm sorry for what I just said. I don't envy the losses you felt that day. Not one iota. Work was my family, and it wasn't the same, I know it."

Mark had never heard the man say anything like what'd just come out of his mouth. "It's okay. Really. Thanks." He paused, then added, "Grandpa."

Alec nodded, then moved back to the wheel, spun it until there was a loud click. He swung the door open, and it clanged as it struck the wall.

The other side revealed nothing but darkness, though a rumbling hum like the sound of distant machinery grew louder.

"What is that?" Mark whispered. "It almost sounds like there's a factory or something down here." He aimed the workpad's glow through the open doorway, revealing a long hallway that disappeared into darkness.

"Generator, I'm sure," Alec responded.

"I guess they couldn't live down here without at least a little electricity. How else would this thing work?" He held the device out in front of him.

"Exactly. We've been living in the wild or in the settlements so long. It brings back memories."

"Bergs, generators ... you think they have a ton of fuel stored here or are they bringing it in from somewhere else?"

Alec thought a second. "Well, it's been a year, and it takes a heap to keep those Bergs afloat. My guess is they're bringing it in."

"We keep going?" Mark asked, though the answer was obvious.

"Yep."

Mark stepped into the hallway first and waited for Alec to join him. "What do we do when someone sees us?" He was whispering, but his voice sounded loud in the confined quarters. "We could use a weapon or two about now."

"Tell me about it. Look, we don't have much choice here. And we don't have a whole lot to lose. Let's just keep moving and take it as it comes."

They started off down the hallway when something clanged behind them, followed by squeals and grinding gears. Mark didn't have to look to know that the landing pad—presumably with a Berg perched on top—had begun to sink into the ground.

Alec acted much calmer than Mark felt. He had to lean in to be heard over the racket. "Let's wait to see which chamber it goes into and then we'll hide in the other. We better not get caught in this hallway."

"Okay," Mark said, his heart thumping, his nerves on edge. He turned off the workpad;

they didn't need it with the light spilling in from outside.

They went back through the door and pulled it shut, then crouched in the shadows of the walkway as the huge Berg descended. Luckily the cockpit was on the other side, so there was little chance of them being seen. Once it had sunk all the way down, there were more clangs and squeals and the ship started moving on tracks into the chamber to the right. Alec and Mark ran to the opposite chamber and hid in the very back, disappearing into the gloom.

The wait was agonizing, but eventually the Berg found its home. When it stopped moving, the giant landing pad began to move upward again, slowly but surely. Whoever had flown the ship had already disembarked, because Mark could faintly hear voices over the noises, then the sound of the round door being opened.

"Come on," Alec whispered into his ear. "Let's follow them."

They slipped out of the chamber and slinked along the walkway. The Berg passengers had left the door of the exit ajar, and Alec crouched next to it, leaning in to listen. He took a peek. Seemingly satisfied that they were in the clear, he gave Mark a stiff nod and slipped into the hallway once again. Mark followed just as the landing pad above him started to rotate, the bushes and earth and small trees heading back toward the sky.

Voces echoed down the passage ahead of them, but they were too distorted to understand. Alec took the workpad from Mark and slipped it inside his backpack. Then he grabbed Mark's arm and started pulling him forward, walking close to the wall, his eyes narrowed. Soon everything would be plunged back into darkness.

They crept down the hallway, step by careful step. Whoever had shown up had decided to stop and talk, because their voices became clearer as Mark and Alec continued their pursuit. It sounded like there were only two of them. Alec finally stopped as well, and suddenly Mark could hear every word.

"—just north of here," a woman was saying. "Burned out like a brick oven. I bet it's got something to do with those people they caught last night. We'll know soon enough."

A man responded. "We better. Like things weren't bad enough without losing our other Berg. Those jacks in Alaska couldn't care less about us. Now that everything's gone weird, I bet we don't even hear from them again."

"No doubt," the woman said. "Can you say expendable?"

"Yeah, but that wasn't supposed to be *us*. It's not our fault the virus is mutating."

The landing pad clanged behind them, presumably done with its rotation. All was dark. The new arrivals started walking away, their footsteps heavy, as if they wore boots. One of them clicked on a flashlight, the glow from its beam bobbing up ahead. Alec grabbed Mark again and they followed, keeping a safe distance.

The two strangers didn't speak again until they reached a door. Mark heard the squeak of the hinges as it opened. Then the man said something as they stepped into a room Mark couldn't see.

"They've already got a name for it, by the way. They're calling it the Flare."

The door slammed shut.

CHAPTER 32

They hadn't heard much from the pair, but Mark didn't like the sound of it. "The Flare. He said they've started calling it the Flare. The virus."

"Yeah." Alec lit up the workpad again. The glow revealed his face—the face of a man who looked as if he'd never smiled in his life. All sags and creases. "That can't be good. If something has a nickname, that means it's big and being talked about. Not good at all."

"We need to find out what happened. Those people dancing around the fire got attacked way before us. At least their settlement did. Maybe they were some kind of test subjects?"

"Then we've got two objectives, kid: One, find Lana, Trina and that cute little whippersnapper. Two, figure out what's going on around here."

Mark couldn't have agreed more. "So let's get moving."

Alec turned off the workpad, casting the hallway into darkness. "Just run your hand along the wall," he whispered. "Try not to step on me."

They started making their way down the passage. Mark kept his footsteps light and his breathing shallow, trying to stay silent. The humming of distant machinery had grown louder, and the wall vibrated as his fingers traced an invisible line along its cool surface. They reached a spot where the slightest outline of rectangular light marked the door through which the two strangers from the Berg had gone. Alec hesitated right before it, then hurried past on his tiptoes—the least soldierly thing Mark had ever seen him do.

Mark decided to be a little braver. He stopped in front of it and leaned in, pressing his ear against the door.

"Not smart," Alec called out in a harsh whisper.

Mark didn't respond, concentrating on what he could hear. Muffled words, impossible to make out. But the discussion sounded a little heated.

"Just come on," Alec said. "I want to explore before someone locks us in a brig and throws away the key."

Mark nodded, though he doubted the man could see him very well. He moved away from the door and resumed his position next to the opposite wall, hand pressed against it. They kept walking, soon in darkness again as they left the faint light bleeding around the edges of the door.

The hallway stretched on, the world silent except for the rumble of the machinery. Mark couldn't tell when it happened exactly, but he realized he could see again. There was a hazy red glow to the air, enough that Alec looked like a creeping devil in front of him. Mark held his hand up and wiggled his fingers—they looked like they were covered in blood. Assuming Alec had noticed, too, he didn't say anything, and they continued.

They finally came upon a large door in the left wall that was slightly ajar. A red bulb covered by a wired cage hung above it. Alec stopped and stared ahead as if waiting for someone to explain what waited inside. The noises of humming and cranking machinery had escalated and now filled the air to the point that Mark couldn't whisper and be heard.

"Guess that answers the question on generators," he said. His head was really starting to ache right behind his eyes, and it hit him how exhausted he was. They'd been up through

the night and half into another day. “Maybe that’s where they are. Just open the stupid thing.”

Alec glanced back at him. “Patience, boy. Caution. A hasty soldier is a dead soldier.”

“A slow soldier means Trina and them could be dead.”

Instead of responding, Alec reached out and opened the door, swinging it into the hallway. The sounds of machinery went up a notch, and a wave of heat poured from the space within, along with the stench of burning fuel.

“Oh, man,” Alec said, “I forgot how bad that smells.” He carefully closed the door. “Let’s hope we find something more useful soon.”

They came upon the next door about twenty yards farther along, and there were three more past it, then finally one facing them where the hall ended. Each one of these doors also stood ajar about three inches, lit by a bulb encased in a cage just like the generator room. Except these lights were yellow and barely working.

“There’s something really creepy about the doors being open,” Mark whispered. “And it’s so dark inside the rooms.”

“What’s your point?” Alec asked. “Ready to turn around and go home?”

“No. Just saying that you should go in first.”

Alec chuckled. He stuck his foot out and nudged open the first door, which swung inward. It let out a metallic creak as dim yellow light spilled across the floor within, though it wasn’t enough to reveal anything else. The door came to a stop with a soft thud; then there was only silence.

Alec made a harrumphing noise and walked on to the next room instead of going into the first one. He lightly kicked that door open as well, with a similar result. Mostly darkness, no sign of people, no sounds. He went to the next door and kicked it open, then to the last one at the end of the hallway. Nothing.

“Guess we better go in,” he said. He turned back to Mark and jerked his head, a clear order to follow him into the last room. Mark quickly stepped up close to him, ready to do as he was told. Alec reached around the edge of the frame and searched for a light switch but came up empty, then went inside, Mark right behind him. They stood there for a moment, waiting for their eyes to adjust, searching the darkness.

Alec finally sighed and pulled out the workpad again. “What’s the point of generators if none of the lights are on? This thing won’t work much longer.” He powered it up.

The light from the device cast a spooky blue glow across the large room—bigger than Mark would’ve guessed—revealing two long rows of bunks lining both walls, probably ten on each side. They were all empty except for one, almost at the end, where a slouched figure sat with its back to them; it looked to be the slumped shoulders of an older man. A chill raced through Mark at the sight of him. In the dim light, the mostly empty room, the pressing silence ... he felt as if he were staring at the back of a ghost waiting to pronounce their doomed destiny. The person didn’t move, didn’t make a sound.

“Hello?” Alec called out, his voice a boom in the silence.

Mark snapped his head to look at him, shocked. “What’re you doing?”

Alec’s face was hidden in shadow since the workpad was pointed down the room. “Being nice,” he whispered. “I’m going to ask this fella some questions.” Then, louder, “Hello down there? Mind helping us out a bit?”

A low, raspy mumble—what Mark thought a man on his deathbed might sound like—answered. The words were a jumble of lost syllables.

“What’s that?” Alec asked.

The man didn’t move, didn’t reply. He sat on his cot, facing away from them, a lump of a human body. Head down, shoulders slumped.

Mark suddenly had to know—*had* to—what the guy had said. He started walking down the aisle between the cots, ignoring the short burst of protest from Alec. As he made his way toward the man, the spaces between the cots flashing by, he heard Alec hurrying to catch up to him, the light from the workpad bobbing about and making weird shadows dance on the walls.

Mark slowed as he neared the slumped man, felt an icy tingle across his skin. The stranger was broad-shouldered and thick-chested, but his demeanor made him look frail and pathetic. Mark steered clear a few feet as he reached the man’s side, saw a face covered in shadow and hanging low.

“What did you say?” Mark asked when he was in front of the man. Alec reached his side and held the workpad up to cast light on the visibly depressed stranger. The man sat forward with elbows on knees, hands clenched together, his entire visage appearing as if it might melt and drip onto the floor.

The man slowly raised his eyes and looked at them, his head tilting on his neck like rusty machinery. His face was grave and long and wrinkled more than it should have been. His eyes were dark caverns that the light seemed unable to penetrate.

“I didn’t want to give her away,” he said with a raspy edge. “Oh, dear God, I didn’t want to. Not to those savages.”

Mark had so many questions, he couldn't get them out fast enough.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Who was given away? What can you tell us about this place? What about a virus? Do you know anything about two women and a little girl, maybe captured outside?" He paused to swallow the golf-ball-sized lump in his throat and slowed down. "My friend's name is Trina. Blond hair, my age. There was another woman and a girl. Do you know anything about them?"

The man lowered his gaze to the floor again and heaved a sigh. "So many questions."

Mark was so frustrated that he had to compose himself for a second. He took a deep breath and walked over to sit down on the cot facing the raspy-voiced stranger. Maybe the old man was dotty. Bombarding him with questions probably wasn't the smartest approach. Mark looked up to see that Alec was a little astonished at his outburst, but then he shook his head and came over to join Mark on the cot. Alec placed the workpad on the floor so that its glow shone up and gave everyone that slightly monstrous look you get when you place a flashlight under your chin.

"What can you tell us?" Alec asked in one of his gentler tones. He'd obviously reached the same conclusion as Mark—this guy was on edge and needed to be handled with care. "What's happened here? All the lights are out, no one's around. Where is everybody?"

The man merely groaned in response, then covered his face with both hands.

Alec and Mark exchanged a look.

"Let me try again," Mark said. He leaned forward, inching to the edge of the cot and putting his forearms on his knees. "Hey, man ... what's your name?"

The stranger dropped his hands, and even in the dim light Mark could see that his eyes were moist with tears. "My name? You want to know my name?"

"Yeah. I want to know your name. Our lives are just as crappy as yours, I promise. I'm Mark and this is my friend, Alec. You can trust us."

The man made a scoffing sound, then had a short bout of racking coughs. Finally he said, "The name's Anton. Not that it matters."

Mark was afraid to continue. This man could hold so many answers to so many questions, and he didn't want to screw it up. "Listen ... we came from one of the settlements. Three of our friends were taken in the canyon above this place. And our village was attacked by someone from here, we think. We just want to ... understand what's going on. And get our friends back. That's it."

He sensed Alec about to say something and shot him a glare to shut up. "Is there anything you can tell us? Like ... what is this place? What's happening out there with the Bergs and the darts and the virus? What happened *here*? Anything you got." A heavy weariness was starting to weigh on him, but he forced himself to focus on the man across from him, hoping for answers.

Anton took a few low, deep breaths and a tear trickled out of his right eye. "We chose a settlement two months ago," he finally said. "As a test. Not that the disastrous results changed the overall plan in the end. But the girl changed it for me. So many dead, and it

was the one who lived who made me realize what a horrible thing we'd done. Like I said, I didn't want them to give her back to her people today. That's when I was truly done. Officially done."

Deedee, Mark realized. It had to be Deedee. But what about Trina and Lana? "Tell us what happened," he urged. He felt guiltier with every passing second that they weren't actively searching for their friends, but they needed information or they might never find them. "From the beginning."

Anton began to speak in a somewhat distant tone. "The Post-Flares Coalition in Alaska wanted something that spread fast, killed fast. A virus that some monsters had developed back in the good old days before the sun flares burned it all out. They say it shuts down the mind. Instant comas, they said, rendering the bodies useless but causing massive hemorrhaging that would spread it to those nearby. Transmission is by blood, but it's also airborne when the conditions are right. A good way to kill off the settlements that are forced to live in close quarters."

The man's words spilled out of him without a hitch or a change in volume. Mark's mind was growing numb from exhaustion, and he found it hard to follow the details. He knew that what he was hearing was important, but it still wasn't fitting together. How long had he been awake now? Twenty-four hours? Thirty-six? Forty-eight?

"—before they realized they'd screwed up big-time."

Mark shook his head again. He'd just missed part of what Anton had been saying.

"What do you mean?" Alec asked. "How'd they screw up?"

Anton coughed, then sniffled and wiped a hand across his nose. "The virus. It's all wrong. It didn't work right on the test subjects over the last two months, but they went ahead with the plan anyway, saying what's left of the planet's resources is being depleted. All they did was up the dosage in those darts. Those bastards are trying to wipe out half the population. Half!"

"What about the little girl?" Mark almost shouted. "Did she have two women with her?"

Anton didn't seem to be hearing a word that Mark or Alec said. "They said we'd be taken care of once the deed was done. That they'd bring us all back to Alaska and give us homes and food and protection. Let half the world die and we'd start over. But they screwed up, didn't they? That little girl lived even though she was struck with a dart. But it's more than that. The virus isn't what they thought. It spreads like wildfire, all right. Too bad it's got a mind of its own. Pardon the pun."

He let out something that was vaguely like a chuckle, but it soon transformed into a hacking cough. Suddenly he was sobbing freely. The man finally slumped over onto his side and pulled his legs up onto the cot, curling into the fetal position, his shoulders shaking as he cried.

"I've got it," he said through the sobs. "I'm sure of it. We've all got it. You've got it, too. Have no doubts, my friends. You've got the virus. I told my coworkers I didn't want anything to do with them. Not anymore. They left me up here by myself. Suits me just fine."

Mark felt like he was observing the whole scene through a fog. He couldn't concentrate. He tried to snap out of it. "Do you have any idea where our friends could be?" he asked, more calmly this time. "Where are your coworkers?"

"They're all down below," Anton whispered. "I couldn't bear it anymore. I came up here to die or go crazy. Both, I guess. I'm just glad they let me."

"Down below?" Alec repeated.

"Farther down in the bunker," Anton answered, his voice getting quieter as his crying subsided. "They're down there, planning. Planning to revolt in Asheville, let them know we're not happy how things ended up. They wanna take it all the way to Alaska."

Mark looked at Alec, who was just staring at Anton. It seemed like everything the poor stranger said was a little more bizarre than the statement before it.

"Revolt?" Mark asked. "Why Asheville? And who are these people?"

"Asheville is the last safe haven in the East," the man replied, his words barely perceptible now, nothing but dry, faint rasps. "Walls and everything—ramshackle as they may be. And *they* are my coworkers, all hired by the PFC—the almighty Post-Flares Coalition. My esteemed associates want to bring their bosses down before they pull out. Before they head back to Alaska through the Flat Trans."

"Anton," Alec said. "Listen to me. Is there anyone else we can talk to? And how can we find out about the friends we're looking for? The girl, two women."

The man coughed; then a little more life sprang into his voice. "Those people I work with have started to lose their minds. Do you understand? They're ... not ... right. They'll be down there for hours, planning and scheming. They're going to Asheville, and they'll gather an army along the way if they have to. Oh, there's talk of an antidote there, but that's a bunch of hooey. In the end, my people will make sure that others don't get what's been taken from them: life. And you know what they'll do after that. You know, don't you?"

"What?" Mark and Alec said at the same time.

Anton got up onto one elbow. The angle of light from the workpad caused one half of his face to be in shadow from the cot, the other in that pale blue glow. The eye on the lighted side looked as if a spark had been lit inside the pupil.

"They'll go to Alaska through that Flat Trans in Asheville," the man said. "They'll go to where the governments have gathered and make sure the world ends, even though that's not their intent. They'll carry on about finding an antidote and taking down the makeshift government. But all they'll *really* do is spread the virus once and for all. Make sure they finish what the sun flares started. Fools, every last one of them."

Anton collapsed back into a heap on the cot, and a few seconds later the sounds of his snores filled the room.

CHAPTER 34

Mark and Alec sat in silence for a long time, listening to the wheezes and hitched breathing of Anton as he slept.

"I'm not sure we can trust much of what came out of this guy's mouth," Alec said after a while. "But I'm troubled, to say the least."

"Yeah," Mark responded flatly. His head was pounding and he felt sick to his stomach. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so tired. But they had to get up, get out of that room, find Trina and the others.

He didn't move.

"Boy, you look like a zombie," Alec said after twisting to face him. "And I feel like one."

"Yeah," Mark said again.

"You're not going to like what I'm about to say, but there'll be no argument."

Mark raised his eyebrows. Even that seemed to take all the energy he had. "And what's that?"

"We need to sleep."

"But ... Trina ... Lana ..." He suddenly couldn't remember the little girl's name. Impossible. His head ached like a storm had erupted inside his skull.

Alec stood up. "We're not going to do our friends a bit of good if we can't function because we're too tired. We'll just catch a few winks. Maybe an hour each while the other keeps an eye out. Anton said his coworkers would be in some meeting for hours." He got up from the bed and walked quickly over to the door to the room, closed it, locked it. "Just to be safe."

Mark slumped to his side, then slowly drew his legs up onto the cot. He folded his arms under his head. He wanted to protest but nothing came out.

Alec started talking again. "I'll take first watch, so ..."

But Mark fell asleep before he heard any more.

The dreams came. The memories. More vivid than ever before. As if the depth of his exhaustion had created the perfect canvas for them.

CHAPTER 35

There's that short moment that seems to last a lifetime when Mark sees the wall of water rushing down the steps of the subtrans station, like a stampede of white, frothy horses. He wonders a thousand things. How he got there. What's happened above them in the city. Is his family dead. What does the future hold. What's it like to drown.

All these thoughts storm through his mind in the one second it takes for the water to reach the bottom of the steps. Then someone is grabbing his arm, pulling him in the opposite direction, forcing his head to turn away from the oncoming disaster. He sees Trina, yanking on him as pure terror brightens her eyes in a sick way that snaps him into motion.

He breaks into an all-out run, this time grabbing *her* arm, making sure they stay together. Alec and Lana are right ahead of them, moving quickly, passing the thugs who accosted them, a thing that now seems so silly and outrageous it angers Mark all over again. The moment passes; he keeps running down the tunnel, Trina by his side. He shoots a quick glance backward, sees Baxter, Darnell, the Toad, Misty, all keeping up, their eyes painted with the same fear as Trina's, the same fear that Mark feels himself.

There's a great rushing sound in the air that takes Mark back to his family's visit to Niagara Falls. People are screaming and things are breaking, glass shattering. Alec looks nothing like an old man as he sprints past the far edge of the station landing and slips back into the darkness of the train-sized tunnel. They can't have much time, and Mark realizes with a jolt of horror that he's entrusted his entire life to the two people in front of him. That this is it. That he'll be alive or dead within minutes.

Someone cries out behind him; then he's hit hard in the shoulder, and he stumbles. He rights himself, letting go of Trina, who can't stop her momentum and keeps rushing forward. Mark looks back and sees two things: Misty has fallen to the ground, and a surging pool of water is funneling down the tracks of the subtrans from the station. The deluge of water from the streets above is washing over the landing and spilling into the wide groove of the tunnel, and it's just a few dozen feet away.

When it washes over Misty's body, the flood is already inches deep. She pushes against the ground to get up. Mark is leaning forward to help when Misty suddenly screams and leaps to her feet as if the water carries an electric charge.

"It's hot!" she yells as she reaches out and squeezes Mark's hand.

They turn and begin running again, water now sloshing across their feet. It soaks through Mark's shoes and socks, the bottom of his pants, and he feels its warmth, then its full heat. He jumps, like someone who has stepped into a bath with the temperature drawn too high. It's unnerving, and hot enough to burn his skin.

The group continues to run down the tunnel, doing their best to slog through the rising river. It's suddenly two feet high and Mark can't believe how quickly it's happened. It moves up past his knees and it's coming faster now—he has to plant his feet more firmly to prevent them from being swept out from under him. He catches up with Trina, the others only a few feet ahead. They're not running anymore. They're struggling, using their whole

bodies to push forward step by careful step. The water is almost to Mark's upper thighs, and he knows the current is about to win the battle against all of them.

And it burns, scalding his skin. He itches from the pain of it.

"Right here!" Alec screams. Straining against the dirty, raging river, fighting the current, he's sloshed his way over to the left. There's a short set of steps there, an iron railing on both sides. It leads up to a landing and a door. "We need to get up there!"

Mark is moving in that direction, planting his feet one at a time, reestablishing his position with every step. Trina is doing the same. Lana is already there. Baxter, Misty, Darnell and the Toad are all behind Mark, making their way as well. They can't last much longer in the current. The roar of the water is deafening, broken only by Alec's words and the screams from back in the station echoing down the walls of the tunnel. Those noises have decreased dramatically, and Mark knows why. Most of the people are dead.

As if the thought must be made real, a body bumps into Mark's knee, then whips past in the river—a woman. Her face is the blue of death, framed by a floating mat of hair. She spins slowly as she rushes deeper into the black tunnel beyond. Then there are more. Some alive, most unmoving—probably dead, Mark realizes. The living are flailing their arms and legs, trying to swim or gain purchase on the ground. Mark has the fleeting thought that they should try to help them, reach for their hands. But it's too late—they'll be lucky to get themselves out.

Alec has reached the stairs, has grabbed the iron railing, takes two steps up. Mark moves another sluggish step forward; the water is up to his waist now. Burning, roasting. Alec leans down and helps Lana up the stairs. Then Trina makes it, grabs his hand. Up she goes. Mark is next. He takes the last tremulous step and he's suddenly clasping forearms with the old man who keeps saving his life. His body jolts forward as Alec pulls him hard and he's on the stairs, almost falling forward onto his face. Trina catches him, hugs him.

The Toad makes it, then Darnell, then Misty. All of them but Alec up the short flight of stairs and onto the landing, grouping together in front of the door. The younger boy, Baxter, is struggling. Mark's suddenly struck by shame as he realizes the kid's still out there—he's six feet beyond Alec's reach, the water slamming into his side, rising and rising, splashing up into his frightened face.

Mark runs back down the stairs even as Trina is calling his name. He stands next to Alec, wonders what to do. Bodies are shooting past Baxter; Mark sees a stray foot smack the kid in the shoulder. A head bobs up out of the river right next to him, spewing water, then disappears back under.

"Take a step!" Alec screams at Baxter.

The boy responds, does as he's told. Then takes another. He's almost within reach now, but the water is beating at his back, making it seem impossible that he hasn't been swept away yet.

Mark yells encouragement this time. "Just a couple more."

Baxter moves forward and is suddenly off his feet, facedown. Alec jumps out at him, grabs the boy's arm just as the current latches on to both of them, ready to yank them away into the darkness. Marks sees it all happen so fast, reacts before he has time to think. He grips the iron railing with his left hand and lunges forward with his right, grasping the sleeve of Alec's shirt before he's swept out of reach. The man's hand comes up and grips

Mark's arm just as the material starts to rip.

Mark's body is jerked into the current but he holds on to the railing; his body is pulled out and then to the side, slamming into the concrete wall next to the track. Alec and Baxter follow, their bodies linked. Mark feels as if his arm is about to be ripped from its socket, his muscles straining, screaming. He can only focus on not letting go to ignore the pain. Water rushes into his mouth and he spits it out. It tastes like dirt and oil and burns his tongue.

He feels hands grabbing his arm, gripping his shirt and elbow, pulling. From the other side he can tell that Alec is climbing him like a rope, using both hands. Which means Baxter must be gone. Mark can do nothing, his strength spent, every part of his body aching and burning. He can only hold tight, keep the link intact. His head slips under the water and he closes his eyes, forces himself to resist the urge to suck in a breath that would kill him.

He loses all sense of movement. There is only water and heat and the rush of sound. And the pain, bursting through his body.

Then he breaks the surface, feels hands on his chest, under his arm. He's being dragged backward up the stairs. Alec is right in front of him, having caught hold of the railing. Baxter is clasped tightly between the man's legs, like the winning grip of a wrestling match. Even as Mark looks, Baxter's face comes up and out of the river and the boy is breathing, spitting, screaming.

They made it. They all made it.

Soon they are on their feet, on the landing. All of them. The water has risen to the upper edge of the track's groove and is beginning to spill onto the landing itself.

Alec is a man whose every inch speaks of exhaustion. Soaking wet, breathing deeply and raggedly. He lurches forward to the door, opens it. Mark has the thought that it could've been locked. Their story could've been over and done right then and there. But it's open, and Alec swings it wide.

He motions for everyone to go through.

"Get ready to climb," the old man says.

Mark woke up shivering in complete darkness.

His body was stiff; he shifted on the cot and it creaked as he tried to get comfortable, find a position in which his muscles didn't ache. He heard Alec and Anton both snoring loudly. Alec obviously hadn't lasted long at first watch.

Mark finally settled on his back. Sleep had officially washed away, and there was nothing to do but wait until his friend woke up. He'd let the man get as much rest as possible—they were probably going to need it.

The dream had seemed so vivid, so lifelike. His heart was still beating from the rush of the experience, like he'd just relived it for real. He could taste the foul water, feel the burns on his skin. He remembered the exhausting climb up the endless flight of stairs afterward, the winding, the dizzying back-and-forth. Sapped of strength and hurting from the water burn, he didn't know how he'd kept up with the others. But up and up they'd gone as the water rose below them. He'd never forget the feeling of looking over the railing, down at the roiling, dirty liquid as it slowly ascended, thinking that his life had almost ended in its depths.

Alec had saved them that day. They'd spent the next two weeks in that skyscraper, realizing quickly that they couldn't search for loved ones yet. The heat and radiation and rising waters were too much. That was when Mark's hopes of ever finding his family had truly begun to fade.

The Lincoln Building. A place that held plenty of its own nightmares. They'd stayed as close to the center of the building as possible, in the structure's middle corridors, to protect themselves from the sun's ruthless radiation. Even so, they'd all been a little sick those first few months.

He heard a groan from the direction of Alec's cot, and the thoughts floated away, pushed to the back of his mind to torment him later. But that feeling of terror he'd experienced in those last moments in the subtrans tunnel wouldn't leave, lingering like the smoke from an extinguished fire.

"Oh ... crap," Alec said.

Mark popped up onto his elbow, looking in the direction of his friend. "What?"

"I didn't mean to fall asleep. Fine soldier I am. And I left the damn workpad on. We can forget using that thing again."

"Meh, the battery was probably almost dead anyway," Mark said. Though in truth, he'd have given anything for five more minutes of the device's glow right then.

Alec groaned and Mark heard the sounds of the cot creaking as the older man got to his feet.

"We need to go find this guy's coworkers. He said they were meeting farther down in the bunker. So we need to find our way to some stairs," the man said.

"What do we do about him?" Mark pointed to Anton, forgetting for a second that Alec couldn't see him in the darkness.

"Let him sleep out his sorrows. Come on."

Mark took a moment to get his bearings, then got up and felt his way to the end of the cot toward the middle aisle of the room.

"How long do you think we slept?" he asked.

"No idea," Alec answered. "Maybe two hours?"

They spent the next few minutes slowly making their way through the room and out into the hallway. The light above the door still sputtered a bit, but barely enough to see by. They eventually found the stairwell Alec had been hoping for. Even the dim sight of it, mostly lines and edges of shadow descending into blackness, brought back to Mark the memory of the flood and their mad clamber up the stairs of the skyscraper. It'd been so close that day. If he'd known all that would come after, would he still have fought so hard to survive?

Yes, he told himself. Yes, he would've. And he was going to find Trina and get out of hot water again. He almost laughed at his own joke.

"Let's get on with it," Alec whispered as he started down the steps.

Mark followed him, determined to stop dwelling on the past. He had to focus on the future or he'd never reach it.

The flight of stairs only descended three levels, though there was no exit until they reached the final one. They pushed through the door and found themselves in another hallway. They'd finally come upon the section of the bunker that used the raving generators above: a line of lights along the ceiling illuminated the passage. Unlike the hallway they'd come from, this one curved.

Mark shot a glance at Alec and they started down the hall. There were doors lining the walls, but Alec suggested that they explore the length of the corridor before they tried each one. They slipped along, as quietly as possible, and it wasn't long before it became clear that the hallway was a giant crescent.

They'd traversed about half of what they could see of its length when Mark heard voices, then saw their source. Up ahead, on the left, there was a set of double doors, one propped all the way open. The sounds were coming from whatever was happening in that room. A gathering of some sort, men and women talking over each other so that Mark couldn't make out a single word being said. Anton's meeting, his coworkers.

Alec slowed as he approached the room, and carefully stepped forward until he was right next to it, his back pressed against the closed door. He turned to look at Mark, shrugged as if to say it's now or never, then craned his neck toward the opening and leaned in for a peek. Mark held his breath, remembering all too well that they had no weapons.

Alec pulled his head back and sidled a couple feet toward Mark. "It's an auditorium. It's pretty big, seats about two hundred, maybe. They're all down at the bottom watching some guy on the stage."

"How many are there?" Mark whispered.

"At least forty. Maybe fifty. No sign of our friends, as far as I can tell. They all seem to be arguing about something, but I can't tell what they're saying."

"So what do we do?" Mark asked. "Keep going? This hall can't go on much longer."

"If we get down on our hands and knees we can crawl in there and down the back. We can hide in a corner over on the right. I think we need to hear what these people are saying."

Mark agreed. They didn't know who these people were or what they were up to, but it seemed like the only way to find out. The safest way, at least. "Okay, let's do it."

They crouched on all fours and got ready, Mark right behind Alec. The soldier leaned forward to take a look around the edge of the door; then he started crawling into the large room. Mark followed, feeling almost naked as they entered the open air of the auditorium. But no one was close to the back—the voices were all coming from below and sounded far enough away. And judging from the fact that they all seemed to be talking at once, Mark had a feeling they weren't on the alert for intruders.

Alec crawled along the last row, his side pressed against the black plastic of the chairs, until he got all the way to the far right side of the room, where the corner was shadowed in darkness. He stopped and situated himself, his legs crossed, his body wedged into the space between the last chair and the wall. Mark moved to sit next to him. He had to tuck himself in closer than was comfortable in order to stay as hidden as possible.

Alec stretched up and peeked over the chair in front of them, then sank down again quickly.

"Can't see much. Seems like they're waiting for something to begin. Or maybe they're taking a break. I don't know."

Mark closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall. They sat there for what seemed like forever. At least ten excruciating minutes passed with nothing changing. Just the buzz of mixed conversation. Then, suddenly, a blur of movement made him catch his breath. A man had walked into the auditorium from the hallway, a quick flash of motion as he entered and began walking down the aisle toward the front. Mark breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't been seen.

The crowd grew quiet and still, the room dropping into an almost eerie silence. Mark could actually hear the man's footsteps as he reached the bottom of the room and climbed a set of stairs onto the stage.

"I'll take over from here, Stanley," a deep voice said, echoing off the ceiling even though he'd said it softly. Acoustics.

"Thanks, Bruce," came the reply from Stanley, a man with a much higher voice. "Everyone give him your full attention."

There was the sound of someone descending the stairs and then the rattle of him sitting in one of the chairs. When silence fell once again, the newcomer began to speak.

"Let's get this started, people. It won't be long before we all lose our minds."

CHAPTER 37

As if the man's opening statement wasn't bizarre enough, the crowd clapped and cheered after he said it, making Mark shiver. Bruce waited for it to die down on its own before he spoke again. Mark was anxious to hear what the guy would say next.

"Frank and Marla are back from a flyby of the areas around Asheville. Just as we thought, they've shored up those walls nice and tight. Humanity and charity, my friends? Those days are long gone. The PFC has created an army of monsters, people who used to be willing to give the shirt off their backs for a neighbor in need. No longer. Those scumbags in Alaska and North Carolina—our very own Asheville—have turned their backs on the settlements once and for all. Worse, they've turned their backs on us. *Us!*"

This elicited a chorus of angry shouts, stomping of feet and banging on the armrests of the chairs. The noises echoed through the room until Bruce started talking again.

"They sent us here!" he shouted. His voice was louder now. "They assigned us to take part in the worst civil rights fiasco since the War of 2020. A holocaust! But they were firm that it was for the survival of the human race. They said it was to save what little resources we have, to be able to feed those people they deemed *worthy* to live. But who are they to decide who's worthy?" He paused for a moment before he continued. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, it seems that we are not worthy. They sent us here to do their dirty work and now they've decided to cut us off. Who are *they*, I ask all of you!"

He practically screamed the last sentence and once again sent the crowd into a fit of near hysterics. People screamed and stomped their feet. The roar made Mark's temples throb and the inside of his forehead ache. He thought it might never end, but it did, abruptly. He imagined that Bruce had made a gesture to silence them.

"Here's where we stand," the man said, much calmer. "The test subjects are getting more fanatical in their odd little religious cult by the day. We've made a deal with them. They wanted the little girl back. Seems that they want to sacrifice her to their newfound spirits. I think they've passed the point of no return. They're beyond any help we could give them. They can barely go a day without fighting each other, reorganizing factions, starting over until they battle again. But we made a deal with the few who still seem to be operating on some sane level—I'm sick and tired of worrying who's going to jump out of a tree and attack me every time I walk outside."

He paused, allowed a long, lingering moment of silence. "We gave them the little girl and the two women we found with her. I know it's harsh, but it buys us a little time where we don't have to worry about those people. I don't want to waste the precious ammo we have left defending ourselves against a cult."

Mark suddenly had a rushing sound in his ears. The little girl. The two women. *Gave them*. The things Anton had said back in the bunk room. It all thudded in his mind, made him tremble. He thought back to how crazy those people at the bonfire were, and a situation he'd thought couldn't get worse did just that. They'd wasted all this time in the bunker and their friends weren't even there anymore.

Bruce was still talking, but Mark couldn't focus on the words. He leaned in to speak in

Alec's ear. "How could they have given them to those ... people? We have to go. Who knows what those psychos will do to them!"

Alec held a hand out to urge calm. "I know. We will. But remember the reason we came here. Let's hear what this man has to say, then we'll go. I promise. Lana means as much to me as Trina does to you."

Mark nodded, leaned back into the wall again. Tried to listen to what Bruce was saying down on the stage.

"—fire is out, thanks to the latest storm that rolled in a couple of hours ago. The sky's black, but the flames are dead. We're going to be dealing with mudslides all over the place. The test subjects all fled to the half-burnt mountain homes, by the looks of it. Hopefully they'll stay put awhile before they get desperate and march on Asheville for food. But I think we're safe to head over to the city in the next day or two. Force our way in, demand our rights. We'll go by foot and hope to surprise them."

There were a few worried murmurs before he continued. "Look, we can't deny that we're dealing with our own outbreak now. We've all seen the symptoms, right here in our safe house. There's just no way our superiors would've agreed to unleash this virus without having something to reverse its effects. And I say that they'll give it to us or they'll all die. Even if we have to go all the way to Alaska to do it. We know they have a Flat Trans at their headquarters. We'll go through it and make them give us what we deserve!"

More cheers and pounding feet thundered through the air.

Mark shook his head. These people were obviously unstable. There was a wild energy in the room, like they were a nest of vipers, tensing to strike. Whatever the reason for spreading this virus, it was clear what it did to people: it made them crazy, and it appeared to be taking more time to do it as it spread. And if Asheville, the largest surviving city within hundreds of miles, really had erected walls to keep itself safe from the disease, things must be bad. Then the last thing anyone needed was a bunch of infected soldiers running through the streets. And the Flat Trans ...

Mark's head still pounded and throbbed and it was hard to sort out his thoughts. He knew he had to focus on Trina, getting her back. But what about all this new information? He elbowed Alec, gave him a look that said his patience was running out.

"Soon, boy," the man whispered. "Never skip a chance to get intel. Then we'll go find our friends. I swear it."

Mark wasn't willing to sacrifice Trina for information. Not after what they'd been through to survive this long. He couldn't wait much longer.

The room had grown quiet again.

"The Post- ... Flares ... Coalition." Bruce pronounced every word with exaggerated diction and spite. "Who do these people think they are? Gods? They can just choose to wipe out the entire eastern half of the United States? Like the PFC has more right to live than anyone else?"

There was another long pause after that. Mark couldn't take it anymore. He crawled around Alec and slowly peeked over the chair to take a look. Bruce was a large man with a bald head that shone in the dull light, his face pale and scruffy with a few days' worth of beard. The muscles of his arms and shoulders bulged against a tight black shirt as he stood with hands clasped in front of him, staring at the floor. If Mark hadn't heard all the things

the man had just said, he'd think he could be praying.

"Don't feel bad, friends. We couldn't have said no to what they asked us to do," Bruce said, slowly raising his eyes to gaze at his captive audience again. "We had no choice. They used the very resources they're trying to preserve against us. We have to eat, too, right? It's not our fault the virus wasn't quite what they expected. All we can do is what we've done since the sun flares struck the Earth: fight tooth and nail to *live*. Darwin taught about survival of the fittest in the natural world. Well, the PFC is trying to cheat nature. It's time to stand up for ourselves. We ... will ... *live!*"

Another raucous round of cheers and whistles and clapping and foot pounding went on for a good minute or two. Mark slinked back to sit next to Alec, feeling stronger than ever that they had to get moving. He was just about to say something when the crowd fell silent and Bruce's voice filled the room like the amplified hiss of a snake.

"But first, my friends, I need you to do something for me. We have two spies in the back of this auditorium. They could very well be from the PFC. I want them bound and gagged by the time I count to thirty."

Mark was jumping to his feet almost before the man had finished his sentence, and Alec was close behind him.

A vicious roar erupted from the crowd like a war cry as Mark paused to take them all in. The group was already on the move, springing from their chairs and stumbling over each other to be the first ones to get up the aisle to the two intruders.

Mark ran toward the double doors of the exit, unable to take his eyes off the scene below, observing it with a strange mix of horror and curiosity. Bruce was bellowing orders and pointing his finger at Mark and Alec, his pale face now red with anger. There was something childish about his movements, almost cartoonish. The urgency with which his followers were clamoring to get into the open aisle also seemed exaggerated somehow, like they were all hopped up on some kind of drug. Men and women yelling and growling like apes on a rampage. Each wanting to capture *him*, acting like their life depended on being the first to do it.

Alec reached the doors first and practically flung himself out into the hallway. Mark skidded to a stop, his focus so intent on the onrushing crowd that he almost ran past the exit. That odd and misplaced sense of curiosity at their behavior winked out finally, replaced by the horrific thump of realization that he was about to be captured for the second time in so many days. Their cries of pursuit tore through the air and scared him, and with a quick sideways glance as he exited the room he saw the first of their group charging up the main aisle of the auditorium with bloodlust in their eyes.

He slipped on the floor of the hallway, caught his balance. Alec had reached out and closed the door after Mark came through, maybe buying them a couple of seconds. The light was dim, but Mark could tell Alec had forgotten which way they'd come from.

"It's this way!" Mark yelled, already running. He heard Alec's footsteps behind him until there was the loud bang of the door slamming back open, followed by the rush of bodies and their continued battle cries.

Mark ran hard, trying his best not to imagine their pursuers or what they'd do if they caught him. Bruce had said to bind and gag them, but the look Mark had seen on their faces told him that was only the beginning. He glanced back to make sure Alec was keeping up, saw the old bear pumping his arms and pounding his feet, then focused ahead again, sprinting along the slow curve of the hallway. He was heading for the stairs because he didn't know where else to go but up.

Adrenaline shot through Mark and hunger gnawed at his stomach. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten. He could only hope he had enough energy to escape back into the woods above them. The stairwell came into view up ahead and he burst forward with a little more speed. The shouts from their pursuers echoed and tore through the narrow space of the hall, reminding Mark of that almost muffled screeching sound the approaching trains of the subtrans made as they sped along the tracks of their tunnels.

Mark reached the stairs, was already leaping onto the second one by the time Alec made it. He heard the man's heavy breathing mixed with his own, the solid thumps of their feet

pounding the steps. Mark grabbed the railing at each switchback, throwing himself forward and onto the next set. He and Alec charged up the three levels, reaching the top just as Mark heard their pursuers reach the bottom. The hollow echo of their frantic cries sent chills across his sweaty skin.

He ran out into the upper hallway, which was still cloaked in darkness, something he could only hope would help them. A sudden moment of indecision hit him, causing a burst of panic.

“Which way?” he yelled at Alec. A part of him thought they should hide somewhere—maybe in the room that held the generators. Searching for an exit meant they’d be out in the open and just waiting for capture if they didn’t find one, but hiding would only delay being found.

Instead of answering, Alec started running to the right, back in the direction of the huge, pivoting landing pad of the Berg. Mark followed him, relieved that his friend had taken charge again.

They ran through the darkness at a reckless speed. Mark ran his hand against the wall to keep his bearings, but he knew that if he came across something on the floor he was a goner. They passed the generator room, its struggling red bulb of faint light giving them a brief break from the pitch-black, the hum of machinery like the drone of bees. Both the glow and the noise faded as they sprinted past. It was at that moment that Mark noticed something that almost made him stop.

The sounds of the people chasing them had ceased. Completely. As if they’d never made it up the stairs.

“Alec,” he whispered, barely hearing his own voice over their heaving breathing and footsteps. He repeated it a little louder.

His friend came to a halt, and Mark passed him before he could stop too. Sucking in deep breaths, Mark turned back to face Alec, wishing desperately for a little light.

“Why’d it stop?” he wondered aloud.

“I don’t know,” Alec responded. “But we should keep moving.” Mark heard the man feeling his way along the walls of the corridor. “You do the right side, I’ll stick to the left. Maybe there’s another exit we don’t know about.”

Mark started searching; the walls were cool to the touch. He remembered the door with the faint rectangle of light from before—but there was no sign of it now. It was maddening to be in such darkness, and not knowing what had happened to the people chasing them put him on edge. It didn’t sit right with him.

They reached the end of the hallway, where the round submarine-like door led back into the chamber below the Berg landing pad. He heard Alec step through the opening, then come back out.

“Can’t see a thing in there, either.”

“There’s nowhere else to go,” Mark replied. “Let’s just get in there and shut that door until we figure something out. Maybe we can keep it—”

Alec shushed him, cutting off his sentence. “Did you hear that?” he whispered.

The question alone made Mark shiver. He grew completely still and held his breath. At first he heard nothing; then there was a rustling sound, faint, but coming from down the hallway. It continued, and oddly, the noise played tricks, seeming to be close one second

and far the next. Suddenly Mark was struck by the feeling that they weren't alone.

Terror lit up his nerves. He moved to grab Alec, to push him through the doorway, knowing it was their only shot. Getting in there and slamming the thing closed, spinning the wheel handle, keeping it shut. But Mark had only taken one step forward when there was a click, followed by the blinding beam of a flashlight pointed directly at Mark and Alec. Whoever held it was only a few steps away.

"We didn't say you could leave yet," a woman said.

There was a sudden rush of movement, the sound of other flashlights being clicked on, their beams crisscrossing and bobbing in a chaotic dance through the air. Bruce's people were charging forward, reigniting their shouts and cries of attack. Mark turned toward Alec, who was already reaching out, grabbing his shirt and pulling him toward the open portal.

Alec was halfway through, his fist still clutching Mark's shirt, when the storm of lights reached them. Their beams were blinding. Someone grabbed Mark's foot and heaved it up into the air, and he crashed to the floor, the back of his head smacking down hard. Mark was suddenly jerked along the floor by his leg. He slid, bumping against people as he thrashed, trying to kick himself loose.

Alec shouted his name but Mark could barely hear him over the mass of angry people. They surrounded Mark and someone kicked him in the ribs; a woman let out a shrill cry and punched him in the stomach. He groaned and tried to curl into a ball, twisting his foot so hard that it sprang free from his captor's grip. Taking advantage of the moment, he flipped onto his stomach and started crawling back toward the door. He was a flurry of arms and legs, frantically trying to stay out of everyone's reach.

A roar cut through the melee: a booming growl, a noise that might come out of a she-bear protecting a cub. It was Alec—and suddenly bodies were flying everywhere. The man had charged forward and leaped into the fray, taking down half the people trying to get to Mark. In the frenzy, someone fell on Mark's leg, someone else on his back. He twisted around and then there was someone sitting on his face. There was a moment when everything seemed absolutely ridiculous, like Mark had fallen into a clown act in a circus, and he almost laughed.

Then someone slapped him on the cheek, clearing that image right out of his head. Mark screwed up his fist and punched back but missed, tried again and again without connecting, his arms flailing like a blind boxer's. On the fourth or fifth try he smashed his fist into someone's chin and they cried out. He caught a glimpse of Alec fighting like a lion, pushing people and elbowing faces and throwing bodies to the floor. There was the clank of a flashlight falling, then the tinny scrape of it rolling until it came to rest against the wall. Its light shone across the floor and illuminated the circle of the door to the chamber, maybe a dozen feet away. Mark knew they had to somehow fight their attackers off and get through there or they were done for.

Mark had gotten to his hands and knees but someone jumped onto his back, taking him down again. An arm slipped around his neck, started squeezing. Mark gagged, gasping for breath as his airway was cut off. His lungs ached. He got his hands underneath himself and pushed off the floor, twisting to the side, throwing the attacker off. He spun and kicked the assailant in the face, realizing at the last second that it was a woman. Her head cracked to the right and blood flew from her nose.

Two other people rushed Mark from behind and grabbed his arms, pulled him to his feet. He tried to break free but their holds were too tight. A man stepped in front of him, a vicious grin crossing his face. He drew back his arm, slammed his fist into Mark's stomach.

Mark doubled over at the explosion of pain and nausea. He retched but had nothing in his stomach to throw up.

He heard another roar come from Alec and then the man tackled one of the people holding Mark. As soon as that arm was free Mark swung back hard and smashed his elbow into the chin of the other person, freeing his other arm. He lunged forward and took the man who'd punched him to the ground, where he landed with an "oomph."

Mark didn't bother with him anymore. He scrambled to his feet, then dived toward the stray flashlight he'd seen roll up against the wall. He slid across the floor and grabbed it, gripped it tightly in his fist. Then he stood up and swung its hard metal end in an arc before even looking at who might be coming at him. He connected, hitting some guy in the ear; the man cried out and crumpled to the ground. Alec, who'd stolen someone else's flashlight, was just getting up from a tussle he'd had with two or three people who lay unmoving at the man's feet. Mark ran to him and they slowly turned in a circle to face the remaining attackers, who still greatly outnumbered them. Packed together into two groups, one on each side of the hallway, the people seemed to be readying for one last charge to smash Mark and Alec in the middle.

Mark shined his light and noticed that the group between them and the door of the chamber was the smaller of the two, maybe eight people total. At least chance had given them that much. As if he and Alec were communicating telepathically, they roared and charged the small group at the same time. They crashed into them, sending bodies flying and tumbling all over each other. Mark went ballistic in a fit of desperation, kicking and kneeing and swinging the butt end of his flashlight at anything that moved. Scrambling and crawling and pushing, twisting away anytime someone tried to latch on to his limbs or clothes, he moved forward, barreling through the crowd of people.

Somehow Mark reached the other side, with a free path to the open door. Alec fought his way through as well, falling with one last surge but quickly leaping back to his feet. And then they were both running to the circular opening, climbing through. In seconds Alec was on the door, pushing to swing it shut. Several arms slipped through the gap, blocking the door from closing.

"Come help me!" he yelled.

Mark beat at hands and fingers with his flashlight; then Alec pulled back on the door and pushed it forward again, crushing it against those still trying to fight their way in. There were yelps and screams, and several pulled out. But another surge pressed ahead and almost made Alec topple over.

Mark abandoned his flashlight to help Alec. Together they held the outer rim of the door and jerked it open, then rammed it against those trying to break in. More arms pulled out, only to be replaced by new ones just as Mark and Alec swung the door out and slammed the edge against the assailants again. More cries of anguish, fewer arms left. They did it again. And again. Quicker, with more force, and a little closer each time.

"One more big one!" Alec yelled.

Mark braced himself, pulled the door out, then screamed and threw his body and all his strength into it. The slab of metal crunched bones and smashed fingers, and every body part disappeared from view.

Alec leaned into the door and closed it with a booming metallic ring.

Mark spun the wheel.

The deafening silence that filled the room was broken by the squeal of the wheel handle as Mark wrenched it tighter and tighter. Alec helped him when the people on the other side tried to spin it back. The tighter they could turn it, the easier it was to prevent the attackers from doing the opposite.

"Just hang on to that puppy," Alec finally said when they couldn't turn it any farther. He took a step back and Mark gripped the right portion of the ring with both hands and hung on it. The chamber in front of him, where the landing pad rotated before lowering down into the ground, was empty and vast. Mark's head pounded with pain, along with the rest of his body, after the scrum in the bunker hallway.

Alec was just picking up the flashlight he'd dropped, which was right next to Mark's. The soldier shined the bluish light toward the chamber to the right, finding the massive shape of the Berg nestled there. Dust motes danced in the beam as he swung it back and forth, revealing scarred metal and rows of bolts and protruding edges and ridges. In the relative darkness, the whole thing looked like some alien vessel rising from the abyss of the ocean.

"It feels a lot bigger inside," Mark said. His arms were getting tired, but he could feel tension on the handle, the wheel inching up, then dropping back down again. "Any chance of getting out of here in that thing?"

Alec was slowly walking around the ship, searching the Berg for something, probably the hatch door. "Best idea you've had all day."

"Good thing you're a pilot." There were low, dull thumps on the door and Mark imagined Bruce's people half out of their minds wanting to get through, beating on it in frustration.

"Yeah ..." Alec was saying absently. Soon his voice came from the other side of the Berg, echoing off the walls. "The hatch door is over here!"

Their pursuers suddenly stopped their efforts, grew quiet.

"They gave up!" Mark said, embarrassed at the kidlike excitement in his voice.

"Which means they're up to something," Alec replied. "We need to get inside this beast and get her ready to fly. And get that landing pad open."

Mark looked up at the wheel and slowly let go of it, ready to grab it again if the thing moved. He got to his feet, his eyes glued to the handle.

He jumped when a loud clang cracked through the air, followed by the wrenching sound of metal screeching against metal. He whipped around to see what had happened, but the bulk of the Berg was between him and the source of the noise. Somehow Alec must've gotten the hatch door to open. Mark took one last look at the wheel handle, satisfied that it was okay for the moment, then made his way to the Berg to join Alec. On the far side of the ship, the man was standing with his hands on his hips like a proud mechanic as the huge ramp of the hatch door slowly swung toward the ground.

"Shall we board, cocaptain?" Alec asked with a wry grin. "I'm sure we can control this landing pad from inside."

Mark could see it in the man's eyes: he was anxious to be at the controls of a Berg again, flying it fast and free through the sky. "As long as by 'cocaptain' you mean the guy who sits

around watching you do everything.”

Alec let out a huge, boisterous laugh, like he didn’t have a care in the world. It sounded good to Mark’s ears, and for a second or two he forgot just how awful everything was. But then he thought of Trina, and at the same time his hunger pains roared in his belly. So much for that.

Alec jumped onto the hatch door just as it thumped to a stop, wide open, and climbed up the ramp, disappearing into the darkness of the ship. Mark ran back out into the main chamber to check the door again. Once he saw that they were safe, the wheel not moving, he went back and followed Alec’s path.

He paused on the upper lip of the hatch door and took a second to shine his flashlight around inside. The Berg was spooky and dark and dusty. It looked much like the one he and Alec had boarded back in their settlement, albeit emptier. Alec was walking back and forth, investigating.

Mark stepped into the craft with a metallic thud. It echoed throughout the dark room, and the sound triggered memories of an old movie—something about astronauts boarding an abandoned alien vessel. Which, of course, had been full of aliens that liked to eat humans. He hoped he and Alec fared better in this thing.

“I don’t see any signs of the dart boxes we saw on the other Berg,” Alec said, pointing his light at a row of empty shelves.

Mark noticed something tucked away in the corner of the farthest shelf. “Hey, what’s that?” he said. He walked over, shined his light, then picked up a stack of three workpads that had been tied down with elastic straps.

“Look at this!” he called to Alec. “Workpads!”

“Do they, um, work?” the man replied, not seeming very impressed.

Mark wedged his flashlight in the crook of his elbow and tried one of the devices. Its face lit up, showing a welcome screen that required a numerical password for access.

“Yeah, it works, all right,” Mark said. “But we might need your old superhuman soldier brain to hack it.”

“Get back over—” Alec’s words were cut off when the entire Berg jolted and shook for a second. Mark almost dropped the workpad in his attempt to keep his balance. The flashlight slipped out of his arm and clanked across the floor, clicking off.

“What was that?” Mark asked, though he had a feeling he knew.

The words had barely left his mouth when the noise of cranking gears and scraping metal filled the air, coming through the hatch door. One of Bruce’s people must have pushed a button somewhere. The landing pad in the central chamber was rotating open once again.

"Quick, you need to close the hatch!" Alec yelled at Mark. "The controls are right next to it. I'll be getting this baby started up. We'll crash it through the ground above us if we have to!"

Alec ran out of the compartment without waiting for a response, going deeper into the ship. Unfortunately the light disappeared with him, leaving Mark in the creepy blackness all alone. But the faintest hint of light was already appearing from the opening crack of the rotating landing pad, and Mark spotted his flashlight.

He picked it up, then ran over to where he'd found the workpads and strapped them back in, hoping he lived long enough to see what information they held. He clicked the flashlight to life and took a quick look around the room with the bright beam. He heard voices—shouts—over the cranking of the landing pad, and his mind slammed back to cold reality.

They already had visitors, probably readying to drop from above like he and Alec had done earlier. He had to get that hatch closed before people tried to climb aboard.

He ran over to it and started searching. The door was surrounded by things like cabling, hooks and the plates that linked the bare-bones machinery of the door hydraulics with the more aesthetic wall coverings of the large cargo room. He found the controls on the left side and studied them, picking out the correct button and pushing it. The motor turned on, and with a crank and a squeal, the ramp door began to close, slowly pivoting upward.

He heard more voices, closer now. It looked like he'd have to fight their pursuers off until the door was fully closed. He moved out of direct view and leaned on the wall, looking around as if some magical weapon might appear in front of him. But he quickly accepted reality: all he had was the flashlight and his fists.

The ramp seemed to be taking forever to close—it had only gone up halfway. Its hinges squealed as the large square of metal crept along, angling shut like the slow-motion capture of a Venus flytrap. Mark braced himself, sure that the intruders would make it to him before the thing sealed completely. He gripped the flashlight, wielding it like a short sword, ready to fight. The room outside was much lighter than before, meaning the landing pad was probably about vertical in its rotation.

Two people jumped onto the rising ramp and started climbing aboard. A man and a woman. Mark tensed his muscles and swung his arm around, aiming for the man, but he missed and the guy grabbed his shirt, then yanked his entire body forward. Mark lost his grip on the flashlight, which went tumbling end over end outside; a clang and the crack of glass signaled its demise. Mark slammed onto the metal of the hatch and stared into the man's face—he had absolutely no expression, not even a sign of fatigue or strain from the climb he'd just made.

"You're a bloody spy," the stranger said, as calmly as if they'd just sat down for a cup of coffee together. "And to make it worse, you're trying to steal our Berg. And strike three, you're an ugly son of a gun, aren't you?"

"I was just going to say the same thing about you," Mark replied. Everything had turned

surreal.

The man acted as if he hadn't heard. "I've got him," he called to the other person. "Get inside, stop the door from closing."

It registered with Mark who these two people were. The pilots. He'd heard them speaking earlier.

"Sorry, man," Mark said. The sense of surrealism had turned into an odd flutter in his chest, making him feel almost outside himself. His head thumped with pain. "I'm afraid I can't let you on without proper identification."

The man looked a little taken aback. His partner was farther away, right on the edge of the door, crawling to get in before it closed. Something had snapped inside of Mark. He didn't understand what it was, but something felt different, and there was no way he was going to let these people on board.

Mark gripped the man's shirt and kicked out viciously with his left foot at the woman. He planted it right in her midsection; she yelped and jolted backward, flailed to grab hold of her partner. But it was too late. She tumbled and fell off the rising ledge, her head smacking the other pilot's knee. Mark heard her crumple on the ground of the chamber.

The hatch door was almost closed now, a five-foot gap at most, moving painfully slowly. The man had leaned over the edge of the door to see if his friend was okay, but he turned now to face Mark again, full of rage. Mark felt rage, too. Like nothing he'd ever felt before. Like a storm erupting within.

He reached out and grabbed his foe's shirt, squeezed it in his fist, then growled two words that somehow calmed the storm within him.

"Your turn."

CHAPTER 42

"You're going to die," the man wheezed back through an angry breath. "You're going to die right now."

"No," Mark answered. "I'm not."

He balled his hand into a fist and smashed it into the pilot's cheek. The man cried out, then threw his hands forward, grabbing at Mark's hair and face and clothes. He finally caught Mark's shirt and his shoulder and yanked him into a wrestler's hold. They rolled against the hatch door. A metal ridge cut into Mark's back as the pilot pressed on him from above, leaning forward with his forearm dug into Mark's neck, cutting off the air to his windpipe.

"You messed with the wrong man today," the pilot said in a low, vicious voice. "I've had enough people tick me off without you trying to steal my ship. I'm going to take my anger out on you, boy. And I'm going to do it over a very long period of time. Do you understand?"

He eased back on his arm and Mark sucked in a breath, filling his lungs. Then the pilot grabbed him by the shirt and sat up, putting all his weight on Mark's stomach. The man reached high and swung down with a fist, hitting Mark square in the jaw. It felt as if something cracked in his face. The pilot punched him again and the pain doubled. Mark closed his eyes, tried to tamp down the rage that was building inside him like a nuclear reaction. How much could he take in one day?

"Better not let that door close for good, now," the man said, clearly confident that he'd already won the battle. "As much as it'd be fun to hold your head out there and watch it get squeezed like a grape, I think I'd rather take a little more time."

He slipped off Mark's body and got to his feet, then walked over to the controls and pressed something. There was a lurch that Mark felt in his back, then a squeal, then the continued slow wrenching sound as the door started opening once again. He could see the chamber growing lighter than ever. The landing pad must've fully rotated and was now sinking into the ground. In a few minutes they'd be open to the entire horde of Bruce's people, open to them charging aboard and ending it all.

Fighting the urge to move, Mark waited, letting the fury inside him continue to grow.

The pilot stepped up to Mark, then reached down and grabbed his feet, lifted them with a grunt. "Come on, now. Let's get you in a good position." He started to swing Mark's body around as he walked sideways deeper into the cargo room of the Berg. "I'll make sure you're nice and comfy before—"

Mark sprang to life, screaming and kicking out as he twisted himself to jerk free from the pilot's grip. The man stumbled backward until his back hit the wall next to the reopening ramp door. Mark scrambled to stand up as he lunged forward, finally slamming his shoulder into the man's gut. The man doubled over and wrapped his arms around Mark's back, both of them crashing to the floor. They rolled and tumbled, all swinging arms and punching fists. Mark tried to knee him in the groin, but the man blocked him, then swung up and connected with Mark's chin.

Mark's head snapped back and he fell off the pilot, who leaped forward, getting on top of him once again. But Mark never stopped moving, using his momentum to spin backward and throw the man off. Then he stood up and ran to the controls, realizing with a shock of horror that the ramp door had already lowered several feet. People might swarm aboard when it was fully open, for all he knew.

He quickly pushed the retract button and the door squealed, then started closing again. He was just turning back around to face his foe when the man tackled him, their bodies crashing onto the large slab of the ramp. They slid a few feet, almost to the very edge again. Mark twisted his body and grabbed the pilot's shirt with both hands, trying to fling him off and through the gap of the door, but the man put his feet down and was able to push himself back on top of Mark.

They struggled against each other, punching and kicking. Mark was tired and hungry and weak, but he fought on, fueled by adrenaline alone. He imagined Trina out there somewhere, being held by the bonfire people, probably even crazier with another day gone and the debacle of the forest fire. He had to live. He had to find her. He couldn't let this man stand in his way. That ball of spinning rage—the churning reactor of heat and fire and pain that had been building and building within his chest—finally exploded once and for all.

He lurched with a strength he didn't know he had, throwing the pilot off his body. He was on top of the man before he could right himself, pushing him down onto his back, punching him. Hard. There was blood. The horrific sound of things crunching. Mark felt disconnected from his own body—he almost couldn't see straight. Tiny bright lights danced before his eyes, his body trembled and he felt the blood boiling in his veins.

He was aware on some level that the ramp door was almost closed. On some level he noticed the walls of the chamber, people screaming and yelling, readying to attack the Berg. But Mark had lost all control.

He looked down, was surprised to see himself dragging the guy's body to the edge of the ramp, shoving him halfway out so that the man's head and shoulders hung over the lip of the ramp into open air. He'd tried to free himself from Mark's grip, but Mark didn't let him. He reached out and punched the man again. The pilot yelled and squirmed violently, obviously aware of what Mark intended.

Maybe even more aware than Mark himself. He held on, kept the man in position—half in, half out. Something had changed for Mark. His thoughts were purely focused on the man in his grip and on making him pay for everything. The anger was like a fog that had filled his head. And he couldn't stop himself.

Something had snapped.

The ramp door closed on the pilot's chest. Squeezed him as it strained to come fully closed. The screams that erupted from the man were horrific and pierced Mark to the core, jolting him out of the red-hot rage into which he'd sunk. As if he was seeing for the first time, he realized what he was doing. Torturing another human being. The sound of the man's sternum and ribs breaking, the squeal of the door's hinges as they continued to stress over the obstacle keeping the door open—Mark felt a rush of horror at himself.

He pushed on the pilot's body, but it was wedged tight in the narrowing gap. His screams seemed to vibrate the metal of the Berg, shake the entire thing through and through. Mark

scrambled around and got onto his back, pressed his elbows against the ramp, then, with all his strength, kicked out with both feet, connecting against the man's middle. He budged a few inches more. Mark yelled as he kicked and kicked and kicked, pushing the body away from him, trying to end the man's misery.

With a final kick, Mark knocked the pilot free. The man disappeared through the gap and the ramp door slammed shut.

CHAPTER 43

A deep and unnerving silence filled the cargo room, along with an almost complete darkness. The silence was interrupted seconds later by the grind of a motor, and then the Berg was moving on the tracks, jerking back to the central chamber.

Mark's eyes adjusted to the darkness and he pulled himself up and crawled to the wall, propping himself against it. He felt something inside that he didn't like.

He wrapped his arms around his knees and he buried his head there. He didn't really understand what had just happened to him. Those dancing lights, that fireball of rage, the adrenaline pumping like pistons in an old gas engine. He'd been consumed and out of control, every part of him wanting to destroy that pilot. He'd almost been happy when the man was wedged in the closing door. And then he'd come to his senses and pushed the man out.

It was like Mark had lost his ...

He looked up when he realized the truth. He *had* lost his mind there for a second. Completely. And just because he seemed like his normal self now didn't mean that it hadn't begun. He slowly pushed himself up along the wall until he was standing, and folded his arms. Shivered, rubbed them with his hands.

The virus. The illness. The thing that attacked the human brain the way the man named Anton had described in the barracks. Which reminded him of something else they'd heard down there, ironically from the pilot himself when he'd heard him talking earlier. A single word.

Mark had it. His every instinct told him so. No wonder his head had been hurting so much.

He had the Flare.

CHAPTER 44

A surprising calm came over him.

Hadn't he expected this? Hadn't he come to terms with the fact that their odds of *not* catching the disease were almost zero? Trina probably had it. Lana and Alec, too. Why Deedee seemed immune to the thing—she'd actually been shot with a dart *two months ago*—was beyond him. But what was it Bruce had said? It made sense: anyone who risked unleashing a virus had to have protection for themselves. There had to be a treatment, an antidote somewhere. It just didn't make sense otherwise.

Maybe, just maybe, there was a spark of hope. Maybe.

How many times had he faced death in the last year or so? He was used to it by now. All he could do was focus on the next rung of the ladder: Trina. He had to find Trina. If for no other reason than so he could die with her.

He was startled when the Berg suddenly jolted to a stop. Then there were more sounds of cranking and grinding of gears and pulleys. The landing pad was finally rising toward the sky. The Berg sprang to life—lights flickering overhead and engines and machinery revving.

With an unexpected burst of excitement, Mark sprinted for the door of the cargo room. If Alec was really going to fly this thing, he had to see it with his own eyes.

* * *

Alec looked more comfortable in the cockpit than Mark had ever seen him. He was a blur of activity—pushing buttons, flipping switches and adjusting levers.

"What in the world took you so long?" the man asked, not even pausing long enough to shoot Mark a glance.

"I ran into a little trouble." The last thing Mark wanted to do was talk about it right then. "You're really going to be able to fly us away in this thing?"

"Oh yeah. She's half filled with fuel cells and lookin' right sharp and pretty." He nodded at the windows in front of him, where Mark could see a line of trees coming into view. "But we better hurry before the nut jobs swarm over us and break in somehow."

Mark rushed forward to take a better look. Leaning in, he could see that quite a few of Bruce's people had congregated outside at the rim of the landing station. They seemed a little out of sorts, pointing this way and that, obviously unsure of what to do. But a couple of them were really close to the ship, busy doing something, though Mark didn't have a good enough angle to see what. An alarming thought popped into his head.

"What about the hatch door?" he asked. "You were able to open it from the outside, right?"

"First thing I did was lock out that function. Don't worry." He was still busy at the controls. "We'll be launching this baby in about one minute. You might wanna perch that skinny butt of yours down in a seat and strap in."

"Okay." He wanted to get another look outside first, though. He stepped around Alec and

went to the other end of the line of windows to take a peek. This side faced the wall of the canyon a little more, and the gray stone grabbed his attention before he could look down. His eyes were just running along the length of the granite walls when something flashed in the corner of his vision and he froze. The head of a huge hammer swung up and came at the glass. It made contact with a shattering thud, sending a web of cracks in every direction. Someone had climbed up the side of the Berg.

Mark jumped back as Alec yelled in surprise.

"Hurry, get us up in the air!" Mark called out.

"What do you think I'm doing?" Alec rushed his efforts even more, focusing on the central panel of the controls, holding his finger above a bright green button on the screen.

Mark looked back at the window just in time to see the hammer come down again, breaking all the way through with a horrible crunch and a shower of glass pellets across the controls—the hammer itself followed, bouncing off a panel and hitting the floor. Then a man's face appeared at the opening he'd created, followed by hands and arms as he started to climb in.

"Get rid of that guy!" Alec yelled. At the same time he tapped the green button and the Berg lurched off the ground, the sound of thrusters filling the air like the roar of angry lions.

Mark caught his balance and reached down for the hammer. Just as his fingers closed around the handle someone grabbed a handful of his hair and yanked. An alien screech tore out of his mouth at the pain and he dropped the hammer, beat his fists against the hand and arm that had taken hold of him. But the man held firm and quickly slipped his other arm around Mark's neck, then pulled back, bringing Mark with him.

Mark's head smacked the top edge of the missing window's frame and slipped through it, out into the hot air of the morning. Then half of his body was out, up to the waist—he gripped the window frame to stop himself from falling completely. All he could see were the tops of the trees and blue sky beyond, and he realized with a wave of horror that the man was literally hanging off of him, still holding on to his hair and neck. For the second time that day, Mark couldn't breathe.

The Berg was rising toward the sky and Mark caught a quick glance of Alec looking at him through the window, his eyes wide in shock. Alec moved out of sight, leaving the Berg to hover just a few dozen feet above the ground; then Mark felt the man tugging on his legs, which only made the pain in his neck and head worse. A strangled, wet bark—a sound that scared Mark more than the pain—somehow escaped his own throat.

Alec pulled on him from above. The man hung from him below. It felt as if his body had been put into one of those medieval torture racks, stretching his bones and sinews. He wondered if it was possible for his head to pop off, like a cork from a bottle. He realized that with Alec holding him he could release his grip on the window frame; he beat at his captor's arms, beat at them, clawed them. The world was upside down, the valley floor like an earthen sky.

Mark slipped out the window several inches—a thunderbolt of pure terror flashed through him like an electric shock before his progress stopped again. Something dark blurred past his vision. A black lump followed by a thin shaft of light brown. The hammer. There was an awful thump and a crack and a scream. Alec had thrown the weapon at the

guy's face.

The man's arm slipped from its grip around Mark's neck and he plummeted to the ground. Mark gasped for breath, sucking in the sweet air.

Alec slowly pulled his body up and up, back through the window, then crashed to the floor. Still heaving to get his breath, Mark touched his sore neck.

The old soldier looked at him carefully. Then, seeming to have decided Mark would live, he stood, returned to the controls and lifted the Berg toward the sky.

CHAPTER 45

Mark's stomach didn't do so well with the sudden movement of the Berg. Alec took it straight up until it cleared the walls of the canyon, then sent it hurtling forward like it had been launched from a slingshot. Mark's insides turned over with a surge of nausea; he crawled on his hands and knees until he finally found a bathroom. He pulled himself inside and threw up. Nothing but bile and acid. His throat burned as if he'd swallowed corrosive chemicals.

He sat for a while, until he was able to walk back to the cockpit.

"Food. Please tell me there's food," he croaked.

"And water?" Alec asked him. "That sound good, too?"

Mark nodded even though the old man couldn't see him.

"Let me get this thing landed somewhere first. I'd just hover, but we can't afford to waste all our fuel. We're gonna need it. But I bet there's something to shove down our throats in this hunk of junk. Then we'll go searching for our bonfire friends."

"Please," Mark muttered. His eyelids drooped, and not because he was tired. He knew he was on the verge of passing out from low blood sugar. It seemed a week had gone by since his last meal. And the thirst. His mouth was a bucket of sand.

"You've had a rough go," Alec said quietly. "Just give me a minute or two."

* * *

Mark sat down on the floor again and closed his eyes.

He never quite lost consciousness.

But the world felt disconnected, as if it were a play Mark was watching from the back row, lying on the floor. With a few blankets over his head. Sounds were muffled and his stomach ached from hunger.

Finally the Berg slowed, and then there was a rough bump that shook the ship, followed by silence and stillness. Mark had a long moment when he thought for sure that sleep was coming. And with it, the memories. He fought it, didn't know if he could handle reliving the past at that moment. He heard footsteps from far away. Then Alec was speaking to him.

"Here ya go, son. Pretty much a standard military meal, but it's food and it's full of nutrients. Gonna perk you right up. I flew us to an empty neighborhood between the bunker and downtown Asheville. All the crazies seem to have fled the fire and headed south."

Mark opened his eyes, the lids so heavy he almost had to use his fingers to lift them up. Alec was blurry at first but then came into focus. He held out a silvery foil that had chunks of ... something on top. It didn't matter. It didn't matter at all. Mark grabbed three of them and shoved the delicious—beautifully delicious—morsels into his mouth. Salty and beefy. But when it came time to swallow he could barely get them down.

"Wa—" he began, but then he erupted into a coughing jag that sent the food he couldn't swallow into Alec's face.

His friend wiped it off. "Nice. Really nice."

"Water," Mark croaked out.

"Yeah, I know. Here." He held out a canteen and Mark could hear the liquid sloshing inside.

Mark sat up, groaning from the shock of pain that jolted through his body at the movement.

"Be careful," Alec said. "Don't drink too fast. You'll be sick."

"Okay." Mark took the canteen, paused to steady his hands, then brought it up and tipped the spout over his bottom lip. Glorious, cool water rushed into his mouth and down his throat. He fought off a cough, focused on swallowing without wasting a drop. Then he drank some more.

"That's enough," Alec warned. "Now eat a few more bites of the delicacy I brought you from the mess cabinet."

Mark did, and this time it tasted even better. Saltier and beefier. With a wetted mouth and throat, it went down easier, as well, though he had the worst sore throat of his life. A little strength seeped its way into his muscles. His headache receded a bit. The best news of all was that his nausea was gone.

He felt just good enough that he wanted to sleep.

"You look like a couple of the lightbulbs in your brain flicked back on," Alec said, sitting down. He relaxed back against the wall and stuffed food into his mouth. "This crap ain't half bad, is it?"

"You shouldn't talk with your mouth full," Mark replied with a weak smile. "It's not polite."

"I know." Alec crammed even more food in and exaggerated his movements to make sure Mark saw everything he was chewing. "What kind of a person even needs to be told such a thing? I mean, didn't I have a mama?"

Mark laughed. Genuinely laughed, and it hurt his chest and throat. Made him cough. When he recovered, he asked, "So where did you take us, again?" Then he resumed eating.

"Well, the Berg's bunker was just west of Asheville. So I came a little east—there're a few fancy neighborhoods along this mountainside. I spotted a lot of activity a couple miles south, and I think it might be where all those people from our lovely bonfire experience fled to after they set the forest ablaze. It seems quiet here."

He paused to take another bite. "We're parked in a cul-de-sac—a fancy-schmancy neighborhood if I've ever seen one. Before it got baked in an oven, that is. Used to be a lot of rich folk outside Asheville, ya know. Most of these homes are half ruined now."

"But what about—"

Alec held up his hand to stop Mark's question. "I know. As soon as we get some strength and another few hours of sleep, we'll find our friends."

Mark didn't want to waste any more time, but he knew Alec was right. They needed to rest. "Any sign of ... anything?"

"I thought I recognized some people when we flew over the place south of here. I'm almost positive it's the folks from Deedee's settlement. We'll just have to see if Lana and the others are there, too, like that Bruce seemed to be saying."

Mark closed his eyes for a second, not sure if that was something he should hope for.

They paused to eat and drink some more. Mark was curious to see what it looked like outside, but he was too tired to stand up and go to the window. Plus, he'd seen his fair share of the burnt-out shells folks had once called home. "You're sure we're okay to be parked here? In case you forgot, some wild dude with a hammer broke one of our windows."

"No one's approached yet. All we can do is keep an eye out. And when we go looking for Lana and them, we'll just have to hope people don't notice the extra entrance."

The thought of the man with the hammer made Mark's stomach sink. It made him think of what had come over him when he'd killed the pilot on the hatch door.

Alec noticed something was wrong. "I know you weren't exactly sipping tea and eating crumpets when I left you back in the cargo room all that time. Ready to tell me what happened?"

Mark flicked an embarrassed, almost nervous glance at his friend.

"For a few minutes it was like I lost control of myself, started acting weird. Sadistic, almost."

"Son, that don't mean jack. I've seen many a good man go south on the battlefield, and there wasn't a virus around to blame back then, either. It doesn't mean you ... have it. Humans do crazy things to survive. Have you not spent the last year seeing that every day?"

Mark didn't feel any better. "This was ... different. For a second it felt like it was Christmas morning, watching a guy get crushed to death."

"Really." Alec looked at him for a long time, and Mark had no idea what the man was thinking. "It's gonna be dark in a couple of hours. No good tramping around at night. Let's get us a long dose of shut-eye."

Mark nodded, troubled to the core. He wondered if maybe he should've kept his mouth shut. Yawning, he got comfortable, planning to process it all, think things through for a while.

But a full stomach and a week's worth of exhaustion pulled him to unconsciousness. Naturally, the dreams came next.

Mark is in a conference room in the Lincoln Building, curled up into a ball under the huge table where he guesses very important men and women used to gather and talk about very important things. His stomach aches from the now weeks-old diet of junk food and soda pop scavenged from the vending machines scattered throughout the building. It took some work to break open the things—but a couple of former soldiers like Alec and Lana were trained to break open things, weren't they? People and objects alike.

The Lincoln Building is a terrible place. Hotter than hell. Suffused with the gagging, sickening smell of rotting bodies, people who died from the initial burst of heat and radiation. They are everywhere. Mark and his new friends cleared the entire fifteenth floor, but the rank stench still permeates the air. It's something you just don't grow used to. And of course, there is nothing to do. Boredom has settled in like a cancer in the building, ready to eat away at their sanity. Not to mention the threat of radiation outside—though Alec thinks it's finally dwindling. Even so, they've kept away from the windows as much as possible.

For all that, there is one thing Mark keeps thinking that makes it all seem not quite as bad as it could be: He and Trina have grown closer than ever. Very close. He grins like a fool and is glad no one can see him.

The door opens up and shuts; then there are footsteps. A can rattles across the floor and someone swears under his breath.

"Hey," the someone whispers. Mark thinks it's Baxter. "You awake under there?"

"Yeah," comes Mark's groggy reply. "And if I wasn't I would be now. You're not very good at being quiet."

"Sorry. I was sent to find you—there's a boat heading down Broadway, driving straight toward us. Come have a look."

Mark never thought he'd hear those words—a boat coming down one of the most famous streets in the world, where cars are supposed to drive. But Manhattan has turned into a grid of rivers and streams, the fierce sun constantly reflecting off the waters in spectacular and blinding flashes. It's like they have a sky both above them and below.

"Are you serious?" Mark finally asks, realizing he's been quiet for a few seconds, stunned by the news. He tries not to get his hopes up that they're about to be rescued.

Baxter scoffs. "No, I made it up. Come on."

"Guess the radiation *has* died down, unless a couple of freak shows are driving it." Mark wipes at his face and eyes, then scoots out from underneath the large table. He stands and stretches, yawns again, teasing Baxter by not hurrying. But then the curiosity finally gets to him.

They head out into the hallway, where a fresh wave of heat and stench assaults Mark's senses. After weeks of this, he still gags, willing himself not to throw up.

"Where are they?" he asks, assuming Alec and Lana are the ones who've spotted the boat and are watching it now.

"Down on five. Smells a thousand times worse down there, but that's where the water

line is. It's like rotting fish *and* humans. I hope you haven't eaten in a while."

Mark just shrugs, not wanting to think about food. He's sick of candy bars and potato chips—something he never would've thought possible.

The two of them go to the central bank of stairwells and begin the ten-story trip down to the fifth floor. All is quiet except for the thumps and scuffles of their footsteps, and Mark finds that his excitement over who might be in the boat overcomes the growing stench as they descend. There are bloodstains on the stairs. He sees a chunk of hair and meaty mass on one of the handrails. He can't imagine the panic that ensued in this place when the sun flares struck, and the horrors that resulted. Luckily—for them, anyway—no one was alive by the time they arrived.

They reach the landing of the fifth floor and Trina is waiting at the door to the stairwell.

"Hurry!" she says, motioning with a quick nod to follow her. She breaks into a trot and talks over her shoulder as they maneuver down a long hallway toward the outermost wall of windows. "It's a big yacht—looks like it was nice and fancy before the flares struck. Now it seems like it was built a hundred years ago. Can't believe it floats, much less runs."

"Could you see the people on it yet?" Mark asks.

"No. They're obviously underneath. In the cockpit, the bridge, whatever you call it."

Seems like she knows as much about boats as Mark.

They turn a corner and see Alec and Lana at a section where the windows have been knocked out, the water of the sea lapping against the wall just a foot or so below them outside. The Toad and Misty are sitting on the floor, staring out. Mark hears the boat before he sees it, a coughing, choked sound of engines that have seen better days. Then the battered vessel comes into view past a small building, its back end sunk low into the water as the yacht chugs along. It's about thirty feet long, fifteen wide, with duct tape and plywood boards covering up scattered holes and split seams. A tinted window with spiderwebs of cracks is like an ominous eye, looking at them as it approaches.

"Do they know we're here?" Mark asks. He only allows himself to think that these people are coming to rescue them. Bring food and water, at least. "Did you hail them down?"

"No," Alec answers curtly. "By the looks of it, they're checking out every building. Scavenging, no doubt. But they've seen us by now."

"I just hope they're friendly," Trina whispers, as if she doesn't want the strangers to hear.

"I'll fly to the moon and back if these folks are nice," Alec replies in a completely dead voice. "Stay on your toes, boys and girls. Follow my lead."

The boat is very close now, its noises filling the air along with the smell of fuel. Mark can see the faint shadow of two people behind the darkened window now, and they both appear to be male. They both have short hair, anyway.

The engines of the yacht cut off and its tail end begins to swing around so that the boat can bump lengthwise against the building. Alec and Lana step back, and Mark notices that at some point the Toad and Misty have scooted all the way to the far wall. Trina, Baxter and Mark are standing in a tight group, the tension clear in their faces.

One of the people from the bridge appears on deck, stepping through a doorway from below. It's a man, and he's holding an enormous gun in both hands, the muzzle already pointed at the spectators inside the Lincoln Building. He's one ugly dude, greasy hair matted to his head, a scruffy beard—the kind that looks like a wild fungus on the neck—

and black sunglasses. His skin is filthy and sunburnt, his clothes tattered.

Another person appears, and Mark's surprised to see it's a woman with a shaved head. She deals with securing the boat against the wall as her partner steps closer to the broken window where Alec and Lana stand.

"I want to see every single hand," the man says to them, sweeping his weapon back and forth, pausing for a brief moment on each person. "Two each, up in the air. Go on."

Most of them do as they're commanded, except Alec. Mark hopes the man doesn't do something crazy and get them all shot.

"You really think I'm bluffing?" the stranger says in a raw, scratchy voice. "Do it now or die."

Alec slowly raises his hands toward the ceiling.

The man with the gun doesn't seem satisfied. He's breathing heavier than he should, and staring at Alec through those dark sunglasses. Then he swings his weapon at Baxter and lets loose three quick bursts of fire. The explosions of sound rock the air, and Mark stumbles backward until he slams into the wall of a cubicle. The bullets have torn into Baxter's chest, spraying red mist everywhere and knocking him onto his back with a hard thud. He doesn't even scream, death having taken him already. His torso is a mess of blood and mangled skin.

The man takes in a deep pull of air. "Now I expect you'll do what I say."

CHAPTER 47

Mark twitched in his sleep and almost woke up. He'd always liked Baxter, liked the kid's smart-aleck nature and who-cares attitude. To see such a thing done to him ...

It was something Mark would probably never get over. Of all the memories that came back to haunt his dreams, that one was the most frequent. And Mark wanted to wake up, wanted to leave it behind again instead of reliving the aftermath of what he'd witnessed and the craziness that followed.

But his body needed the rest and wouldn't allow it. Sleep pulled him back down into its embrace, with no intention of comforting his troubled mind.

It's one of those moments when it takes the brain a moment to catch up with the events playing out before your eyes—shock temporarily blocks the path. Mark is on the ground, leaning back at a forty-five-degree angle, his head resting against the wall. Trina has her hands folded against her chest and suddenly screams—a sound like a million frantic crows bursting out of a tunnel. The Toad and Misty have huddled together, their faces masks of terror. Lana and Alec stand straight, their hands still raised. But Mark can see the tension in their muscles.

"Shut up!" the man with the gun yells, spit flying out of his mouth. Trina does, the noise of her scream cutting off like it's been sliced with a blade. "If I hear one more god-awful sound like that I'll shoot whoever makes it. Am I understood?"

Trina is trembling, her hands now covering her mouth. Somehow she manages to nod, but her eyes are still glued to the bloody and lifeless Baxter. Mark doesn't let himself look at the boy. Instead he stares at the man who killed him, hatred clouding his vision.

"All done, boss," the woman on the boat says. She stands up and wipes her fingers on her filthy pants. She's tied the yacht to something on the outside—Mark can see the coiled end of a rope—either oblivious or insensitive to the murder her partner has just committed. Or maybe just used to it. "What now?"

"Go get your gun, idiot," the man answers with a sideways look that leaves no doubt how he has always treated the woman. "Do I need to tell you how to use the bathroom, too?"

Somehow even sadder to Mark than what the guy has just said, the object of his scorn just nods and apologizes. Then she disappears back into the boat for a second, emerging with a similar gun held tightly in both hands. She takes a stance next to her partner and points the weapon at Mark and each of his friends in turn.

"Now here's how this is going to work," the man says. "You want to live, then all you have to do is obey. Easy-peasy. We're here for fuel and food. My guess is you have both, judging by the fact that you aren't a bunch of walking skeletons. And every building this big has generators. Bring us what we need, and we leave. You can even keep some for yourselves. That's how loving we are. All we want is our share."

"Real generous," Alec says in a low voice.

Mark jumps to his feet as the man brings his weapon up and points it directly at the old man's face. "No! Stop!"

The stranger swings it to point at Mark, who throws his hands up and scoots back against the cubicle wall. “Please! Just stop it! We’ll get you whatever you want!”

“That’s right, you will, boy. Now move. All of you. Time to go on a little scavenger hunt.” He jerks his weapon in a gesture to get people in motion.

“Be careful not to step on your dead friend,” the woman says.

“Shut up!” her partner lashes back. “Seriously. You get dumber every day.”

“Sorry, boss.”

She’s suddenly a meek little mouse, head hung low. Mark’s heart is still beating a thousand times a minute, but he can’t help feeling sorry for the lady.

The man returns his attention to the others. “Show us where it’s at. I don’t wanna be here all day.”

Mark half expects Alec to do something crazy, but he just begins walking back toward the stairwell. As he passes Mark, he gives him a quick wink. Mark doesn’t know if he should be encouraged or worried.

They march down the hallway, leaving the bloodied form of Baxter behind, prisoners in what has become their castle over the past few weeks. They reach the stairs and start climbing. Boss—that’s the only way Mark can think of the man with the gun now, hearing over and over in his mind the pathetic way his partner saluted him—takes turns poking people in the back as they ascend, making sure they don’t forget who’s armed.

“Just remember what I did to your buddy,” Boss whispers to Mark when it’s his turn to get prodded.

Mark keeps moving, step by step.

* * *

They spend the next two hours scavenging the Lincoln Building, top to bottom, for food and fuel. Every inch of Mark’s skin is sweating, and his muscles ache from carrying the large containers of generator fuel from the emergency supply room on the thirtieth floor down to the boat. They scour the vending machines, emptying over half of the dwindling stock throughout the many break rooms and other common areas.

The yacht is an oven inside the cabin, which only makes the smell within even worse. As Mark unloads the supplies, he wonders if Boss and his partner have bothered to so much as dip themselves in the warm waters that surround them. They literally live in bathwater—dirty as it may be—yet refuse to bathe. Mark grows more disgusted with the pair on every trip. He also wonders at the biding silence of Alec, who’s worked hard without the slightest sign of rebellion.

They’ve filled almost every spare inch of the vessel when the entire group finds themselves on the twelfth floor—part of one last sweep through the lower half of the building. Boss tells them they can have whatever’s left above that.

The man, still pointing his gun at each of them in turn, is standing next to the windows. The orange sheen of the setting sun paints the glass behind him. His subordinate stands right next to him, looking as blank-minded as ever. Trina is grabbing a few last chip bags and candy bars through the busted cover of a vending machine. The Toad, Misty, Lana, Alec and Darnell are waiting for her, not much to do now. The place is emptied out and each of them is probably like Mark, just counting down the seconds until these people are

gone. And hoping no one else dies.

Alec walks toward Boss, holding his hands up in a conciliatory gesture.

"Careful," the armed man warns. "Now your work's done, I wouldn't mind gettin' a little more target practice. Close-range, even."

"It's done, all right," Alec says in a half growl. "We're not idiots. We wanted to get that boat loaded first. Ya know, before ..."

"Before what?" Boss seems to sense trouble and the muscles of his arms tense; Mark sees his finger tighten on the trigger of the gun.

"This."

Alec suddenly bursts into motion. His hand shoots forward and smacks the weapon out of Boss's hands—the gun fires a wayward shot just as it spins away, clattering on the floor. Boss's partner turns and bolts down the hallway along the bank of windows, as quickly as she's done anything yet. Lana chases her, even though the other woman is armed. Mark barely has time to notice this before Alec throws his body forward and tackles Boss, the two of them slamming into the glass of the large window.

Everything happens so fast. An icy splintering sound fills the room as cracks branch out from their point of impact. Then the entire pane bursts, exploding into a million pieces just as Alec is trying to get his balance and lift himself off of Boss's body. Both of them begin to fall, tipping as if in slow motion, leaning toward the water below. Mark is already rushing at them, diving, then sliding across the floor so that he can brace his feet against the window frame for support while reaching for Alec's arm. He grabs it, grips his fingers, holds tight, but his feet miss and are suddenly in open air. His entire body is about to topple out with Alec and Boss.

Someone grabs him from behind, arms slipping around his chest. Mark holds on to Alec with every ounce of his strength and is looking straight down into the river-street. Boss is falling, madly flailing his arms and legs and screaming. Mark's arms feel like they may come out of their sockets, but Alec recovers his wits quickly, turns his body and puts his free hand on the bottom sill of the window, begins to hoist himself inside while whoever has captured Mark drags him in as well. It's the Toad.

Soon they are all standing again, safe. Lana comes charging back down the hallway.

"She got away," the woman says. "I bet she's hiding in some closet."

"Let's get out of here," Alec replies, already on the move. Mark and the others follow. "Plan worked perfectly. Got the boat stocked up and now it's ours for the taking. We're getting out of the city."

They find the stairwell, descend rapidly, taking two steps at a time. Mark is sweating and exhausted, and anxious about what they're planning to do. Leaving the place that has become home in the wake of the sun flares. Venturing out into the complete unknown. He doesn't know which is stronger, the excitement or the fear.

They make it to the fifth floor, sprint down the hallway, go through the missing window, board the boat.

"Get us loose," Alec yells to Mark.

Alec and Lana go into the cabin. Darnell, the Toad, Misty and Trina find places to sit up top, looking a little lost and a lot uncertain. Mark begins untying the rope the woman used to secure the yacht earlier. He finally gets the knots loose and pulls in the rope just as the

engines come to life and the boat starts moving away from the Lincoln Building. Mark sits on a seat at the tail end of the vessel and twists backward to look up at the towering skyscraper, where the dwindling glow of the day's sunshine reflects an amber sheen.

Boss suddenly leaps out of the water like a crazed dolphin, his arms slamming onto the back of the boat as he begins to frantically scramble on board. His legs kick and scissor as his hands search for anything to hold on to; he grabs a hook and his muscles bulge as he pulls himself up, water streaming off his body. He has a huge purple bruise covering half his face—the other half is red and angry to match his eyes.

"I'm gonna kill you," the man growls. "Every single one of you!"

The boat is picking up speed. Everything explodes inside Mark at once—he's not going to let this sorry excuse for a human ruin their chance to escape. Gripping a seat, he rears back his foot and launches it forward, kicking Boss in the shoulder. The man barely budges. Mark pulls back and kicks him again. Then again. He connects each time. Boss is beginning to lose his grip.

"Let ... go!" Mark yells as he slams his foot into the man's shoulder again.

"Kill ...," Boss says, but he seems to have no strength left.

Mark yells with a burst of adrenaline, then throws all his strength into one last assault, this time leaping up and throwing both feet forward. He smashes them into Boss, connecting with his nose and his neck, and the man releases a strangled scream and lets go, falling back into the wake of the churning boat. His body disappears in the white bubbles.

Mark is desperately sucking in each breath. He scoots himself around and crawls up onto the lip of the seat and looks over the edge. Sees nothing but the wake and black water behind that. Then he spots movement at the open window of the Lincoln Building where Boss fell. It's receding now, growing smaller, but the woman—Boss's partner—is standing there, holding her gun. Mark slouches down, waiting for the barrage of bullets. But instead, he notices the woman aim the weapon at herself, the muzzle propped against the bottom of her chin.

Mark wants to scream, to tell her not to do it. But it's too late.

The woman pulls the trigger.

The boat drives on.

Mark woke up in a cold sweat, as if the spray from the water in his dream had doused him while he slept. His head hurt badly again—like something rolled around loose in his skull every time he moved. Thankfully Alec was easy on him and didn't talk much while they both ate and strengthened themselves for the day ahead. For the search for their friends.

The two of them were sitting in the cockpit, the light of late morning spilling in through the windows. A warm breeze whistled as it blew through the broken one.

"You were too dead to the world to notice," Alec said after they'd sat in silence for a while, "but I took this baby up for an observation run while you were sleeping. And ... I confirmed what I'd suspected. Just a couple miles away, the bonfire ... they ... have Lana, Trina and Deedee. I saw them being herded like sheep."

That left a sick lump in Mark's stomach. "What ... do you mean?"

"A few people were being herded from one house to another. I spotted Lana's black hair and Trina with the kid in her arms. I got closer to make sure." Alec took a deep breath before he finished. "At least we know they're alive and where they are. And now we know what we have to do."

Mark should've been relieved that his friends weren't dead. But instead he was consumed by the gnawing realization that to get them out, they'd have to go in and fight. Two against ... how many?

"Did you forget how to talk, kid?"

Mark had been staring at the back of the pilot's chair as if something mesmerizing were painted there. "No. Just scared." He'd given up long ago trying to act brave for the old army vet.

"Scared. That's good. A fine soldier is always scared. Makes you normal. It's how you respond to it that makes or breaks you."

Mark smiled. "You've given that speech a few times. I think I got it."

"Then pour some water down your gullet and let's get hopping."

"Sounds good." Mark drank long and hard from his canteen, then stood up. The weighty burden of his dream was finally starting to fade a little. "So what's the plan?"

Alec was just wiping his mouth. He nodded in the general direction of the Berg's middle section. "Go get our friends. But first we break into the ship's weapons stash."

Mark knew nothing about Bergs, but Alec knew more than most. In the central area of the ship there was a locked storage facility that required passwords and retinal scans to open. Since they had neither the words nor the eyeballs for such access, they decided to work at it the old-fashioned way: with an axe.

Luckily the Berg was old and had seen its better days many years before, so it only took three turns each and a half hour of sweat to bust the hinges and locks off the metal door. Little shards of steel clattered across the hallway and the big door tipped over and slammed into the opposite wall. The echo seemed to reverberate through the vessel for a solid minute.

Alec had thrown the last blow of the axe to make it happen. "Let's hope there's still something inside this beast," he announced.

The storage room was dark and smelled like dust. The Berg had power, but most of the lights had been broken, except for a small red emergency bulb in the corner that made everything look like it was washed in blood. Alec started searching, but Mark could already see that most of the shelves were empty. Nothing but trash and discarded containers strewn about from the ship tipping upside down now and then. Alec swore under his breath with every disappointing discovery, and Mark was feeling it, too. How could they possibly have a chance if all they had when they went after Trina were their fists and their feet?

"There's something over here," Alec muttered, his voice strained. He was already working to get open whatever he'd found.

Mark stepped up to him and looked over his shoulder. The object was mostly in shadow, but it appeared to be a large box with several metal clasps.

"It's useless," Alec finally said when his hands slipped off the clasps for the third time. "Go get me that axe."

Mark quickly grabbed it from the hallway where Alec had dropped it after pounding the door hinges. He hefted it in his hands, ready to take a shot at getting the box open.

"You're gonna do it?" Alec asked, straightening up. "You sure about that?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Alec pointed at the box. "Boy, do you have any idea what could be inside that thing? Explosives. High-voltage machinery. Poison. Who knows?"

"And?" Mark pushed.

"Well, I wouldn't just start whacking at it or we might be dead before noon. We need to be careful. Delicate, precise hits on the clasps."

Mark almost laughed. "Since there's not one delicate cell in your entire body, I think I'll give it a go."

"Fair enough," Alec replied, taking a step back and sweeping his hand out with a bow. "Just be careful."

Mark gripped the handle of the axe tightly and leaned in, taking little chops instead of full swings at the small but stubborn brackets. Sweat poured down his face and the thing almost slipped out of his hands a couple of times, but eventually he broke the first seal and moved on to the next one. Ten minutes later his shoulders ached like nothing else and his fingers had grown almost numb from gripping so hard. But he'd broken through every last clasp.

He stood up and stretched his back, unable to keep himself from wincing. "Man, that wasn't quite as easy as it looked."

They both laughed, which made Mark wonder where all the sudden levity had come from. The task ahead of them was treacherous and scary. But for some reason his mind refused to focus on that.

"Feels good to get yourself worked up in a sweat, doesn't it?" Alec asked. "Now let's see what we've got waiting for us. Grab that end."

Mark slipped his fingers under the small lip of the lid and waited for Alec's signal. The man counted to three and then they both lifted—it was heavy but they were able to get it up and swing it against the wall, where it crashed with a boom. All Mark could see inside

the box were shiny, elongated forms that reflected the red light. The things almost looked wet.

"What *are* those?" Mark asked. He glanced over at Alec and saw a wide-eyed, almost crazy expression on the man's face. "Based on that look, I'm guessing you know exactly what they are."

"Oh, yeah," Alec said in a tight whisper. "I do. I really think I do."

"And?" Mark was almost bursting from curiosity now.

Instead of answering, Alec leaned down and grabbed one of the objects from the box. He lifted it up—the thing was the size and shape of a rifle—and examined it, turning it in his hands. It appeared to be made mostly of silver metal and plastic, with little tubes spiraling down the long shaft of its main body. One end was a gunlike butt with a trigger, and the other end looked like an elongated bubble with a spout popping out. There was a strap to sling across your shoulder.

"What *is* that thing?" Mark asked, hearing the awe in his own voice.

Alec was just shaking his head back and forth, in obvious disbelief as he continued studying the object in his hands. "Do you have any idea how much these things cost? They were way too expensive to ever make it to the actual weapons market. I can't believe I'm holding one."

"What?" Mark asked, filled with impatience. "What *is* it?"

Alec finally looked up and met his eyes. "This bad boy is called a Transvice."

"A Transvice?" Mark repeated. "What does it do?"

Alec held the strange weapon up as if it were some holy relic.

"It makes people dissolve into thin air."

CHAPTER 49

“Dissolve?” Mark said skeptically. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, it won’t matter much if these things don’t even work.” Alec inspected the box for a minute, then removed a bulky black thing with silvery latches. He took his precious items and moved past Mark, out of the storage room and into the hallway and beyond. “Come on!” he yelled when he’d disappeared.

Mark spared a last glance at the menacing, almost magical items shining inside the box, then took off to catch up with the man. He found him back in the cockpit, sitting in the captain’s chair, admiring the weapon in his hands. He looked like a kid with a new toy. The black thing he’d also retrieved was sitting on the floor. It looked like a cradle for the weapon. Some kind of charging device, perhaps.

“Okay,” Mark said as he sidled up to stand behind Alec. “Tell me what that thing does.”

“Just a sec,” Alec said as he placed his toy in the long cradle bay of the black thing. He pushed a button on a small control pad on the side. Something chirped, then hummed; then there was a gray light emanating from the entire body of the weapon itself.

“We’ll charge her up and then you’ll see what she does,” Alec announced proudly. He looked up at Mark. “Ever heard of a Flat Trans?”

Mark rolled his eyes. “Of course I have. I live on planet Earth.”

“Okay, wise guy. Calm your shorts. Anyway, you know how expensive those things are, right? And how they work?”

Mark shrugged and took a seat on the floor—the same spot where he’d fallen asleep at some point a million years ago, it seemed. “It’s not like I’ve ever used one. Or even seen one. But I know it’s a molecular transporter.”

Alec barked a forced laugh. “Obviously you haven’t seen one, because you don’t have a billion dollars. Or work for the government. Just one of those devices costs more than you could count to in a year. But you’re right, that’s how they work. Breaking down molecular structures and then reassembling them at the receiver point. Well, this bad boy of a gun does the same thing, except it only does half the job.”

Mark looked at the charging weapon and got the chills. “You mean it breaks people apart? Splits them into tiny little pieces?”

“Yep. That about sums it up. Throws them into the air like the tossed ashes of the dearly departed. For all I know they fly around for the rest of eternity screaming for someone to put them back together again. Or maybe it’s just instant and over. No way to tell. Maybe it’s not such a bad way to die.”

Mark shook his head. Modern technology. The world had some pretty cool stuff, but it didn’t amount to much when the sun decided to wipe out most of civilization.

“So I guess that’s it, then?” Mark asked. “Didn’t seem like there was anything else in that room.”

“Nope. So ... let’s hope these puppies work.”

Mark told himself to make sure he didn’t shoot his own foot. “How long till it charges?”

“Not long. Just enough time for us to pack up some supplies for the rescue mission.”

Talking like a soldier, Mark thought. “Then we’ll test it out while we charge one up for you. Maybe a spare for the road.”

Mark stared at the charging device until Alec dragged him to his feet to help prepare for their journey.

* * *

A half hour later, they had backpacks full of food and water and some clean clothes they’d found hidden away in the small barracks section. The first Transvice had been fully charged and was firmly gripped in Alec’s hands, its strap across his shoulder, as they opened up the ramp door of the cargo hatch. They’d done a cursory search of their surroundings and didn’t see anyone close, so they’d decided it was safe to test the new fancy weapon.

Mark winced as the hinges of the ramp squealed open, and he looked over at his proud partner.

“Holding that thing a little tightly, aren’t you?” The Transvice glistened with shine and, now charged, put out a faint orange glow.

Alec gave Mark a look that said *Give me a break*. “These might look fragile, but they’re far from it. We could drop it from the top of the Lincoln Building and it wouldn’t break.”

“That’s because it’d land in the water.”

Alec twisted and pulled the Transvice up so that its business end—that strange little spout coming from the long bubble—was pointing straight at him.

Mark flinched in spite of himself. “Not funny,” he said.

“Especially if I pulled the trigger.”

The ramp door thumped to its open position on the cracked pavement of the cul-de-sac in which they were parked. A sudden and stark silence fell over the world, broken only by the distant cries of a bird. Warm, humid air engulfed them, making it almost hard to breathe. Mark coughed when he tried to pull in a deep breath.

“Come on,” Alec said, already stomping down the ramp. “Let’s find us a squirrel.” He swept the weapon back and forth as he walked, looking for any interlopers. “Or better yet, one of the crazies who might’ve strayed over here. Too bad these things have to be charged or we could get rid of this virus problem in a jiffy. Sweep these old neighborhoods nice and clean.”

Mark joined him on the ground below the Berg, wary that someone might be watching from the ruined homes surrounding them or from the burnt woods beyond those. “Your value of human life brings tears to my eyes,” he muttered.

“Long-term,” Alec replied. “Sometimes you gotta think long-term. But they’re just words, son. Just words.”

Being in the suburbs was really unsettling Mark—he’d grown used to life in the mountains, in the woods, living in a hut. This abandoned neighborhood just made him feel odd and uncomfortable. He needed to steel up his nerves before they set out to do the real business at hand. “Let’s get this test over with.”

Alec started walking toward a brick mailbox that was half destroyed. It looked like someone had smashed into it with a car or truck during a frantic attempt to escape.

“All right, then,” he said. “I wanted to test it on something alive—it works much better with living, organic material. But you’re right ... we need to be quick about it. I’ll try

zapping this pile of br—”

A door slammed open in the half-crumbled house closest to them and a man came out of it running straight for them, screaming at the top of his lungs. His words were indecipherable, and his eyes were full of madness, his hair ratty and matted; sores covered his face, as if he'd been trying to claw through his own skin. And he was completely naked.

Mark stumbled a couple of steps backward, stunned by the man's appearance and scared out of his mind. He was searching for something to do or say.

But Alec had already raised his weapon, pointing the Transvice directly at the quickly approaching man.

“Stop!” the vet yelled. “Stop or you’re ...” He gave up because the wild man coming at him was obviously not listening. Screaming nonsensical things, stumbling but not slowing, heading for Alec.

A sharp ping sounded, seemingly from everywhere at once, followed by a rushing, spinning sound, like the whirr of a jet engine. Mark noticed that the orange light emanating from the Transvice had brightened, visible even in the sunshine. Then Alec suddenly jerked backward when a bolt of pure, brilliant white light shot out of the weapon and slammed into the chest of the screaming man.

His cries cut off instantly, like he'd been sealed in a tomb. His body turned gray as ash from top to bottom, all details and dimension disappearing so that he looked like a cutout of gray cloth, shimmering and rippling. Then he exploded into a mist, evaporating into nothingness. Just like that, without leaving a single trace that Mark could see.

He turned to look at Alec, who'd lowered his weapon and was breathing heavily, his eyes still wide and staring at the spot the man had occupied just seconds earlier.

The old soldier finally returned Mark's stunned stare. “I guess it works.”

Mark was at a loss for words. The spectacle of the Transvice dissolving a person like a cloud of smoke caught in the wind wasn't even what weighed on his thoughts the heaviest. A completely insane man had just charged out of a house, straight at them. What had he been thinking? Was he attacking or begging for help? Were others going to be as bad off? As ... crazy?

It haunted him through and through, witnessing what the disease did to people. *Was doing.* It had to be getting worse. That guy had been utterly *nuts*. And Mark had already felt something like it—the faintest trace—starting within him. There was a beast hidden inside, and soon it might come out and make him look like the man Alec had zapped with the Transvice.

"You okay over there?"

Mark shook his head and came back to his senses. "No, I'm not okay. Did you see that dude?"

"Yeah. I saw him! Why do you think I evaporated him into oblivion?" Alec was resting the weapon against its strap, looking around for signs of more people. So far there were none.

Though it should've happened a long time ago, it finally hit Mark—like a hammer to his heart—just how much trouble Trina was in. Held prisoner by lunatics who could now be as bad off as the one he'd just seen. And Mark and Alec had taken the time to sleep? To eat? To pack? He suddenly hated himself.

"We have to go rescue her," he said.

"What's that?" Alec was walking toward him.

Mark raised his eyes and glared at his friend. "We have to go. Now."

The next hour was a mix of maddening rushing around, then equally maddening waiting.

They closed the ramp door, Alec standing by with the Transvice in case anyone tried to board during the agonizing couple of minutes it took the thing to pull all the way shut. Then they made sure their packs were ready to go and Alec gave Mark a quick lesson on how to hold and shoot the Transvice. It seemed straightforward enough. Finally the soldier got the Berg up and running, its thrusters pushing them into the sky.

They flew low, Mark the key observer, searching the ground below them as they passed. As they got closer to the neighborhood ruins in which Alec had seen Trina and the others, Mark definitely saw more signs of life. People running between homes in little groups; a few fires in yards and smoke coming from half-crumbled chimneys; carcasses of dead animals that had been stripped of meat. He even saw a few humans lying lifeless here and there—sometimes piles of them.

"We're right on the outskirts of Asheville," Alec pointed out. They were at the head of a large valley, fed into by the foothills of the mountain forests that had burned in the recent fire. Expensive developments of big houses dotted the sides of those foothills. Several of the homes had been burned to the ground, nothing left but charred black swaths of debris.

Mark saw dozens of people milling about in packs here and there along the streets. A handful of them had seen the Berg now—some were pointing up at the ship, some running for cover. But the majority didn't seem to have noticed at all, as if they'd been struck deaf and blind. "There's a huge group of them on that street." He pointed at them. Alec nodded. "That's where I saw them put Trina, Lana, and the kid in one of the houses."

Alec banked the Berg to swoop in and get a closer look. He pulled up and hovered about a hundred feet above the spot, then joined Mark at the windows. The two of them looked down on a complete nightmare.

It was as if a mental hospital had released all its patients. There was no order to the madness that Mark witnessed below him. Here he saw a girl lying flat on her back, screaming at no one. There he saw three women beating two men who'd been tied together, back to back. In another spot, people were dancing and drinking some kind of black liquid out of a pot that boiled over a makeshift fire pit. Others were running around in circles, still others stumbling about as if drunk.

But then Mark saw the worst thing of all. And he no longer had any doubt that the people who'd gathered there were beyond any kind of help.

A small group of men and women were fighting over something that looked like it had once been a person, their hands and faces covered in blood.

Mark was simultaneously revolted and terrified that he might be looking at the remains of the only girl he'd ever loved. His whole body suddenly shook, trembling from head to toe.

"Go down," he growled. "Go down there right now! Let me out!"

Alec had backed away from the window, his face as pale a thing as Mark had ever seen. "I ... we can't do that."

A furious burst of anger shot through Mark. "We can't give up now!"

"What're you talking about, kid? We need to land in a safer place or they'll swarm this thing. We'll need it to get back to safety. We won't go too far."

Mark couldn't believe how heavily he was breathing. "Okay ... okay. Sorry. But ... just hurry."

"After what we just saw?" Alec asked as he was already positioning himself at the controls. "Yeah, I think that's sound advice."

Mark stumbled, leaned against the wall. The anger inside him was being replaced by an overwhelming sadness. How could she possibly still be alive in the midst of such madness? What was this Flare virus? What possibly could've possessed any person to want to spread it? Every question only increased his anguish. And there were no answers.

The Berg came to life and banked again, turning back toward the way they'd come. Mark wondered how many of the people down below had even noticed that a huge ship was just hovering right above them. They flew for a few minutes, and when Alec seemed satisfied, he landed the Berg in a cul-de-sac surrounded by empty lots, part of some developmental expansion that had never happened. And never would.

"That whole street was full of people," Mark said as he and his friend walked back to the cargo room. They both carried a fully charged Transvice and had backpacks strapped to their shoulders. "And there were signs of them in every house. They're probably in that entire section of the neighborhood."

"For all we know they might've moved Lana and them again," Alec replied. "It would be smart to check every house in that section. But remember—they were alive this morning. I saw them, no doubt. Don't give up hope yet, son."

"You only call me son when you're scared," Mark answered.

Alec smiled kindly. "Exactly."

They made it to the big cargo room and Alec went to the control pad, pressed the ramp buttons. The hatch began to open, announcing their presence with its screeching hinges.

"Do you think the ship will be safe while we're gone?" Mark asked, the broken window still haunting him.

"I've got the remote control here. We'll lock her up. That's the best we can do."

The door touched down and the noises ceased. The stifling hot air enveloped them as they walked to the bottom of the metal slab. They'd just stepped off when Alec pushed a button on the pad and sent the ramp closing up again. Soon it sealed shut and all was silent.

Mark looked at Alec, and Alec looked back. Mark thought it was a tight contest as to whose eyes showed more fire.

"Let's go get our friends," Mark said.

The two of them began walking away from the Berg, weapons hefted in their arms, marching toward the madness and chaos that waited down the street.

CHAPTER 51

The air was dusty and dry.

With each step it seemed to become thicker, almost choking them. Sweat already covered every inch of Mark's body, and the breeze that swept across them now and then felt as if it came from a furnace, doing nothing to cool his skin. He pressed on, hoping his palms wouldn't become too slippery to handle the weapon properly. The sun hung above them like the eye of some hellish beast looking down, wilting the world around them.

"It's been a while since I've been out like this during the middle of the day," Mark said, the effort of speaking making him thirsty. His tongue felt swollen. "Gonna have one sweet sunburn come tomorrow." He knew what he was doing. Trying to convince himself that things weren't so bad—that he wasn't losing it up top, that his anger and headaches weren't going to hinder his concentration and focus and everything was going to be fine. But the effort seemed pointless.

They reached their first crossroads and Alec pointed to the right. "Okay, it's just a couple of turns up that way. Let's start sticking closer to the houses."

Mark followed Alec's lead, crossing the dead lawn—now nothing but weeds and rocks—into the shadow of a home that had once been a mansion. All stone and dark wood, it had held up for the most part, though it now had a faded, sad look, as if losing its former occupants had stolen its soul away.

Alec leaned back against the wall and Mark did the same behind him. They swept their gazes—and weapons—back to where they'd just come from to see if anyone was following them. There wasn't a person in sight. Strangely, though, the breeze had stopped, so that the world seemed as lifeless as the neighborhood itself. Mark shifted in his sticky clothes.

"We need to stay hydrated," Alec said, placing his weapon on the ground. He slipped off his backpack and pulled out one of his two canteens. After a long drink he handed it to Mark, who relished every drop as it slicked his parched mouth and throat.

"Oh, man," he said when he finished, handing the canteen back to Alec. "That was the single best drink I've ever had in my life. That one right there."

"Sayin' a lot," Alec muttered as he put the thing away and hunched into his backpack once again. "Considering all the times we've been thirsty in the last year."

"I think that crazy dude you ... evaporated got me all worked up. But I'm ready to go now." He really did feel invigorated, as if the canteen had been full of adrenaline instead of water.

Alec picked up his weapon and slung the strap across his shoulder. "Follow me. From here on out we'll keep the houses between us and the streets."

"Sounds good."

Alec slipped out of the shade and made a beeline for the neighboring yard, heading toward the back. Mark was right on his heels.

They kept the same routine for the next dozen or so homes: A quick sprint across the dead, lifeless yards, slipping into the shade of the buildings; then they'd slink their way around

the back to the other side and Alec would peek around the corner, searching for any sign of company. Once he gave the all clear, they sprinted to the next house and started again.

They made it to the end of another street, where you could turn left or right.

"Okay," Alec whispered. "We need to head down this road and take the second left. That one runs into the big street where we saw all that partying going on."

"Partying?" Mark repeated.

"Yeah. It reminded me of some crankheads we busted in the twenties when martial law was declared. Those people were just as nuts—bloody hell-bent psychos, they were. Come on."

Crankheads. Mark had known some druggies in his life, but those were the worst. The drug had gotten stronger and stronger over the decades. Now it was something you never came back from. Never. For some reason the word stuck in Mark's mind.

"Hey!" Alec was halfway to the next house, and he turned back toward Mark. "Fine time to daydream!"

Mark shook off the cobwebs and ran after Alec. He caught up and they booked it to the side of a three-story mansion, the shade a welcome relief as always. Even if it didn't last long. They sidled along the wall until they reached the back. Alec took a peek; then they stepped around the corner and started for the other side. Mark had only taken three or four steps when he heard a wet, cackling sound above him. He looked up, half expecting to see some kind of exotic animal, the noise had been so strange and alien.

But there was a woman perched on the roof, as ratty and filthy as any of the other infected Mark had seen recently. Her hair stuck out in every direction and her face was smeared with mud, the pattern almost ritualistic-looking.

She made that same cackling sound—somewhere between a laugh and a racking cough. She smiled, revealing a set of perfectly white teeth, but then turned it into a snarl. After another burst of cackles she rolled backward and disappeared behind the lip of the roof's gutter—one of the few homes that still *had* a roof.

Mark shuddered. He hoped he'd be able to get the image of the woman out of his mind. He turned back and saw Alec was standing a few feet away from the house, aiming his weapon toward the roof but with no shot.

"Where'd she go?" the man asked absently.

"Let's just get out of here. Maybe she's by herself."

"Fat chance."

They shuffled along until they reached the far corner of the back side of the house. Alec leaned out for a quick look.

"All clear. We're getting closer, so buck up and look alive."

Mark nodded.

Alec took off for the next house and Mark was just stepping out to do the same when a horrific screech stopped him cold. He looked up just in time to see the woman leap off the roof, flying through the air with her arms outstretched like wings. Her face was lit with madness as she shrieked, plummeting toward Mark, who couldn't believe what he was seeing.

He turned to run but it was too late. Her body slammed into his shoulders and they both crashed to the ground.

CHAPTER 52

She went for his eyes, as if the impact of the fall had done nothing to her. Howls poured from her mouth as if she were some kind of tortured creature. The wind had been knocked out of him, and his knees ached where they'd thumped against the hard ground. He rolled over, gasping for air as he grabbed her hands, tried to force them away from his face. She ripped free of his grasp and clawed at his ears, his nose, his cheeks, scratching and slapping. He continued to fight her off.

"Help!" he screamed to Alec.

"Push her off so I can get a clear shot!" the man yelled back.

Mark twisted his body and darted a quick glance at Alec. He was standing there, hopping around as he aimed his weapon, waiting until he could risk firing the Transvice at the woman.

"Just come get—" Mark started to yell, but her fingers were suddenly in his mouth, pulling at his lips. She hooked a finger into his cheek and pulled as if trying to rip the side of his face off, but her finger slipped out. Her hand flew up into the air, then came crashing back into his face with a clenched fist. Pain and anger burst through him like a lit chain of firecrackers.

Finally able to breathe, he got his hands underneath her body and stuck his elbows out, then pushed hard. She flew off him, crashing onto her back with an audible thud that momentarily shut her up. Then she was scrambling to get back onto her hands and knees. But Mark had righted himself first, and he lurched forward, then planted his weight on his left foot and kicked out with his right, slamming the toe of his shoe into the side of her head. She screamed and flopped over, curled up into a ball and held her face in her arms. Rocked back and forth, whimpering.

Mark quickly scrambled away from her. "Go ahead, do it!"

But Alec didn't. He calmly walked up to stand beside Mark, the end of his weapon pointed at the suffering woman. "It'd be a waste. Let's save it for bigger game."

"But what if she follows us? Goes and gets her friends? Ruins our chance at surprising them up ahead?"

Alec gave her a long look, then raised his eyes to Mark. "If it makes you feel better, then you do it." He turned and started walking toward the next house, scanning the area for potential enemies.

Mark went over to where he'd dropped his Transvice and backpack in the melee of fighting off the crazy woman. He didn't take his eyes off her as he picked both items up, slinging the pack onto his shoulders and tightening the straps, then hefting the weapon in both hands once they were free. He aimed it at the lady and walked closer until he was just a few feet away. Still she lay curled up in the fetal position, whimpering and moaning, rocking back and forth. Mark found that he felt no pity, no sorrow. She was past being human, had lost every ounce of sanity, and that wasn't his fault. And for all he knew, she had friends nearby, or was just playing weak so that they'd walk away and leave her alone.

No. There wasn't time for pity anymore.

He took another step back, firmly pressed the butt of the weapon against his chest, aimed a little more precisely and pulled the trigger. A buzz and hum filled the air; then the Transvice recoiled and shot out a beam of white light that sliced into the woman's body. She didn't have time to scream before her body turned into a rippling wave of gray and exploded into a fine mist, vanishing in an instant.

Mark had stumbled two steps backward, but he was just glad he hadn't fallen down. He stared at the empty space on the ground where the woman had been lying, then finally looked up to see that Alec had stopped and was facing him, eyeing him with an unreadable expression on his face. But there seemed to be a mix of shock and unmistakable pride in there somewhere.

"Our friends," Mark said, sure that he'd never heard such a bitter voice escape his own lips before. "That's all we can think about."

He lifted the weapon, nestled it in the crook between his neck and shoulder and held it there with one hand while dropping the other to rest at his side. Then he calmly and quietly walked toward Alec.

The old soldier waited for him and didn't say a word. They moved on to the next house.

Mark began to hear the chaos after passing two more houses. Screams and laughter and what sounded like metal beating on metal. The screams were the most chilling, and he didn't know if he was prepared to see their source. He tried not to think about the fact that he might end up just as sick as the people he could hear. He might have already started the journey there.

After dodging and weaving past several more houses, he and Alec finally reached the street they'd seen from the sky.

Alec held up his hand to stop Mark behind the last house on the block. It faced the road yet still provided some protection from being seen. They stood in the shade of a half-crumbled awning.

"Okay," Alec said, slipping off his backpack. "This is it. Let's get ourselves fed and watered up. Then we're going in hot and heavy."

Mark was surprised at how little fear he felt, at least at that moment. Maybe it was because they were taking a short break and the situation didn't seem real yet. But if anything, it'd been building up for so long he was just anxious to get out there and let what happened happen. His head was throbbing again badly, and he knew somehow that it was only going to get worse. He couldn't afford to waste time.

They sat down and ate some of the dried, packaged food scavenged from the Berg. Mark enjoyed every swallow of the water from his canteen. He had the fleeting thought that it could be the last time he ever drank the stuff. He shook his head. The morbid thoughts were becoming harder and harder to push from his mind. He crammed the last couple of bites into his mouth and stood up.

"I can't take it anymore," he said. He reached down, picked up his backpack and slung it onto his shoulders. "Let's get out there and find our friends."

Alec gave him a sharp look.

"I just meant with all the waiting.... I can't take it." His head ached but he tried hard to ignore it. "Come on. Let's do this."

Alec stood up and got himself packed and prepared. Once he was done, the two of them hoisted their weapons into their hands, ready for battle.

"Remember," Alec said, "there might be no defense against these Transvices. But that doesn't mean anything if we get the damn things taken from us. Do not, I repeat, *do not* let anyone get close enough to get it out of your hands. And keep the strap over your shoulder. That's our number one priority—keeping these babies for ourselves."

Mark gripped his tightly, as if someone were going to try to take it from him right then and there, and nodded. "Don't worry. I won't let anyone get close."

Alec put out his hand. "We're going to make it through this, but just in case..."

Mark shook the man's hand, squeezing it. "Thanks for the billion times you saved my life."

"It's been an honor serving with you, kid. Maybe today you'll save mine a couple more times."

"I'll do my best."

They hefted their weapons and turned the corner of the house. Alec looked at Mark and nodded, then burst into a full-on sprint. Mark followed his lead and ran behind him into the street.

The main pack of infected were farther down the road, but there were enough people nearby for the two to be wary. One woman sat square in the middle of the road, clapping her hands in a rhythmic pattern. A few feet away from her, two men were fighting over what looked like a dead rat. Another guy was standing on the corner, singing at the top of his lungs.

Mark and Alec crossed the street and headed toward the first home. Like most of the ruins in the wealthy neighborhood, it was huge and half burned down. What remained had rotted. Mark followed Alec closely, stopping at the side of the house. They inched up against the wall and caught their breath. No one seemed to have noticed them yet. Of course, many hadn't even looked up when they'd been in the Berg right over their heads, thrusters burning louder than anything Mark could imagine.

"Okay," Alec said. "When I saw them, Lana and the others were being led to a house down there." He nodded toward the street to the right. "But I think we should search each one to be sure. If they've been moved, I'd rather not miss them. If we can avoid the main pack of wackos up the street, all the better."

"Might as well get started, then," Mark replied. "Right here."

Alec nodded. "Come on."

They slipped out from the protection of the wall and headed for the front door—only to run straight into a man standing in front of the entrance. He was dressed in tattered clothing and his face was dirty, a red gash taking up most of his cheek.

"Get out of the way," Alec barked. "Step away from the door and into the yard or you'll be dead in five seconds."

The man gave them a blank look. Then he raised his eyebrows once and did as he was told, stepping calmly off the porch and walking—slowly—onto the weedy, rocky front yard. And he kept walking, without a backward glance, until he reached the sidewalk, where he turned to the right and headed for the activity down the road.

Alec shook his head. "Be ready in case someone jumps out at us."

Mark planted his feet and aimed his weapon.

Alec held his Transvice with one hand and reached out with the other, grabbing the door and pulling it open. He took a step back as it swung wide, giving Mark a clear shot if he needed it. But the place was empty.

"You go first so I can watch your back," Alec said, waving his arm for Mark to enter.

"Or watch me get eaten before you do."

"Trust me on this one, kid. It's better for you if I'm back here. Now get moving."

A surge of excitement was pumping through Mark's body. Fear no longer tugged at him; he was itching to do something. He gave Alec a curt nod and stepped up to the porch and entered the house, sweeping his weapon left and right as he searched the room. Everything was hot and dusty and dark, sunlight visible only through holes in the walls. The upstairs seemed much lighter, though.

The floor creaked with every step he took.

"Stop and listen for a sec," Alec said behind him.

Mark stilled his body and strained his ears. Other than the distant sounds of the chaotic dance taking place down the street, he couldn't hear a thing. The house was silent.

"Let's go top to bottom," Alec suggested.

The stairs proved to be too broken to manage. Mark gave up after his foot went completely through the third step.

Alec motioned toward a door that seemed likely to lead to the basement. "Bag that idea. I don't hear anything up there. Let's check it out down below, then move on."

Mark carefully removed himself from the stairs and went to the basement door. He gave Alec a confirming look, grabbed the handle and jerked it open. Alec swung his weapon into the gap in case anyone attacked, but nothing happened. A rush of moist, noxious air swept up and over Mark, and he gagged. He had to cough and swallow a couple of times to keep himself from throwing up.

Alec decided to go first this time, stepping through the doorway and onto the landing. He reached back and pulled his flashlight out of his pack, clicked it on and shined it down the steps. Mark leaned in to see dust motes dancing in the bright beam. Alec was just putting his foot forward to start down when a voice rang out from below.

"C-c-come any closer and I'll l-l-light the match."

It was a man's voice, weak and shaky. Alec glanced back at Mark with a questioning look.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mark caught movement, at the bottom of the steps and gestured toward it with his weapon. Alec shined the light down there to reveal the person who'd spoken, who'd just appeared out of the darkness. He was trembling top to bottom and soaking wet, his dark hair matted to his head and his clothes dripping. Little puddles were already forming on the floor. The man's face was starkly pale, as if he hadn't left the basement in weeks. His eyes squinted against the brightness of the flashlight.

At first Mark wondered if the man was just sweating profusely. Then he wondered if maybe the guy had some kind of busted pipe or groundwater down there. But then he caught a whiff of gasoline or kerosene—some kind of fuel. And then he noticed that the guy had things in his hands, holding them tight to his waist. In one, he held a rectangular box. In the other, a single match.

"Take one more step and I'll light it," the man said.

CHAPTER 54

Mark wanted to turn and run, but Alec hadn't moved yet. He just stood there with his weapon aimed down the stairs at the man with the match.

"We didn't come here to hurt you," Alec said carefully. "We're just looking for some friends of ours. Is anybody else down there?"

It seemed as if the man hadn't heard anything Alec had said. He just continued to stand there, trembling and dripping with fuel. "They're scared of fire, you know. Everyone is scared of fire, no matter how far your mind has gone. They don't bother me down here. Not with my matches and gasoline."

"Trina!" Mark called out. "Lana! Are you guys here?"

No one responded, and the man with the match wasn't fazed by the outburst. "It's your choice, my new friends. You can take a step toward me and I'll light the flames that'll take me away once and for all. Or you can go on your merry way and let me live another day."

Alec was slowly shaking his head. He finally started to back away from the steps, pushing against Mark until they were both in the hallway again. Without a word, Alec reached out and slowly closed the door until it clicked softly. Then he turned toward Mark.

"What kind of world has this become?"

"A really sick one." Mark was feeling it, too. Something about seeing that guy doused in fuel, holding a match. For some reason he just seemed to sum things up. "And I doubt its end will be so happy for us. All we can do is find our friends and make sure we die on our own terms."

"Well said, son. Well said."

Mark and Alec quietly exited the first house and moved on to the next.

The sounds were louder now. In a crouching run, Alec and Mark had made their way to the home across the street, planning to follow a zigzagging route. A few stragglers noticed them and pointed but moved on quickly enough. Mark hoped their luck would hold and no one would give them too much thought. Although the shiny weapons were bound to ruin that plan.

They'd just stepped up to the porch of the next house when two small children came running out. Mark's finger was twitching on the trigger, but relief washed over him when he realized the advancing figures were only kids. They were filthy and had that strange distant look in their eyes. They giggled and ran away, but as soon as they disappeared a large woman came stomping out, screaming something about brats and threatening to tan their hides.

She didn't seem to notice the two strangers until after she'd yelled for a few good seconds, and then she only gave them a disapproving look.

"We're not crazy in this home," she said, her face suddenly red with anger. "Not yet, anyway. No need to take my kids. They're the only things keeping the monsters away." There was a vacancy in her eyes that chilled Mark to the bone.

Alec was visibly annoyed. "Look, lady, we don't care about your kids and we're certainly

not here to cart them off. All we want to do is have a quick look in your home, make sure our friends aren't in there."

"Friends?" the woman repeated. "The monsters are your friends? The ones that want to eat my children?" The vacancy was suddenly replaced by a stark terror that darkened her eyes. "Please ... please don't hurt me. I can give you one of them. Just one. Please."

Alec sighed. "We don't know any monsters. Just ... look, just move aside and let us in. We don't have time."

He stepped forward, muscles tensed, ready to use force if necessary, but she scrambled away, almost tripping onto the dead weeds of her yard. Mark looked at her sadly—he'd assumed the monsters were the infected people down the street, but now he realized he was wrong. This woman wasn't any more right in the head than the last guy they'd found, and he wouldn't be surprised if she really did think monsters were living under the beds.

Mark left the woman in the front yard and followed Alec inside only to be stunned by what he saw. The interior looked more like a back alley from one of the worst parts of New York City than a suburban home. Pictures had been drawn—with what looked like black crayon and chalk—all over the walls. Dark, terrifying pictures. Of monsters. Things with claws and sharp teeth and vicious eyes. They were messy, as if they'd been done in a hurry, but some had vivid details. Enough to make the hair on Mark's arms stand up.

He gave Alec a grim look and followed the older man past them, to the stairs to the basement, and went down, weapons held at the ready.

They found more children below—at least fifteen, maybe more. And they were living in filth. Most of them were huddled together in groups, cowering as if they expected some horrible punishment from the new arrivals. They were all dirty and poorly clothed and, by the looks of it, starving. Mark hardly registered the fact that the people he was looking for were nowhere to be seen.

"We ... we can't leave them here," Mark said. He'd let go of his weapon, and it hung from the strap on his shoulder. He was dumbfounded. "There's no way we can leave them here."

Alec seemed to sense he wouldn't be able to make Mark budge on this. The soldier stepped in front of him and spoke gravely.

"I understand what you're saying, son. Where you're coming from. But listen to me. What can we do for these children? Everyone in this godforsaken place is sick, and we don't have the manpower to get them out. At least they're ... I don't even know what to say."

"Surviving," Mark said quietly. "I thought surviving was all that mattered, but I was wrong. We can't leave these kids here."

Alec sighed. "Look at me." When Mark didn't, Alec snapped his fingers and yelled, "Look at me!"

Mark did.

"Let's go find our friends. After that we can come back. But if we take them now, we'll have no chance. You hear me? Absolutely zero."

Mark nodded. He knew the old man was right. But something had torn in his heart at the sight of these kids, and it physically hurt. He didn't think it would ever mend.

He turned around to gather his thoughts. All he could do was focus on Trina. He had to save Trina. And Deedee.

"Okay," he finally said. "Let's go."

Mark and Alec moved from house to house, searching them from top to bottom.

It all became a big, hazy blur to Mark. The more he saw, the more numb he grew to the strangeness of the new world. This sickness that had been spread on purpose. In each house, on each block, he saw things that kept topping what he'd thought unstoppable. He saw a woman jump off a roof and land, broken, on her front steps. He saw three men drawing circles in the dirt and jumping in and out of them, like kids playing a game. Except something was making them more and more upset and they finally erupted into a crazed brawl. There was a room in one of the homes where twenty or thirty people were lying in a heap in complete silence. Definitely alive, but not moving.

A woman eating a cat. A man chewing on a rug in the corner of his living room. Two kids throwing rocks at each other as hard as they could, bloodied and bruised from head to toe. Laughing all the while. People standing still in their yards, staring at the sky. Others lying facedown in the dirt, talking to themselves. Mark saw a man bull-rushing a tree, slamming himself into the trunk over and over, as if he thought eventually he'd win some battle and knock the thing down.

But on they went, quickly searching each and every home as they got closer to what Alec had called the party. The strangest thing, though, was that so far no one had attacked them. Most people actually seemed scared to death of them.

They were approaching their next house when a scream suddenly tore through the air, somehow louder than all the other sounds combined. It was piercing and raw, ripping its way along the street like a living thing.

Alec pulled up short, as did Mark, and they both looked in the direction of the noise.

About five houses down, two men were dragging a woman with black hair by her feet through the front door. Her head smacked the concrete of each step as they descended to the yard.

"Holy Mother of ...," Alec whispered. "It's Lana."

Alec didn't wait for Mark's response.

He burst into an all-out sprint, booking into the street, his feet pounding the pavement as he headed for Lana and the strangers now dragging her across the rock-filled yard of the house. He'd reacted so quickly that Mark was far behind. He tried his best to catch up, his backpack bouncing against his shoulders and his weapon threatening to slip out of his sweaty hands.

Alec was screaming at the men to stop what they were doing. He held up his Transvice, but the thugs didn't understand the threat, or didn't care. They continued pulling Lana across the yard until they reached the sidewalk, where they threw her legs down violently. She'd ceased her screaming and Mark wondered if she was still conscious. Still alive.

Alec stopped a dozen feet from where Lana lay unmoving. He was aiming his weapon, yelling at them all to freeze, when Mark caught up to him. It took him a moment to catch his breath before he could aim his own Transvice.

There were three men total, and they stood in a circle around Lana's body, all of them looking down at her. They seemed completely oblivious that people had weapons aimed at them.

"Step away from her!" Alec shouted.

Now that they were closer, Mark finally got a good look at their friend. It made his stomach turn. She was battered and bloody and covered in bruises. Much of her hair had been ripped out, and her bloody scalp shown through where it was missing. The last thing Mark noticed was that one of her ears looked like someone had tried to tear it off. The horror of it struck Mark like an anvil to his chest, and the rage he'd grown all too familiar with came boiling back up. These people were monsters, and if they'd done the same things to Trina ...

He stepped toward them, but Alec reached a hand out and stopped him.

"Just a second," he said, then returned his attention to Lana's captors. "I'm not going to repeat myself. Step away from her or I start shooting."

But instead of responding, the three men knelt to the ground, their knees touching Lana's body as they surrounded her. Frantically, she looked back and forth between them.

"Just do it," Mark said. "What're you waiting for?"

"I don't have a clear shot!" Alec barked back. "I don't want to vaporize her!"

Alec's words just made Mark angrier. He wasn't going to stand there and do nothing for one more second.

"I've had enough of this crap," he muttered, and started walking forward, slapping away Alec's hand when he tried once again to stop him.

The men didn't so much as glance at him as he approached. They were all digging deep in their pockets for something, their bodies turned in a way that blocked most of Mark's view.

"Hey!" he shouted, his weapon held out before him. "Get away from her or I'm going to shoot. You won't know what hit you, believe me!"

They didn't hear him, or pretended not to. The next thing that happened was so quick and shocking that it made him stumble, almost fall down. In a blur of motion, one of the men pulled out a switchblade and stabbed Lana. Her screams sent a jolt of horror thudding through Mark's bones. Then he was rushing forward, slinging his weapon to his back, diving. He leaped and tackled the man closest to him, sending them both rolling away from Lana.

He heard Alec yelling his name, but somehow he ignored it. His only thought was that he had to disarm this guy quickly enough that he could stop the others. At least get them far enough away from Lana that Alec could take care of them. The man he'd tackled was strong, but Mark had taken him by surprise and was able to pin him to the ground with his knees and snatch the switchblade out of his hands. Without thinking, he stabbed him in the chest and ended it.

Mark fell off, crashing onto his back and scrambling away. Staring in horror at what he'd just done. But just as quickly, the world around him came back into focus and he jumped to his feet. Alec ran up and swung the butt of his weapon down with both arms, slamming its end into one of the attackers' heads. He crumpled and slumped to the ground.

There was a group of people charging in from the other side of the street. Mark had no idea where they'd come from, but there were at least seven or eight of them. All men. All with knives or hammers or screwdrivers, their faces lit up in rage.

"Watch out!" Mark yelled to Alec.

But the men weren't interested in them. Instead they all went after Lana, who was still being attacked by the lone man left of the three who'd originally dragged her outside. Alec took a few stumbling steps backward and Mark ran to stand beside him. As they watched, Mark realized that they were powerless to stop the madness unless they started using the Transvices. He was filled with a sudden doomed uncertainty.

Alec seemed to suddenly harden, a visible change that spread through his body. His face went still, hard as a rock. He straightened and stood tall. Then, without a word to Mark, he lifted his weapon and aimed it at the group of people attacking Lana.

He fired a shot. The quick stream of pure white bolted forward and hit the closest man, who'd just been pulling his arm back, a bloodied hammer gripped in his hand. He transformed quickly into that shimmering flag of gray, then exploded into a cloud of mist, whisked away by an unfelt wind. Alec was already firing another burst at the man next to him. Mark knew they couldn't win this battle, though Lana had been brave and true and strong since the day they'd met back in the tunnels of the subtrans.

Mark lifted up his own weapon and started firing. He and Alec picked off the attackers one by one: Pull the trigger. On to the next.

Soon the monsters were gone and only the pitiful, wretched form of their friend lay on the ground. Alec didn't hesitate for a moment. He aimed and shot one more burst from his Transvice.

Lana's suffering ended in a spray of gray mist.

Mark's eyes drifted up from the bloody patch on the ground and fixed on Alec. The man had a look on his face that said a thousand things. But laced through it all was a profound sadness. Though Mark never fully understood what kind of relationship the two veterans had shared, it had been deep and full of history.

And now she was gone.

Alec's expression cleared in a few seconds, but it felt like a lifetime to Mark. He'd never seen his friend so sad before.

Suddenly Alec was all business again. He pointed at the house in front of them. "That's where they dragged her out. And that's where we're going in. I'm sure Trina and the kid are in there right now."

Mark turned to look. A mansion by any account, three stories and all gables and massive windows—many of them broken now—and fancy brickwork. But with a scorched roof and filthy walls and a weed-choked, yellow lawn, it looked ancient. Mark was terrified at what they might find inside it.

And people were gathering around them.

Less than a minute had passed since they'd vaporized their friend and the violent thugs attacking her, but the crowd milling about in the yard and street seemed to have doubled in size. Men and women, children. Most of them marked with bruises and scratches, some with worse. A man with a huge section of his shoulder missing was slowly ambling toward them; it looked like someone had taken an axe to him in a fit of rage. There was a woman with an entire arm gone, the joint a bloody mess. Most disturbing of all, there were a couple of kids with brutal injuries, and they didn't even seem to know they were hurt.

Without fail, the people started to inch closer, surrounding Mark and Alec. Tattered and grimy clothes, dirty hair, hollow gazes—the crowd's attention was entirely fixed on the two newcomers.

Alec started walking slowly toward the front door of the large house. Mark mimicked his wary movements, as if any sudden action would trigger the budding insanity in those who watched their every step. They inched closer, weapons held firm. Mark wasn't taking even the slightest chance anymore. If someone came at him, they were getting shot.

The crowd pulled in tighter around Mark and Alec, gathering like spectators at a parade. There had to be dozens of them now, maybe over a hundred. Then several men broke from the larger group and cut off the path to the front door. As soon as they did it, others followed suit, completely surrounding Mark and Alec now, a tightening noose.

"I don't know if you people can understand me," Alec bellowed. "But this is a one-time offer. Get out of our way or we start shooting."

"We've got friends in this house," Mark added. "And we're not leaving without them." He raised his Transvice just for show.

The looks on the faces all around him were changing. That blank indifference was clearing. Eyes were narrowing, foreheads furrowing, lips curling up in slight snarls. A couple of women actually hissed at them, and a kid gnashed his teeth like some wild

animal.

"Get out of our way!" Alec yelled.

The crowd surged in a few inches, pressing closer, tightening their circle. Mark felt that familiar break inside of him again, as if he was losing control. A rush of something like hatred burned through him.

"Forget this," he muttered.

He aimed his Transvice at the closest man between him and the front door and pulled the trigger. A blinding stream of white light shot from the weapon and into the man's chest, quickly turning him into a wall of gray, then an explosion of particles that disappeared. Mark didn't hesitate. He immediately aimed at the next man, pulled the trigger, watched him turn to vapor. Next to him was a woman. Three seconds later she was no longer there.

He'd half expected Alec to stop him. But the former soldier wasted no time. The woman had barely disassembled when Alec was firing away as well. They concentrated on clearing a path to the house, slowly sweeping their weapons back and forth as they picked the people off one by one. Flashes of light filled the air as their Transvices heated up, unleashing a wave of destruction. All without a single drop of blood.

They'd eliminated about a dozen people, cutting through half the crowd standing in front of them, when the rest of the infected seemed to finally catch on to what was happening. A violent scream filled the air, a piercing, horrible sound, and suddenly every last person there was charging forward, rushing at the two men with their death-dealing weapons.

Mark moved his weapon left to right, pulling the trigger in short bursts, not even bothering to aim. Streaks of white connected with a few women. One stray shot hit a small boy, vaporized him. Still they barreled toward him at full speed. Mark turned to face the people behind him. He fired again, then gripped the Transvice and swung it up to smash its butt end into a man's face, sending him sprawling, shrieking in pain.

Mark stumbled backward but caught his balance. There were people all around him, hissing, baring their teeth, dancing about on their feet, all wild eyes and hysterical laughter. Mark held the Transvice tightly against his chest again and fired randomly, turning in a slow circle as he vaporized whoever was closest. Then he swept the weapon back the other way, all the while careful of where Alec stood.

The next few moments were complete madness. Mark felt a hitch of panic. He kept firing, swinging left, then right. He elbowed and shoved and broke through and fired and started all over again, pushing his way ever closer to the house. He killed at least ten more people before he was suddenly tripping over the steps of the porch.

He fell, twisted the Transvice around and fired it directly into the chest of a man who'd leaped into the air toward him. The gray mist washed over Mark's face and disappeared. He spotted Alec a few feet away, jamming the end of his weapon into a woman's face; Alec then broke into a run, jumping onto the steps and passing Mark, heading for the door.

Mark got off one more shot before he began to crawl backward up the stairs. At the top he got to his feet and reached the door just as Alec was stepping through. He ran past Alec into the house and his friend slammed the door. Alec had barely tripped the lock before the thump of bodies hitting it sounded from the other side. Mark doubted it would hold for long.

Then they were running. Down a hallway, a right turn, another hallway. Two people

came at them—they'd been guarding a door. Alec got both of them with shots from his Transvice. Mark slipped past him, opened the door—there were steps. A man was at the bottom, pounding his way up, his eyes all fire set in a dirty, scratched face. Mark vaporized him.

Down the stairway, two at a time. A man and a woman rushed at him with knives, swinging at him before he could bring his weapon up. He smacked them both away and dove toward the floor just as Alec appeared and shot his weapon twice. And then everything grew quiet except for the distant sounds of the people outside, who'd be coming for them soon.

They were in a basement. A stream of sunlight shone through a narrow window at the top of the wall to Mark's right. Dust motes danced in the air. And two people were huddled in the corner of the room, looking as frightened as anyone Mark had ever seen.

Trina and Deedee, clutching each other, arms wrapped around one another's bruised bodies. Mark ran to them, knelt in front of them, placed his weapon on the ground.

Deedee was crying and spoke first. "She's sick," she said in her trembling, little-girl voice. She squeezed Trina tighter, crying.

Mark reached out and took Trina's hand, squeezed it. "It's okay. We found you. We're getting you out of here."

Trina had been staring at the floor the entire time, but she slowly raised her head and looked at Mark. Her eyes were empty and dark.

"Who are you?" she asked.

CHAPTER 57

The words hit him like a rapid series of thumps to his heart. He tried to convince himself that there were a million reasons she could've said what she did. Maybe the room didn't have enough light; maybe she'd been hit in the head; maybe her vision was blurred. But the reality of it was in those eyes. She had no idea who he was. None.

"Trina ..." He searched for words. "Trina, it's me. Mark."

There was a crash upstairs, something breaking. Then a few thuds. Footsteps sounded from above.

"We've gotta get out," Alec barked. "Now."

Trina had not stopped looking at Mark, her face wrinkled in confusion. Her head was tilted to the side, as if in her mind she was running through the possibilities of who this guy in front of her could be. But there was also fear and panic, something unsettling.

"Maybe there's a treatment," Mark found himself whispering, in some sort of trance. The only person in the world he wanted with him safe and sound ... "Maybe—"

"Mark!" Alec yelled. "Get them up! Now!"

He looked back to see his friend at the bottom of the stairs, weapon raised to shoot whoever dared try to come down first. There was more noise above them: People running and shouting. Things breaking. Then Mark caught a blur of movement out the window, a pair of feet that were there, then gone.

"We'll figure everything out," he said, returning his attention to the two girls. "Come on, we need to get out of here."

The rising volume of noise threatened to push his panic over the edge, but he knew he was treading on fragile ground with Trina. He had no idea how she might react if he tried to rush her.

"Deedee?" he said as gently as he could. He picked up the Transvice and rested the strap on his shoulder. "Come here, Deedee. Take my hand and stand up."

A loud bang cut through the air, coming from the stairs. Someone had just thrown a door open and slammed it against the wall. The shouts had reached a hysterical pitch. Mark heard the distinct power surge and zing of Alec's Transvice going off, heard the shocked gasps coming from above as people saw one of their comrades disappear in a flash of gray mist. Mark imagined the scene, all while holding his hand out and trying to look calm for Deedee.

The girl just stared at him for an agonizing few seconds, a thousand thoughts going through her head, by the looks of it. Mark didn't let himself move, just kept smiling and holding that hand out. Finally she reached out and took it, let him pull her up. Without letting go, he leaned in and slipped his other arm under Trina's back, got a firm grip. He used all the strength he had left to lift her off the ground and set her on her feet.

She didn't resist, but Mark was worried she might topple over if he let go. "Who are you?" she repeated. "Are you here to save us?"

"I'm your best friend of all time," he answered, trying not to let her words sting. "These people stole you from me, and now I'm going to get you back to safety. Home sweet home

and all that.”

“Please,” she said. “Please don’t let them hurt me again.”

An abyss yawned in his chest, threatening to swallow his heart. “That’s why I’m here. I just need you to walk, okay? Walk and stay close to me.”

More sounds from up above: a scream, a window shattering. Then footsteps on the stairs. Alec fired off another shot.

Trina shifted and put all her weight on her own two feet. “Okay. I’m okay. I’ll do anything to get out of here.”

“That’s my girl.” Mark reluctantly slid his arm from her back and then focused on Deedee, bending over to look into her eyes. “This is going to be really scary, okay? But then it’ll be over. Stay close to—”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, cutting him off. A sudden fire burned in her eyes that made her seem ten years older. “Let’s go.”

Mark felt a small smile on his lips. “Perfect. Let’s do it.”

He took her hand and put it in Trina’s and squeezed them together. Then he grabbed his Transvice and positioned it firmly against his chest, ready to shoot.

“Stay right behind me,” he said, looking at each of them in turn to get confirmation that they understood. Trina seemed a little more lucid now, clarity coming back into her eyes. “Right behind me.”

He gripped his weapon, rested his finger on the trigger, then turned to face the foot of the stairs, where Alec maintained his position.

Mark had taken two steps toward Alec, Deedee and Trina right on his heels, when the window to their left suddenly exploded inward, a chunk of brick crashing to the floor in a shower of glass. Deedee screamed and Trina jumped forward, stumbling into Mark’s back. Mark lurched forward but caught himself before he fell. He pointed his Transvice at the broken window, where a man’s arm had snaked through the narrow gap and was groping along the walls.

Mark fired a burst from his weapon. The first bolt of white heat missed, drilling a hole in the wall that sent up a strange cloud of dust. He tried again and this time hit home. The arm dissolved into a gray mass, then whiffed out of existence. Two more people appeared where the man had been, but Mark could tell the strip of window was too small for a person to crawl through. He turned away and moved once again toward the staircase, where Alec stood firm. He took a shot at someone above even as Mark looked at him.

“Got no choice but to make our way up there,” the man growled without taking his eyes off the door. “More of these psychos are probably arriving by the minute outside.”

“We’re ready,” Mark replied, even though he had no clue how they were going to get their group of four through the horde of Flare-infected maniacs. “Maybe we should put the girls in between us.”

“Exactly. I’ll go first, you take up the rear this time. It’s gonna be ugly pushing through these wackos.”

Mark nodded and took a step back. Trina seemed more and more with it, though she hadn’t yet given any sign that she remembered him. She grabbed Deedee’s hand and guided her to stand right beside Alec. The man winked at the little girl, then started up the stairs. Trina followed with Deedee in tow. Mark went up backward, just in case someone figured

out another way to get into the basement.

Step by step, they ascended toward the chaos waiting above.

"Get out of our way!" Alec yelled. "I start shooting in three seconds!"

The roar of activity increased, a cacophony of shouts and whistles and jeers and laughing. Mark abandoned the idea of guarding their rear and looked up to see five or six faces packed together at the door, waiting for them, wild-eyed and seemingly hungry for violence. He felt such a burgeoning fear in his chest that it was hard to breathe. But he knew that if they could just get outside somehow, they stood a fighting chance.

"Time's up!" Alec roared. Then he let out three quick blasts from his Transvice. Two women and a man were whisked away into neverland.

Suddenly everyone surged forward, screaming and yelling, pushing through the door in a mass of bodies. Alec got off another couple of shots, but then it was too much. Soon he had ten people on top of him, jumping and leaping and clawing.

Alec fell backward into Trina and Deedee, who crashed into Mark. The entire group tumbled down the stairs in a tangle of arms and legs. And the infected came charging after them.

Mark's head slammed against a step, then the wall, then the floor. All while feet kicked and hands slapped and elbows jabbed at him. The world had turned into spinning, pain-filled madness. When everything stilled, Trina and Alec were on his chest and Deedee was on his legs, squirming to get up. Alec awkwardly tried to lift his Transvice to get off a shot but was suddenly tackled by a man who jumped from the fourth step up and smashed into his body, sending him flying off Mark.

Trina was reaching for Deedee; she grabbed her and pulled her into a fierce hug, leaping out of the fray just as more people rained down from above. Soon they were on top of Mark, a dozen or more, punching and kicking and seemingly trying to rip him apart. Mark was at a loss, all plans out the window, relying on sheer desperation. He twisted his body and tried to spin out of the mass, gripping the Transvice with both hands to swing it left and right to get people away from him.

Trina yelled in a loud, piercing voice, "Stop it! Everyone stop and listen to me!"

Her words sliced through the air and the cries and shouts and grunts coming from everyone in the tangled mass of bodies lining the stairs from top to bottom went silent. All movement stopped. Mark was stunned at the abrupt change—he scrambled out from underneath a couple of people who were staring at Trina, almost transfixed. His back hit the wall across from the lowest step. Trina was to his left, still clutching Deedee in her arms; to his right, Alec had freed himself, too.

All eyes were on Trina, as if she had some magical, hypnotic power. The silence in the basement was broken only by the breathing of the occupants.

"You all need to listen to me," she said more quietly. There was a wildness in her eyes. "I'm one of you now. These men have come to help us. But you need to let us go so they can do that."

This set off a chorus of mumbling and muttering throughout the crowd. Mark watched in sick fascination as they got to their feet, frantically whispering to each other, seeming to obey. The people were bloody and filthy, but they started to act in an organized fashion. Soon they were lined up on both sides of the stairs, leaving a clear path up the middle. Mark could tell that those at the top were communicating with other people in the house, spreading the word. It was all done with something like reverence.

Trina turned toward Mark. "Lead us up."

She still showed no sign of recognition in her eyes, and it stung in his heart once again. He had no idea what was going on or how she'd gotten this sea of maniacs to listen to her command, but he wasn't going to waste the opportunity. He jumped to his feet and held his Transvice at the ready, without overtly showing it as a threat. He looked at Alec, who seemed as unsettled as Mark had ever seen him, doubt clouding his eyes. He nodded at Mark to go first.

Mark walked forward to the stairs and turned to Trina and Deedee. "Let's go up, then. Come on, it's going to be okay." He'd never said anything in his life that he believed less.

They came to him, ready to follow. Trina had Deedee in front of her, gripping the little

girl's shoulders. Alec moved to stand right behind them.

"Up we go," the man grumbled. His eyes were darting back and forth at the lines of people on both sides of the stairs. And the way he looked at them said it all—he thought for sure it was some kind of trap. His grip on his Transvice was a little tighter than Mark's.

With a deep breath that made him aware of the awful smells of the people around him, Mark turned and faced the stairs again. He took the first step. Every single eye above him was focused on his face. To his right was a woman with stringy hair and bruised cheeks, staring at him with a slight, knowing smile. To his left stood a teenage boy in tattered clothes, scuffed and dirty from head to toe. He also seemed on the verge of laughing. More people waited with similar looks, all eyes on him. All silent and still.

"Would you get on with it?" Alec whispered from behind.

Mark took another step. He was worried about rushing up the stairs, as if Trina had put the infected into some kind of trance and that any hurried movement might break the spell. He lifted his foot and went one step higher. Then another. A glance backward showed Trina and Deedee right on his tail, and Alec behind them. The old man shot him a glare that said he was clearly unhappy with how slowly they were moving.

Mark took another step and then another, the strangers' stares sending a cold tingling across his skin and down his spine. The smiles were getting bigger and creepier.

They were two-thirds of the way up when he heard a woman's voice right behind him.

"Pretty. So very pretty."

He turned to see the lady patting Deedee's head, almost petting her like an animal at the zoo. The little girl's face was filled with horror.

"Such a pretty child," the woman said. "I could just eat you up. Like a turkey dinner. Yes. So sweet."

Mark faced front again, repulsed. There was a bulging feeling in his chest, as if something were trying to escape. He'd just taken another step when a man reached out and poked his shoulder with a finger.

"Good, strong young boy, you are," the stranger said. "I bet your mama's proud, eh?"

Mark ignored him, went up another step. This time people on either side of him put their hands on his arm—not in a threatening way, just a touch. Another step. A woman moved away from the wall and threw her arms around his neck, squeezed him in a quick and fierce hug. Then she released him and stepped back into her position to the side. A wicked smile distorted her features.

Revulsion filled Mark. He couldn't take another minute in that house. He threw caution to the wind and reached behind him, grabbed Deedee's hand, then started moving faster up the steps. He could hear Alec's feet pounding as he brought up the rear.

At first the infected seemed taken unaware, stunned by the sudden burst of motion. Mark made it to the top, across the landing, through the haunted faces that stared at them from both sides—and then he was in the hallway. The house was packed, people everywhere, some of them holding sticks and bats and knives. But there was a clear path down the middle, leading to the front door. Mark didn't hesitate, started sprinting toward the exit, pulling Deedee along behind him.

They made it halfway before order collapsed. All of the house occupants seemed to scream at once, and their bodies swarmed in, pressing against Mark and his friends. Mark

lost hold of Deedee's hand and saw her disappear into the crowd, her sweet little cry like that of an angel among demons.

Mark lunged after her but lost his balance, slipping and falling. Bodies were on top of him in an instant, clawing and ripping at his clothes. He twisted and swung his elbows, felt both of them connect with bodies, heard screams. Hands were grabbing for his weapon, too many to fight off. He kicked out with his legs, squirmed onto his stomach so he could push himself up. Something hard hit him in the back of the head and he collapsed, his face smacking against the hard tile. Then there was a thin, painful tug on his neck—he realized with horror that it was the strap of his weapon. He was just trying to reach for it when it slipped past his chin and over his head. There were hoots and hollers and cheers.

His Transvice was gone.

All the focus in the room shifted to the stolen weapon, leaving Mark a few seconds to scramble back to his feet. The man who'd taken the thing from him was holding it up in the air with both hands and dancing in a slow circle. Those around him leaped up and down, their arms outstretched so they could touch the shiny surface. They were slowly moving away from Mark, and more and more people were pushing in to see the new prize. The mass was heading toward the other end of the hallway, into what looked like the kitchen.

Mark knew he'd never get the Transvice back. He frantically scanned the room for signs of his friends. Deedee was being handled by three or four people. She was kicking and screaming as they tried to carry her up the stairs. Trina was right behind them, fighting to reach the girl. Alec was battling at least six attackers who seemed bent on getting their own shiny prize. Even as Mark glanced at him, his friend smashed the Transvice's end into one guy's face, shot a bolt of white light into another, vaporizing him. But then there was a mad rush against the old man and he fell to the floor, people leaping on top of him.

Mark had no choice but to go after Trina and Deedee first.

He ran forward, pushing past people who didn't quite seem to know what they were supposed to be doing, and leaped onto the ledge running up the outside of the stairs. He knew his only chance was to climb along it. He held on to the railing and inched upward.

A man swung a fist at him and missed. A woman threw her body at him, oblivious to the possibility of hurting herself. Mark was able to duck and she sailed past, crashing to the floor below. Others tried to push him; some from below swatted at him, grabbed his legs, trying to pull him into the seething mass of bodies. He fought them all off, somehow keeping at least one hand on the wooden railing as he dodged and slapped and kicked away their attempts to stop his progress.

Finally he made it past the leading charge, past the man and woman who had Deedee in their arms. Mark grabbed the railing with both hands and heaved himself over, landing cleanly on a step almost at the very top of the staircase. The people didn't stop, kept heading straight toward him. Mark didn't know what else to do, so he dove forward, wrapping his arms around Deedee and squeezing tightly, letting the momentum of his body pull her free from her captors' grasps.

They rolled down the stairs, knocking people left and right until they bounced off the bottom step and onto the floor. He looked up from where he lay wrapped protectively

around the little girl and saw Trina barreling her way toward him, pushing others aside, her eyes afire and focused on Deedee.

Groaning from the pain that racked his body, he somehow got his feet under him and stood up just as Trina reached them. She grabbed Deedee from him, wrapped her arms around her tight. The little girl was sobbing. Their brief reprieve was over, however; people were coming at them from all directions.

Mark took a quick look around and realized their prospects were grim. The house was in chaos.

Alec was in the dining room, still fighting off a dozen attackers, firing his weapon when he could. Several of the mob gave up on him when they saw Mark, charging him instead. A surge of people also came from the other direction—from the hallway leading to the kitchen—and they came fast, as if they were fleeing something instead of attacking. More infected stood between Mark and the door, blocking any escape. And each one of them looked ready to kill or be killed.

Mark held his arms up to protect Trina and Deedee, backed up and pressed them against the wall by the stairs. The first person to reach him was a mangled old man with scratches and gashes covering his head instead of hair. He leaped into the air, coming straight for Mark, when there was a thumping sound from the kitchen. The man's body turned into a gray wall and then he was gone in a cloud of mist that washed over Mark.

Mark's entire body went cold. The sound hadn't come from Alec's direction—somebody had figured out how to use the Transvice.

The thought had barely formed in his mind before a bolt of white light shot past him and slammed into the chest of a woman standing in the group by the door.

"Alec!" Mark yelled. "Someone's shooting the other Transvice!"

The fear that prickled Mark's skin was like nothing he'd ever felt, even after all the hellacious things they'd experienced since that day when all went dark in the subtrans. A mad person was running around with a weapon that could vaporize a human in an instant. At any second, Mark's life might vanish before he even realized what had happened.

They had to get out of there.

Even with their diseased minds, the others in the house knew something extraordinary was happening. Panic rippled through the group, and every last person turned and ran for the front door. Screams and hysterical cries for help filled the air. The hallway was a surging river of arms and legs and terrified faces, all pressed together, straining toward the front of the house. More shots rang out from the rogue Transvice; more people disappeared.

Mark felt his sanity crumbling. He spun around and lifted Deedee into his arms, then grabbed Trina's shoulder and heaved her off the wall, pushed her away from the crowd and into the dining room, where Alec had been fighting. He was surrounded by a mass of people—too many to shoot.

Mark pushed Trina, this time toward the big bay windows—the few in the house that were still intact. He picked up a lamp and tossed it at the glass, shattering it into a million shards. Clasping Deedee tightly in his right arm, he ran forward, catching up with Trina and gripping her elbow with his left hand. Without slowing, he sprinted straight for the opening; then he let go of Trina and dove, turning his body at the last second so that his back went first. He hugged the girl tightly to his body, trying his best to protect her as he

thumped against the hard-packed dirt of what had once been a flower bed. The fall knocked the wind out of him.

Gasping for air, he looked up into the bright sky and he saw Alec's head poke out of the house.

"You really have lost your mind," the man said, but he was already helping Trina climb out the window before he'd finished the short sentence.

He jumped down after Trina landed safely. Then they were both helping Mark to his feet and Trina took Deedee back into her arms. Some of the infected had seen their escape and were following; others were streaming out the front door. Screams and shouts filled the air. People were already fighting each other outside.

"I've had enough of this party," Alec grumbled.

Mark was finally catching his breath, and the four of them started running across the dusty yard, angling toward the street that would lead them back to the Berg. Alec tried to take Deedee from Trina but she refused, kept moving, her face showing the strain of carrying the burden. As for the little girl, her cries had been replaced at some point by silence. There weren't even any tears on her face.

Mark looked behind him. A man stood on the front porch, blasting away randomly with the Transvice, sending people to their wispy deaths. He finally noticed the group running away down the street and fired off a couple of shots. They came nowhere close, the white bolts smashing into the pavement, sending up poofs of dust. The guy gave up, returned to killing closer quarry.

Mark and his friends kept running. When they passed the house full of small children, Mark thought of Trina and Deedee and the future. He didn't stop.

CHAPTER 60

Finally they saw the Berg once again. It rose up in the distance, more beautiful than Mark would've ever guessed one of the beat-up old things could look. Though each one of them was heaving like every breath might be their last, they didn't slow down, and soon the big hunk of scarred metal loomed above their heads.

Mark didn't know how in the world Trina had done it with Deedee in her arms the entire time. But she'd refused to let anyone else help.

"You ... okay?" he asked her between deep breaths.

She collapsed to the ground, spilling the girl next to her as gently as she could. Trina looked up at him, still no recognition in her eyes. "I'm ... fine. Thank you for rescuing us."

Mark knelt next to her, the pain creeping back into his heart now that the craziness of escaping was over. "Trina, do you really not remember me?"

"You seem ... familiar. But there's too much in my head. We just need to get the girl—she's immune, I know it—we need to get her to people who matter. Before we're all too insane to try."

Mark felt something turn in his stomach and leaned back, away from his best friend. The chilling way she'd said those last few words ...

He knew that there was something seriously wrong with her. And couldn't he say the same thing about himself? How long did he have until nothing mattered anymore? A day? Maybe two?

The huge door of the Berg lurched into motion with a thump and a squeal, giving Mark an excuse not to respond. He watched as it lowered to the ground.

Alec spoke loudly over the grinding gears and hydraulics. "Let's get them on board, get everyone fed. Then we need to figure out what to do with ourselves. We might be like those kooks we just ran away from soon."

"Not the girl," Mark said, so quietly he wondered if his friend even heard him.

"What do you mean?" the man replied.

"The scar on her arm. She was hit by a dart months ago. Think about it. Trina's right. She's immune somehow. That's gotta mean something."

Trina had perked up at the statement, was nodding vigorously. Too vigorously. Mark's heart sank a little bit more. She just wasn't quite there.

Alec let out one of his infamous grunts. "Well, unless you wanna swap bodies with her, I reckon it won't do you a bit of good, now, will it?"

"But maybe it could help others. If they don't already have a treatment ..."

Alec gave him a doubtful look. "Let's just get on board before some of them crazies catch up to us."

And blast us with my Transvice, Mark thought grimly. He appreciated Alec's not giving him a hard time about it.

Alec headed for the ramp, which was almost all the way down, leaving Mark to deal with the two girls. Mark reached for Trina's hand.

"Come on. It'll be nice and safe on board. And there's food, somewhere to rest. Don't

worry. You ... can trust me." It hurt to even have to say such a thing.

Deedee stood up, her face still set in stone, and took Mark's hand before Trina could. The little girl looked at him, and even though her features didn't change, something in her eyes almost made him think she had a smile hidden inside somewhere. Trina got to her feet.

"I just hope the boogie man doesn't live on that thing," she said in a distant, haunted voice. Then she started walking toward the ramp.

Mark sighed and followed, Deedee in tow.

The next few hours passed quietly as the sun sped toward the horizon and darkness fell on the land outside the Berg. Alec flew the ship to the neighborhood where they'd parked before—it still seemed deserted. Then they ate and prepared bunks for Trina and Deedee to get some sleep. Trina mumbled a lot, and Mark even caught her with a line of drool on her chin at one point. As he wiped it off, sadness once again welled up in his heart.

As for him, sleeping seemed utterly impossible.

He planned to talk to Alec, figure out exactly what their next move should be, but when he found him, the old bear was snoring in the pilot's chair, sitting straight up with his head lolling to one side. Mark was half tempted to throw a chunk of food in his mouth, and giggled at the thought of it.

Giggled.

I really am starting to slip, he thought. And his mood sank into a low and dark place. He desperately needed to do something to take his mind off things.

He suddenly remembered the workpads he'd seen in the cargo room—the ones he'd secured against the shelf with the straps. His spirits rose a bit at the hope that maybe something within those devices would shed some light on what they should do. Maybe, just maybe, there was a way to get rid of the virus somehow. Maybe there was a chance.

He banged his knee twice—and his head once—running through the dimly lit Berg toward the cargo room. He remembered halfway there that he'd need a flashlight and went back to get it out of his backpack. Then, finally, he was standing in front of the shelf. He quickly removed the workpads and sat down to read through them.

There were three. The first was dead. A password prevented him from getting into the second, but it flickered and would probably die soon anyway. Mark's excitement almost crashed to a halt. But the third came to life, its glow illuminating the large room so brightly that Mark turned off his flashlight. The owner—evidently a guy named Randall Spilker—had felt no need for a password, and the home station popped up immediately.

He spent the next half hour perusing useless information. Mr. Spilker loved games and chat rooms. Mark was almost ready to give up, thinking the guy had merely used the device as a toy, when he finally discovered some hidden work files.

Folder after folder revealed nothing. But Mark finally hit the jackpot in a place most people would never have had the patience to find. It was a folder, marked as plainly as the rest, practically lost within a list of a hundred others that were empty.

It was titled *KILL ORDER*.

CHAPTER 61

There were so many documents that Mark didn't know where to start. Each file had a number assigned to it and seemed to have been saved in random order. Mark knew he didn't have time to read every single file, so he decided to just start opening and see what he could see.

There was file after file of saved correspondence, memorandums and official announcements. Most numerous were the personal exchanges—all copied into a few files—between Mr. Spilker and his friends, particularly one named Ladena Lichliter. The two of them worked for the Post-Flares Coalition, an entity people in the settlements had heard of but knew almost nothing about. From what Mark could gather, the group had brought together as many government agencies as they could from around the world. They'd gathered in Alaska—a location rumored to have been only mildly affected by the sun flares—and they were trying to put the world back together again.

It all seemed very noble—and frustrating to those involved—until Mark came across an exchange between Mr. Spilker and Ladena Lichliter, who seemed to be his closest confidant, that sent an icy chill along his arms. He'd been skimming text after text, but he read this one twice:

To: Randall Spilker
From: Ladena Lichliter
Subject:

I'm still sick from the meeting today. I just can't believe it. I can't accept that the PCC actually looked us in the eyes and presented that proposal. Seriously. I was stunned.

And then more than half the room AGREED WITH THEM! They supported it! What the hell is going on? Randall, tell me what the HELL is going on? How can we even THINK about doing something like that? How?

I've spent the afternoon trying to make sense of it all.

I can't take it. I can't.

How did we get here?

Come see me tonight. Please.

—LL

What in the world? Mark wondered. The PCC ... The man named Bruce had mentioned them as part of the people behind the virus attack. Or had that been the PFC—the Post-

Flares Coalition? Maybe the former was a division of the latter. Headquartered somewhere in Alaska. He kept digging.

A few minutes later, he found a series of correspondence spliced together into one file that almost made his heart stop. The icy chills from before turned into a cold sweat.

Post-Flares Coalition Memorandum

Date 217.11.28, Time 21:46

TO: All board members

FROM: Chancellor John Michael

RE: Population concerns

The report presented to us today, copies of which were sent to all members of the coalition, certainly left no room for doubt as to the problems that face this already crippled world. I am certain that all of you, like me, went to your shelters in stunned silence. It is my hope that the harsh reality described in this report is now clear enough that we can begin talking about solutions.

The problem is simple: the world has too many people and not enough resources.

We have scheduled our next meeting for a week from tomorrow. I expect all members to come prepared to present a solution, no matter how extraordinary it seems. You may be familiar with an old business saying, "think outside the box." I believe it is time we do just that.

I look forward to hearing your ideas.

To: John Michael

From: Katie McVoy

Subject: Potential

John,

I looked into the matter we discussed over dinner last night. AMRIID barely survived the flares, but they're confident that the underground containment system for the most dangerous viruses, bacteria and biological weapons didn't fail.

It took some wrangling, but I got the information we need. I've looked through it and come up with a recommendation. All the potential solutions are far too unpredictable to be usable. Except one.

It's a virus. It attacks the brain and shuts it down, painlessly. It acts quickly and decisively. The virus was designed to slowly weaken in infection rate as it spreads from host to host. It will be perfect for our needs, especially considering how severely limited travel has become. It could work, John. And as awful as it seems, I believe it could work efficiently.

I'll send over the details. Let me know your thoughts.

—Katie

To: Katie McVoy
From: John Michael
Subject: RE: Potential

Katie,

I need your help preparing my full proposal for the virus release presentation. We need to focus on how a controlled kill is the only way to save lives. Though it will make survival possible for only a select portion of our population, unless we take extreme measures, we face the eventual extinction of the human race.

You and I both know how hypothetical this solution is. But we've run the simulations a thousand times and I just can't see any alternative. If we don't do this, the world will run out of resources. I firmly believe it is the most ethical decision—the risk of race extinction justifies the elimination of a few. My mind is made up. Now it's a matter of convincing the others on the board.

Let's meet at my quarters, 1700. Everything has to be worded perfectly, so prepare yourself for a long night.

Until then,
John

Post-Flares Coalition Memorandum

Date 219.2.12, Time 19:32

TO: All board members

FROM: Chancellor John Michael

SUBJECT: EO Draft

Please give me your thoughts on the following draft. The final order will go out tomorrow.

Executive Order #13 of the Post-Flares Coalition, by recommendation of the Population Control Committee, to be considered TOP-SECRET, of the highest priority, on penalty of capital punishment.

We the Coalition hereby grant the PCC express permission to fully implement their PC Initiative #1 as presented in full and attached below. We the Coalition take full responsibility for this action and will monitor developments and offer assistance to the fullest extent of our resources. The virus will be released in the locations recommended by the PCC and agreed upon by the Coalition. Armed forces will be stationed to ensure that the process ensues in as orderly a manner as possible.

EO #13, PCI #1, is hereby ratified. Begin immediately.

Mark had to shut down the device for a minute. There was a rushing sound in his ears and his face burned with heat. His head throbbed.

Everything Mark had witnessed in the last week had been sanctioned by the acting government of the flare-inflicted world. It hadn't been terrorists or the work of madmen. It had been approved and executed with the intent of controlling the population. Of wiping

out entire areas, leaving more resources for those who lived.

Mark's entire body shook with anger, intensified by the madness growing inside him. He sat in complete darkness, staring into a black void, but spots swam before his eyes. Spots that formed into shapes. Streaks of fire that made him think of sun flares. People's faces, screaming for help. Virus-laced darts shrieking through the air, thunking into necks and arms and shoulders. He began to worry at the things he saw dancing before him, wondered if this revelation had been the final push that sent him over the cliff of insanity.

He shook, and sweat covered his skin. He began to cry; then he screamed as loud as he could. An avalanche of rage like he'd never known before crashed through him. He heard a loud crack. It had come from his lap.

He looked down but couldn't see anything. His attempt to power up the workpad proved worthless. He felt around beside him until he found the flashlight, then flicked it on. The workpad's screen had been destroyed, the entire flat panel of the device bent at a weird angle. In his anger, he'd broken the stupid thing. He never would have thought he had the strength.

Somehow he formed a coherent thought in the madness that pounded through his skull. He knew what they had to do, and that it was their last and only shot. If the people at the bunker were going to Ashville to face whoever gave them their orders, then Mark and his friends were going, too. Getting inside the walled city was the only way Mark could think to find the people who'd issued the kill order. He could only hope they had a way to stop the sickness. He wanted to be made better.

Asheville. That was where they had to go. Just like that thug Bruce had said during his speech in the auditorium. Except Mark wanted to beat them to it.

He stood up, feeling a little woozy from the images that had been swirling in his vision. The anger pulsed through him as if it, instead of blood, thumped out of his heart and through his veins, but even as he stood, he could feel himself calming. He shined the flashlight once again on the cracked workpad, then tossed the device to the other side of the room. It landed with a clatter. He hoped that someday he'd have a chance to tell this PCC what he thought of their decision.

Pain lanced through his skull, and a sudden wave of exhaustion washed over him, a heavy, dragging thing that was like a two-ton blanket draped over his shoulders. He dropped to his knees, then slumped onto his side, his head resting on the cold floor. There was so much to do. No time for sleeping. But he was so, so tired....

For once, he dreamed of something pleasant.

CHAPTER 62

A crackle of thunder makes Trina jump in Mark's arms.

It's raining outside the cave, something they haven't seen in at least three months, since the sun flares struck. Mark shivers, the chill across his skin a fresh relief from the hellish heat that has become his life. They were lucky to find the deep recess in the side of the mountain, and he realizes he doesn't care if they spend the rest of their lives in the dark, cool place. Alec and the others are farther inside, sleeping.

He squeezes Trina's shoulders, leans his head against hers. Breathes in her smell, which is salty and sweet. It's the first time since they left the boat on the shores of New Jersey that Mark has felt calm. Almost content.

"I love the sound of it," Trina whispers, as if speaking too loudly might interrupt the drumming patter of the rain outside. "It makes me want to sleep. Snuggle my head right up in your armpit and snore for three days."

"My armpit?" Mark repeats. "Good thing we all showered up in the storm this morning. My pits smell like roses. Go ahead and get comfy."

She shifts and wiggles, then settles again. "I seriously can't believe we're still alive, Mark. I just can't believe it. Who knows, though. We could be dead in another six months. Or tomorrow, I guess."

"That's the spirit," he deadpans. "Come on. Don't talk like that. How could things possibly get worse than what we've seen? We'll stay here for a while, then go look for the settlements in the south mountains."

"Rumors," she said quietly.

"Huh?"

"Rumors of settlements."

Mark sighs. "They'll be there. You'll see."

He leans his head against the wall and thinks about what she said. That they're lucky to be alive. Truer words have never been spoken.

They survived the weeks of solar radiation by hiding inside the Lincoln Building. Survived the relentless heat and drought. The trek across countless miles of wasted land and crime-riddled streets. The acceptance that their families were dead. Traveled by night, hide by day, found food wherever it presented itself, sometimes going without for days. He knows if they hadn't had the military skills of Alec and Lana, they never would've made it this far. Never.

But they did. They are still alive and kicking. He smiles, almost in defiance of whatever force of the universe threw such obstacles in their path. He starts to think that maybe, in a few years, all could be well again.

Lightning flashes somewhere off in the distance; thunder rumbling a few seconds later. It seems louder, closer than before. And the rain has picked up, pounding the ground outside the entrance to the cave. For the millionth time he thinks how lucky they are that they stumbled across the hidden haven.

Trina shifts to look up at him. "Alec said that once the storms started, they might get

really bad. That the weather in the world is gonna be screwed up big-time.”

“Yeah. It’s okay. I’ll take rain and wind and lightning any day over what it’s been like. We’ll just stay in this cave. How about that?”

“Can’t stay here forever.”

“Okay, then. A week. A month. Just stop *thinking*. Sheesh.”

She tilts her face up and kisses him on the cheek. “What would I do without you? I’d die of stress and depression before nature killed me.”

“Probably true.” He smiles and hopes she’ll just enjoy the peace for a while.

After shifting back down into a comfortable position, she hugs him a little tighter. “Seriously, though. I’m really glad I have you. You mean the world to me.”

“Same to you,” he replies. And then he grows quiet, not daring to let his mouth take over, say something cheesy and ruin the moment. He closes his eyes.

Light flashes, followed quickly by the boom of thunder. The storm is definitely getting closer.

Mark woke up, and for a few seconds he remembered the feeling of staring at Trina when things had begun to turn a corner and hope—the slightest trace—was in her eyes. Whether she would admit it or not on that day. For the first time in months he wished he could sink back into his dreams. The longing in his heart was almost painful. But then reality rolled in, along with the darkness of the cargo room. The storms had been bad, all right, he thought. Really bad. But they’d survived that, too, eventually finding their way to the settlements.

Where they might’ve lived in peace if it weren’t for a committee called the PCC.

Groaning, rubbing his eyes, he let out a long yawn, then stood up. And fully remembered the decisions he’d made before succumbing to sleep.

Asheville.

He bent over, picked up the flashlight and flicked it on. Then he turned around to head for the door and was startled to see Alec standing there, filling up the frame as if he’d grown several inches taller. Because the faint light of the ship was behind him, his face was hidden in shadow, but there was something sinister about it. Something disquieting about how he’d been there for who knew how long without announcing himself. And still wasn’t saying anything.

“Alec?” Mark asked. “You okay there, big guy?”

The man stumbled forward, almost fell down. But he righted himself and stood up straight and tall again. Mark hadn’t wanted to shine the light in his friend’s face, but he felt like he had no choice. He raised the flashlight and pointed it directly at Alec. He was flushed and sweating, his eyes wide and darting back and forth as if he expected a monster to leap from the shadows at any moment.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Mark asked.

Alec took another laboring step forward. “I’m sick, Mark. I’m really, really sick. I need to die. I need to die and I don’t wanna die for nothing.”

CHAPTER 63

Mark couldn't remember ever having been at such a loss for words.

Alec slouched to the ground, falling to one knee. "I'm serious, boy. I've been feeling funny, my mind playing tricks. Seeing things, feeling things. I'm feeling a little bit better right now, but I don't want to be like those people. I need to die, and I don't wanna wait till morning."

"What ... Why ..." Mark stammered for the right thing to say. It'd been inevitable that this would happen, but it still shocked him to the core. "What do you want me to do?"

The man shot him a glare. "I've thought it—"

He spasmed, suddenly contorting into an unnatural shape, his head thrown back, his face twisted in pain. A strangled, choked cry escaped his throat.

"Alec!" Mark shouted, running up to him. He had to duck when the man suddenly swung a fist. Alec fell to the floor. "What's wrong?"

The old man's body relaxed and he got on his hands and knees, laboring heavily to breathe. "I ... I just ... I don't know. Weird things are knocking around my noggin."

Mark ran his hands through his hair, looking around in anguish, as if some magical answer to all their problems might appear in a dark corner of the cargo room. When he turned back to Alec, the man had stood, holding his hands up as if surrendering.

"Listen to me," Alec said. "I've got ideas. Things are bleak, no doubt. But ..." He pointed in the direction of the barracks where Trina and Deedee were sleeping. "We have a precious little girl in there who can be saved. If nothing else. We need to get her to Asheville, drop her off. Then ..."

He shrugged, a pathetic gesture that said all too much. It was over for the rest of them.

"A treatment—a cure," Mark said, hearing the defiance in his voice. "That Bruce guy thought there might be one. We need to go there for that, too, and—"

"Oh, horse crap," Alec barked, cutting him off. "Just listen to me before I can't talk straight anymore. I'm the only one who can fly this thing. I want you to come to the cockpit and watch me, learn as much as that head of yours can handle. Just in case. You're right—we're taking that girl to Asheville if it's the last thing I do."

A suffocating, dark feeling enveloped Mark. He'd be crazy or dead soon. But Alec's idea was much like his, and the only thing he could think to do was take action.

"Then let's go," he said, fighting back the sudden sting of tears. "Let's not waste one more second."

Alec twitched and his arms jerked outward, but then he clenched his fists and brought them back down, his face strained as if he'd fought off another attack with willpower alone. Clarity filled his eyes and he looked at Mark for a long moment. It was as if all of the past year—the memories, the horrors, even the laughs—passed quickly between them, and Mark wondered if either of them would ever be so grounded again. Madness waited in the wings.

The soldier gave a quick nod, and the two of them headed for the door.

* * *

They reached the cockpit without seeing any sign of Trina or Deedee. Mark had hoped they'd be awake—maybe by some miracle Trina would be better, laughing, remembering. It was a foolish thought.

As Alec got to work on the controls, Mark looked outside. A trace of dawn had brightened the eastern sky, the darkness fading into light purple over the houses and trees in the distance. Most of the stars had winked out; the sun would make its grand entrance within the hour. He had a heavy feeling that the day would end with everything changed forever.

"I'm okay for a bit," Alec said, standing back to scan the instruments and screens of the control panel. "Why don't you go check on the girls. We'll be off the ground in a jiffy. We'll do some flyovers and see what we see."

Mark nodded and patted him on the back, a ridiculous gesture but all he could think of to do. He was worried about his friend. He turned on his flashlight and left the cockpit, entering the short passage that led to the barracks room where he'd left Trina, resting peacefully in a bunk with Deedee.

Mark was almost to the door of the barracks when he heard a strange scratching noise above him, like rats scurrying across the panels of the ceiling. Then there was the distinct sound of a man giggling, only feet over his head. A shudder of horror passed through him. He ran a few steps down the hall and spun around, pressing his back against the wall. He looked up at the ceiling, shining the flashlight over the panels, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

He held his breath and listened.

Something was up there, moving back and forth, almost rhythmically.

"Hey!" Mark shouted. "Who ..." His question died when he realized he hadn't checked on Trina yet. If someone, or *something*, had snuck its way onto the Berg ...

He ran to the barracks door and flung it open, frantically shining his light on the bunk where he'd last seen Trina sleeping. For one split second his heart stalled—the bunk was empty. It was just rumpled sheets and a blanket. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Trina on the floor, Deedee sitting right next to her. They were holding hands, and both of them had sheer terror on their faces.

"What?" Mark asked. "What happened?"

Deedee pointed a shaking finger toward the ceiling. "The boogie man's up there." She paused, visibly shaking—a sight that tore at Mark's heart. "And he brought his friends."

CHAPTER 64

She'd barely said the last word when the Berg burst into life and launched off the ground. The floor tilted and Mark stumbled and fell onto the cot, then pushed himself to his feet.

"Just stay there," he said. "I'll be right back."

He wasn't going to hesitate this time.

He ran from the barracks into the hallway, piercing the darkness with his flashlight as he headed straight for the cockpit. He thought he heard another giggle coming from the ceiling in the same spot as before, and horrible thoughts popped into his mind: bloodthirsty men and women, infected and insane, leaping through the panels once he disappeared, attacking the girls he'd left behind. But he had no choice, and he'd be quick. Besides, if there *were* people up there, they'd waited this long without doing anything. Chances were he had some time.

He bolted into the cockpit, where Alec was manning the controls. He was sweaty and flushed, and concentrating hard on what he was doing.

"Where's the Transvice?" Mark shouted.

Alec spun around, fear crossing his face. But Mark didn't waste time with explanations—the man's weapon was propped up against the wall next to him. Mark ran to it, grabbed it and threw the strap around his shoulder, then made sure it was powered up and started back toward the barracks. Toward Trina and Deedee.

"Turn some lights on out here!" he yelled back to Alec as he slipped out of the cockpit—he'd dropped the flashlight at some point and the world was pitch-dark. Conserving power and fuel no longer meant a thing. He'd only gone a few feet down the corridor before the dim lights flashed on and illuminated his path, though shadows clung to the walls.

Sweat dripped into his eyes as he pounded down the corridor. It felt as if the heat inside the Berg had skyrocketed to a thousand degrees. The sweltering air combined with his shot nerves—the razor's edge of madness that cut into his psyche—put him on the brink of losing it. He just had to hold on for a little while longer. With every bit of effort he could muster, he focused only on the next seconds of his life.

He crossed under the place he'd heard the giggling. Even as he did, a cackle came from above. It was low and throaty, as ominous a thing as he could imagine. But the panel remained intact. He tore through the door of the barracks and saw with relief that Trina and Deedee were still huddled together on the floor.

He was just moving toward them when three sections of the ceiling suddenly collapsed, breaking apart in a crunch of plaster and metal. Several bodies fell among the pieces, crashing on top of the two girls. Deedee screamed.

Mark raised his weapon and rushed forward, not daring to shoot but ready to fight.

Three people were scrambling to their feet, shoving Deedee and Trina as if they were simply objects in their way. A man and two women. They were laughing hysterically, leaping from foot to foot and throwing their arms around like wild apes. Mark reached the man and swung the butt of his Transvice into the side of his head. The man cried out and crumpled to the floor. Mark used his momentum to turn his body and kick one of the

women away from his friends. She shrieked and toppled onto the nearest cot and he aimed the Transvice, pulling the trigger. A bolt of white heat hit her and she grayed, then dissipated into the air.

She'd barely disappeared when the other woman tackled him from the side—they both landed on the floor, and for what felt like the hundredth time in the past week, the air was knocked from his lungs. He twisted onto his back, pulling her on top of him as she struggled to rip the Transvice out of his hands.

He saw Trina and Deedee standing up, pressed against the wall, watching helplessly. Mark knew the old Trina would've joined in and helped somehow. She would have attacked the woman and probably beaten her senseless. But this new Trina, this sick Trina, just stood there like a frightened little girl. Clutching Deedee in her arms.

Mark grunted and kept fighting the woman. He heard a groan, looked over to see the man he'd knocked out crawling to his hands and knees. The guy's eyes were glued on Mark, full of hatred and madness. He bared his teeth and growled.

The man came at him on all fours, as if he had transformed into some kind of rabid animal. He pushed off the ground and leaped into the struggle between Mark and the woman like a lion attacking its prey. He crashed into the woman and the two were suddenly locked in an embrace. They fell off Mark, rolling across the floor as if playing some kind of game. Mark was still gasping for breath but he turned onto his side, then his stomach. Got his knees under him. His elbows. Pushed up. He leaned against a cot and finally was able to stand.

He calmly aimed the Transvice at the man, then the woman, taking two clean shots. The noise shook the air like thunder, and the people were no more.

Mark heard his own breathing, heavy and strained. He glanced wearily over at Trina and Deedee, still huddled against the wall. It was close as to which of them looked more terrified.

"Sorry you had to see that," Mark mumbled, unable to find anything else to say. "Come on. Let's get to the cockpit. We're taking ..." He'd almost said *taking Deedee*, but he'd caught himself. He didn't know how Trina might respond. "We're going somewhere safe," he finished.

A burst of deep laughing seemed to come from everywhere at once, the same horrible sound as before. It was followed by a hitched series of coughs that eased back into the haunted fit of giggling. To Mark, nothing sounded more as though it belonged inside a mental hospital, and goose bumps broke out across his skin despite the heat. Trina was staring at the floor, her gaze so empty that Mark felt another pang of loss. He stepped closer to the girls and reached out a hand. The man hidden in the rafters continued to chuckle.

"We can do this," he said. "All you have to do is take my hand and walk with me. It won't be long before we're all ... safe." He didn't mean to falter on the last word.

Deedee raised her scarred arm and squeezed his middle finger, held on to it. This seemed to trigger some reaction in Trina, and she shifted away from the wall and put her weight fully on her feet. Her eyes didn't stray from that spot on the floor, and she was still clutching Deedee's shoulders with both hands. But it looked like she'd follow.

"Good," Mark whispered. "We're going to ignore that poor guy up there and walk nice

and calm to the cockpit. Let's go."

He turned and started moving before anything changed in Trina's countenance. Tugging on Deedee's hand, he walked quickly toward the door of the barracks. A glance behind him showed Trina still attached to the girl as if they'd been glued together. There was the pitter-patter of footsteps above them, which almost made him stop, but he steeled his nerves and kept going.

They went through the door and into the hallway—they had nowhere else to go. It was even darker out there, the emergency lights just a pale glowing line running along the upper edges of the walls. After quick looks left and right, Mark headed off in the direction of the cockpit. He'd barely taken a step when there was a burst of sound and movement.

And then a thud directly above him. A fit of laughter. The sudden appearance of a man's face and arms, hanging upside down right in front of him. A cry escaped Mark's lips before he could help it, and shock froze him solid.

In his stupor, he was unable to react in time—the man reached out and tore the Transvice out of his hands, breaking the strap in the process. Mark grabbed for it, but the stranger had been as quick as a striking snake.

Then he disappeared back into the rafters above, laughing all the while. His thumping footsteps and cackles faded as he ran to another part of the ship.

Mark didn't think he could get up to the ceiling and climb after the man—and he could be hiding anywhere, with instant and certain death pointed right at whoever came his way.

"I can't believe it," he whispered. How could he have let the guy rip the thing out of his hands like that? It'd happened twice in less than a day. And now there was a crazy person in the ship somewhere with the most dangerous handheld weapon ever invented.

"Come on," he said tightly, then pulled Deedee and Trina along behind him as he started running down the hall. He looked up every few seconds, wondering if the man would suddenly appear, hanging down from the ceiling, ready to shoot. He also strained to listen for any sound other than the pounding of their own footsteps.

When they reached the cockpit the first thing Mark noticed was Alec slumped over the controls, his head buried in his arms.

"Alec!" Mark let go of Deedee's hand and rushed toward the man. But Alec shot straight up before Mark reached him, startling him so much he almost skidded across the floor. "Whoa. You okay?"

He didn't look it. His eyes were puffy and bloodshot, his skin pale and sweaty. "I'm ... I'm ... hanging ... in there."

"You're the only one who knows how to fly this thing." Mark felt terrible for saying it—selfish. But he looked out the windows and saw the foothills above Asheville slowly moving past below them. "I mean ... I don't ..."

"Save your breath, kid. I know the stakes. I'm trying to find where the PFC is headquartered in the city. I just needed a rest."

Mark broke the news. "There's a crazy dude on the ship. He stole the Transvice."

Alec didn't say anything. Merely screwed up his face, which had become alarmingly flushed. He looked as if he might literally burst at any second.

"Calm down," Mark said slowly. "I'll get it back. You just find the place."

"I ... will," the older man said through clenched teeth. "I need ... to show you some of the controls soon."

"I'm scared," Deedee said, standing there with her hand in Trina's.

Mark saw that her eyes were focused on the windows—the poor thing had probably never been in a Berg before. He expected Trina to comfort the girl, but she did nothing. Just stood staring blankly at the floor again.

"Look, it's going to be okay," Mark said, squatting down to Deedee's height. He'd barely done it when the ship bounced in a pocket of air. Deedee screamed again, and this time she tore her hand free from Trina and ran, bolting out of the cockpit before anyone could grab her.

"Hey!" Mark shouted, already on the move. A flash of her being vaporized almost stilled his heart. He sprinted after the girl, just catching sight of her rounding the bend of the hallway outside the cockpit. In the direction of the cargo room. "Come back!"

But she was gone. Mark sped after her, but he'd only gone a few frantic steps when he caught sight of her again, standing completely still, staring at something in front of her.

Mark didn't stop until he reached Deedee's side and saw what had her attention.

The infected man who'd stolen the Transvice was just outside the door to the cargo room, the weapon clutched in his hands. And he had it aimed at Deedee.

"Please," Mark whispered over the thumping of his icy heart. "Please don't." He held out a hand toward the man, put the other on Deedee's shoulder. "I'm begging you. She's only—"

"I know who she is!" the stranger shouted, a line of spit hitting his chin. His arms trembled and his knees shook. Matted dark hair hung down from his filthy head, framing a pale, scratched face that shone with sweat. He leaned up against the frame of the door as if he needed it to stand. "Sweet little girl? That's probably what you think she is?"

"What are you talking about?" Mark wondered how he was supposed to talk to someone this far past reason.

The man was obviously beyond any hope. His eyes said it all. "Brought the demons, she did." He stabbed the Transvice in the air to emphasize his point. "I was in the village with her. They came down on us like the flares themselves, lightning and rain of poison. Left us to die or worse, and look at her now! Even though she was hit. All fine and cute! Laughing at us all for what she's done."

"She had nothing to do with that," Mark said. He could feel Deedee quaking under his hand. "Not a thing. How could she? She's five years old at the most!" Anger seethed inside him—anger that he couldn't hide.

"Nothing to do with it? That's why she got shot and showed no sign of it? She's some kind of savior to those demons, and I mean to send her back to them!"

The man lurched forward. He took two long steps, almost lost his balance, but somehow stayed on his feet. The Transvice was shaking in his hands but still pointing at Deedee.

Mark's anger dissolved and was replaced by a huge lump of fear that lodged in his throat. Tears stung his eyes, he felt so helpless. "Please ... I don't know what to say to you. But I swear she's innocent. We went to the bunker where the Bergs came from. We found out who's behind the disease. They aren't demons. They were just people. We think she's immune—that's why she didn't get sick."

"You shut up," the man answered, ambling forward another couple of steps. He lifted the Transvice and aimed it at Mark's face. "You've got the look about ya. Pathetic. Stupid. Weak in the knees. Demons wouldn't even bother with someone like you. An utter waste of flesh." He smiled, pulling his lips farther back than seemed possible. Half of his teeth were missing.

Something shifted deep down inside Mark. He knew what it was, even if he didn't dare admit it: that bubble of insanity that was ready to burst for good. A rush of anger and adrenaline flooded him.

Rage formed in his chest and tore through his throat, released in a scream so loud he didn't know he had the strength to create it. He rushed forward, leaping into action before the man could begin to process what was happening. Mark saw the man's finger move, close on the trigger, but somehow, as if his burgeoning madness had momentarily heightened all of his senses one last time, Mark somehow outpaced him. He dove and swept his hand upward, knocking the weapon away as it shot a bolt of white heat. He heard the shot thump against the wall behind them.

His shoulder slammed into the man next, throwing him to the floor. Mark crashed on top of him but was already righting himself, getting his feet underneath him. He grabbed the man's shirt and yanked him upward, tore the Transvice from his grasp and threw it to the ground. That was too easy a death for this psycho.

Mark started dragging him down the hallway, aware on some level that he himself had crossed into territory from which he wasn't sure he'd come back.

The man screamed and clawed at Mark's face, kicked blindly and tried to stand and run. But Mark didn't let any of it affect him. A universe of fury seemed to spin inside Mark, an impossible feeling that he knew couldn't last, couldn't be contained. His sanity hung by a thread.

He dragged the man on. Along the curve of the hallway. Through the cockpit door. Toward the broken window. Alec didn't even seem to notice, was sitting there with his hands clenched in his lap, staring blankly at the controls.

Mark didn't say anything, thought something might explode out of him if he dared open his mouth. He stopped next to the window, bent over and grabbed the man around the torso, then lifted him, holding him sideways. He twisted to pull the guy back, then flung him toward the window. His head cracked against the wall and the man fell to the ground. Mark picked him up, pulled back and tried again. Same result, the man's head thumping loudly.

Mark picked the man back up and once again threw him toward the broken window. This time the guy went through—head, then shoulders, then waist—before he got stuck. Mark didn't let go, kept pushing and shoving, throwing all his strength into ending this man's life.

The ship lurched just as Mark shoved the man's hips through the open space, his muscles tensed as he pushed. The entire world tilted, his head spinning with a rush of blood through his system. Gravity seemed to disappear as well, and he was falling through the window along with the stranger. Where blue sky and wispy clouds had filled Mark's vision before, now he saw the ground straight in front of him. He was about to plummet to his death.

Mark kicked out and latched his legs on the lip of the window frame before he could fall all the way out. The rest of his body hung from the Berg, and the man hadn't let go of him. He clutched Mark's upper arms, gripping his shirt to keep himself from plunging to the earth below. Mark tried to push the guy away, but he was desperate and wild, climbing Mark's body like a rope, high enough that his legs now wrapped around Mark's head. Wind tore at both of them.

How could this possibly be happening again? Mark asked himself. Falling out of the Berg's window twice!

A jolt ran through the ship and suddenly it righted itself again. Mark and the man swung back toward the body of the Berg and slammed into the side, just below the window from which they dangled. Mark's legs screamed with pain from supporting two people. He flailed with his arms, trying to find something to hold on to. The outside of the Berg was littered with various boxy protrusions and handles for maintenance workers. He ran his hands along them but couldn't still himself long enough to get a grip.

Mark's fingers finally found a long bar, and he gripped it tightly. Just in time, because his legs had no strength left. His feet slipped from the window and the two bodies flipped over and slammed into the Berg's side once more. Mark felt the jolt through his entire body

but held on, slipping his forearm into the gap between the handle and the ship so that his elbow took the weight. His stomach and face pressed against the warm metal of the Berg, the crazed man still clambering for some kind of position on his back. The man was screaming right in his ear.

Mark's mind jumped between clarity and foggy anger. What was Alec doing? What was happening inside? The ship had righted itself, continued to fly forward—though at a slower speed—and no one was reaching out of the window to offer any help. Mark looked down and immediately regretted it, a wave of terror crashing over him when he saw how far away the ground was.

He had to get rid of this man or he'd never be able to climb back inside.

The wind gusted, whipping the man's hair into Mark's face and rippling through their clothes. The sounds were all too much—the wind, the screams, the roar of the thrusters. The closest spout of blue flame was just below them, maybe ten feet away, burning like the breath of a dragon.

Mark shook his shoulders, kicked off the side of the Berg with his feet and let himself slam back into it. Still the man held on. He'd scraped Mark's neck and arms and cheeks, leaving painful gashes everywhere. Mark ached, every part of him. A quick examination of the Berg's body showed several places he could wedge his feet. Going up seemed impossible with the extra weight of the crazy guy on his back. He decided to go down, a terrifying idea having formed in his head.

The gamut of options had run out. His strength was just about sapped.

He reached way down, grabbed a short bar, then let his body fall, planting his foot on a boxy metal outcrop he'd spotted. The man shrieked and almost let go of Mark's arms, slipping until he caught hold again, wrapping both of his arms around Mark's neck and squeezing just enough to make him gag.

Choking out a cough, Mark sought more places for his hands and feet, dropped another yard or so. Then another. The man had ceased his juddering movements. He'd even grown silent. Mark had never known such hatred for anyone, and in some faint part of his psyche he knew it wasn't quite rational. But he *loathed* the man, and wanted him dead. It was the only goal in his mind.

He kept descending. Wind tore at them, trying to rip them away. The thruster was so close now, just below and to his left, its roar the loudest thing Mark had ever heard. He stepped down again, and suddenly his feet were dangling in open air—there was nowhere left to put them. Another bar ran along the length of the Berg's lower edge, with just enough space for Mark to slip his arm through it.

Mark slid his right arm in and crooked his elbow, letting every pound of his and the man's combined weight rest on the joint once again. The strain was terrible—it felt like his arm would rip in two at any second. But he only needed a few moments. Only a few.

He twisted his body, craning his neck to look at the man who clung to his back. He hugged Mark with one arm above his shoulder and one wrapped around his chest. Somehow Mark got his free hand up, slipping it between their two bodies and up to his foe's neck. He slammed it into the man's windpipe and began to squeeze.

The guy began to choke, his grayish-purple tongue sticking out between his chapped lips. Mark's right elbow shuddered in pain, trembling as if the tendons and bone and tissue were

coming apart. He tightened his fingers around the man's throat. The guy coughed and spat, his eyes bulging. His grip on Mark began to loosen, and as soon as it did, Mark acted.

With a shout of rage he pushed the man's body outward, snapping his arm straight and shoving him directly into the path of the thruster's blue flames, watching as the man's head and shoulders were consumed by the fire, disintegrating before he could even scream. What remained of his body plummeted toward the city below, swept out of Mark's vision as the Berg sped forward.

Madness crept through Mark's muscles. Lights danced before his eyes. Anger howled within him. He knew that his life was almost forfeit. But there was one last thing he had to do.

He started climbing back up the outer face of the monstrous Berg.

No one helped him through the window. Every inch of his body ached and his muscles were rubber, but somehow he managed to make it on his own, falling to the floor of the cockpit in a heap. Alec sat hunched over the controls, his face slack and his eyes empty. Trina sat in the corner, Deedee huddled in her lap. Both of them looked at him, but their expressions were unreadable.

"Flat Trans," Mark blurted out. Sparkles and flashes of light continued to cross his field of vision, and he could barely contain the unstable emotions that churned within him. "Bruce said the PFC had a Flat Trans in Asheville. We have to find it."

Alec's head snapped up and he glared at Mark. But then something softened in his gaze. "I think I know where to find it." As lifeless a thing as had ever come out of his mouth.

Mark felt the Berg descending. He leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes, for a moment wanting nothing but to fall asleep and never wake up again, or to do the opposite and kneel, bashing his head against the floor until it was over. But there was still that small sliver of clarity in his mind. He held on to it like a man clinging to a root on the side of a sheer cliff.

Eyes open again. With a grunt, he forced himself to his feet, leaning against the window. The small city of Asheville lay spread out before them. Walls had been constructed out of wood, scrap metal, cars, anything big and strong enough to protect what was inside: a mostly burned-out urban center. He saw a mass of people at a breach in one wall. Climbing over it. Surging into the town.

A man was waving them on with a red flag tied to a stick. It was Bruce, the man who'd given the speech back at the bunker. They'd come for the Flat Trans, too, just like he'd promised his coworkers. And by the looks of it, countless others who'd been infected had joined him—there were hundreds scaling the broken wall.

The Berg flew past them, over street after empty street. And then there was a small building with double doors hanging wide open. A hand-painted sign said PFC PERSONNEL ONLY. A few people were lined up to go inside. They seemed calm and collected. Mark hated them for it and had a fleeting moment where he itched to find the Transvice to start firing away.

"That's ... it," Alec muttered.

And Mark knew what he meant. If there really was a Flat Trans device, it would be there. The few people entering the building had to be the last of the PFC workers, fleeing the East once and for all. Leaving it to be claimed by madness and death. They looked up at the Berg with something like terror in their eyes, then, as one, they disappeared inside.

Mark fumbled around in a cabinet until he found some old-school paper and a pencil, stored there for power-loss emergencies. With a messy hand, he scrawled the message he'd been thinking about, then turned toward Alec. "Land," he breathed. His lungs felt full of fire instead of air. "Hurry." He folded the note and shoved it in his back pocket.

Alec's every movement was strained, his muscles tense, veins like ropes under his skin. He was flushed and sweaty. Trembling. But a few moments later the Berg landed with a surprisingly soft thump, just outside the entrance to the PFC building.

"Open the hatch." Mark was already on the move, the world a haze around him. He grabbed Deedee out of Trina's lap far more roughly than he meant to, ignoring the little girl's cries of protest. Holding her in his arms, he moved toward the exit, Trina on his tail. She hadn't said a word or lifted a finger to stop him.

At the cockpit's door, Mark paused. "You know ... what to do ... when I'm done," he said to Alec, words a struggle now. "If it's there or not, you know what to do." Without waiting for a response, he marched into the hallway.

Deedee calmed as he headed for the cargo room and the exit beyond that. Her arms tightened around his neck and she buried her face into his shoulder. As if understanding had dawned, even for her, that the end was here. Spots swam before Mark's eyes, flashing lights. His heart wouldn't stop racing, and it felt as if the organ pumped acid through his veins. Trina, silent, kept up with him.

Into the cargo room. Down the ramp of the hatch door, into the brightness of day. They'd barely stepped off of it when squeals pierced the air and the slab of metal began to close. Alec lifted the Berg off the ground, blue thrusters roaring. Mark was barely holding onto his mind, but he felt a sudden, unbearable sadness. He'd never see the old bear again.

The sun sweltered in the sky. There was a rising rumble of shouts and whistles and marching. Groups of the infected were approaching from all directions. Far off, through the display of lights flashing before his eyes, Mark thought he could see Bruce and his red flag leading his own charge. If these people got to the Flat Trans before someone shut it down or destroyed it ...

"Come on," he grunted to Trina.

The wind from the ascending Berg blew across them as he ran over to the entrance of the building, its doors still open. Deedee clung to him and Trina was right by his side. They went through the entrance into a wide room with no furniture. Only a strange object right in the center—two metallic rods, standing tall, with a shimmering wall of gray stretched in between them. It appeared to be moving and sparkling, yet still and serene at the same time. It hurt Mark's eyes to stare at it.

A man and a woman were standing next to it, looking back at Mark and his friends with fear in their eyes. They were already moving toward the grayness.

"Wait!" Mark yelled.

They didn't respond, didn't stop. The two strangers leaped into the abyss and vanished from sight. On instinct, Mark sprinted to the other side of the gray wall, yet there was nothing there.

A Flat Trans. For the first time in his life, he'd actually seen someone travel through a Flat Trans. The noise of the approaching crowds outside seemed to tick up a notch, and Mark knew he was out of time. In so many ways.

He walked back over to the proper side of the Flat Trans and kneeled right before it, gently placing Deedee on her feet. It took every last ounce of his effort to remain calm and keep his swirling emotions and anger and madness at bay. Trina knelt as well, though she said nothing.

"Listen to me," Mark said to the girl. He stopped, closed his eyes for a second, fought off the darkness that tried to consume him. *Only a little longer*, he told himself. "I need ... you to be really brave for me now, okay? There're people on the other side of this magic wall

that ... are going to help you. And you're going to help them. You're going to help them do ... something really important. There's ... something special about you."

He didn't know what he expected. For Deedee to protest, to cry, to run away. But instead she looked him in the eye and nodded. Mark's head wasn't clear enough to understand how she could be so brave. She *was* special.

He'd almost forgotten about the note he'd scribbled earlier. He pulled it out of his back pocket, read it one more time, his hand shaking.

She's immune to the Flare.
Use her.
Do it before the crazy people find you.

He gently reached out for Deedee's hand and scrunched the paper up into her palm. Closed her fingers around it. Squeezed her hand with both of his. The shouts and calls from outside grew to a crescendo. Mark spotted Bruce charging the door, a mass of people behind him. Mark's entire body washed with sadness. He nodded at the Flat Trans. Deedee nodded back.

Then she and Trina were hugging fiercely. Both of them shed tears. Mark was on his feet. He heard the unmistakable sound of the Berg's thrusters returning. Noticed a wind picking up outside. The time had come.

"Go, now," he said, fighting the emotions that tore through him.

Deedee pulled away from Trina and turned, ran into the gray wall of the Flat Trans. It swallowed her whole and she was gone. The roar of the Berg filled the air. The building trembled. Bruce arrived at the door, screaming something unintelligible.

And then Trina was rushing to Mark. Throwing her arms around his neck. Kissing him. A thousand thoughts flipped through his mind, and he saw her in all of them. Wrestling in the front yard of her house before they were old enough to know anything; saying hi in the school hallway; riding the subtrans; feeling her hand in the darkness after the flares struck; the terror of the tunnels, the rushing waters, the Lincoln Building; waiting out the radiation, stealing the boat, the countless treks across ruined, sweltering land. She'd been there with him through it all. With Alec. Lana. Darnell and the others.

And here, at the end of the fight, Trina was in his arms.

Monstrous noise and quaking took over the world, but he still heard what she whispered into his ear before the Berg came crashing into the building.

"Mark."

A single lightbulb hung from the apartment's drab ceiling, buzzing every ten seconds or so. Somehow, it seemed to represent what the world had become. Lonely, noisy, dying. Barely holding on.

The woman sat in her chair, trying desperately not to cry.

She'd known the knock was coming far before it happened. And she wanted to be strong for her son. Make the boy think that the new life that awaited him was a good thing. A hopeful thing. She had to be strong. When her son—her only child—was gone, then she'd let it out. Then she'd cry a river's worth until the madness made her forget.

The boy sat next to her, quiet. Unmoving. Only a child, and yet it seemed he understood that his life would never be the same. He had a small bag packed, though the woman assumed its contents would be discarded before her son reached his final destination. And so they waited.

Their visitors tapped the door three times. There was no anger behind it, or force. Just *tap, tap, tap*, like the gentle pecking of a bird.

"Come in," she said, so loud it startled her. Nerves. She was on the edge.

The door opened. Two men and one woman stepped inside the small apartment, dressed in black suits, protective masks covering their mouths and noses.

The lady seemed in charge.

"I can see you're ready," she said, her voice muffled, as she walked forward and stood before the woman and her son. "We appreciate your willingness to make such a sacrifice. I don't need to tell you how much this means to future generations. We're on the cusp of a very great thing. We *will* find the cure, ma'am. I give you my word."

The woman could only nod. If she tried to speak, it would all come out: Her pain, her fear. Her anger. Her tears. And then her efforts to be strong for the boy would have been for naught. So she kept it in, a dam against a raging river.

The lady was all business. "Come," she said, extending a hand.

The boy looked up at his mother. He had no reason to hold back the tears, and he didn't. They flowed down his face freely. He jumped to his feet and hugged her, shattering her heart a million times over. She squeezed him back.

"You're going to do great things for this world," she whispered, somehow keeping herself under control. "You're going to make me so proud. I love you, sweet boy. I love you so much and don't you ever forget it."

His only response was to sob into her shoulder. And that said everything.

Finally it had to end.

"I'm very sorry," the lady in the dark suit and mask said. "But we have a tight schedule. Truly, I'm sorry."

"Go on now," the mother said to her son. "Go on, and be brave."

He pulled back, his face wet, his eyes red. A strength seemed to come over him and he nodded, helping her believe he'd be okay in the end. He was strong, this one.

The boy turned away, never to look at her again. He walked to the door and went through it with no hesitation. No glance back, no complaints.

"Thank you again," the visiting lady said. She followed the boy out.

One of the men looked up at the dangling, buzzing lightbulb, then turned to his partner. "You know who invented those things, right? Maybe we should call this one Thomas." And then they left.

When the door closed, the woman curled up into a ball and finally let her tears come.

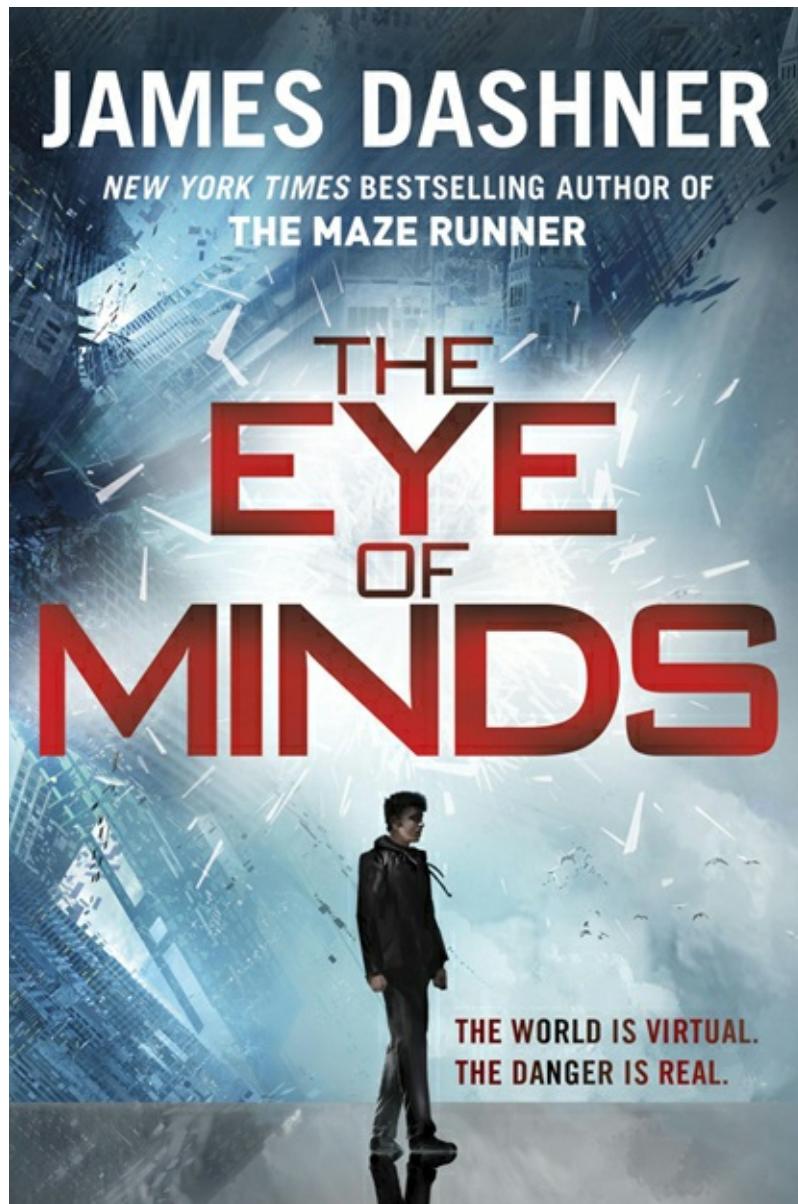
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All those who've helped make this series happen are well known by now, since I've mentioned them in every book so far. Especially Krista and Michael.

Therefore, I want to dedicate this space to all of my readers. My life has changed drastically since I first wrote about Thomas and the other Gladers, and I owe so much of it to you. Thank you for enjoying this story. Thank you for spending your hard-earned money on my books. Thank you for telling your friends and family. Thank you for all the enthusiastic praise you've sent me via Twitter, Facebook, my blog, etc. Thank you for allowing me to make a living doing something I love so much.

I've got a lot of books in my head, so hopefully we can be friends for a long time. With all my heart, mind, body, and soul ... thank you!

If you love
THE MAZE RUNNER,
turn the page for a look at the first book in
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CHAPTER 1

THE COFFIN

Michael spoke against the wind, to a girl named Tanya.

"I know it's water down there, but it might as well be concrete. You'll be flat as a pancake the second you hit."

Not the most comforting choice of words when talking to someone who wanted to end her life, but it was certainly the truth. Tanya had just climbed over the railing of the Golden Gate Bridge, cars zooming by on the road, and was leaning back toward the open air, her twitchy hands holding on to a pole wet with mist. Even if somehow Michael could talk her out of jumping, those slippery fingers might get the job done anyway. And then it'd be lights-out. He pictured some poor sap of a fisherman thinking he'd finally caught the big one, only to reel in a nasty surprise.

"Stop joking," the trembling girl responded. "It's not a game—not anymore."

Michael was inside the VirtNet—the Sleep, to people who went in as often as he did. He was used to seeing scared people there. A lot of them. Yet underneath the fear was usually the *knowing*. Knowing deep down that no matter what was happening in the Sleep, it wasn't real.

Not with Tanya. Tanya was different. At least, her Aura, her computer-simulated counterpart, was. Her Aura had this bat-crazy look of pure terror on her face, and it suddenly gave Michael chills—made him feel like *he* was the one hovering over that long drop to death. And Michael wasn't a big fan of death, fake or not.

"It is a game, and you know it," he said louder than he'd wanted to—he didn't want to startle her. But a cold wind had sprung up, and it seemed to grab his words and whisk them down to the bay. "Get back over here and let's talk. We'll both get our Experience Points, and we can go explore the city, get to know each other. Find some crazies to spy on. Maybe even hack some free food from the shops. It'll be good times. And when we're done, we'll find you a Portal, and you can Lift back home. Take a break from the game for a while."

"This has nothing to do with *Lifeblood!*!" Tanya screamed at him. The wind pulled at her clothes, and her dark hair fanned out behind her like laundry on a line. "Just go away and leave me alone. I don't want your pretty-boy face to be the last thing I see."

Michael thought of *Lifeblood Deep*, the next level, the goal of all goals. Where everything was a thousand times more real, more advanced, more intense. He was three years away from earning his way inside. Maybe two. But right then he needed to talk this dopey girl out of jumping to her date with the fishes or he'd be sent back to the Suburbs for a week, making *Lifeblood Deep* that much further away.

"Okay, look ..." He was trying to choose his words carefully, but he'd already made a pretty big mistake and knew it. Going out of character and using the game itself as a reason for her to stop what she was doing meant he'd be docked points big-time. And it was all about the points. But this girl was legitimately starting to scare him. It was that face—pale and sunken, as if she'd already died.

"Just go away!" she yelled. "You don't get it. I'm trapped here. Portals or no Portals. I'm trapped! He won't let me Lift!"

Michael wanted to scream right back at her—she was talking nonsense. A dark part of him wanted to say forget it, tell her she was a loser, let her nosedive. She was being so stubborn—it wasn't like any of it was really happening. *It's just a game.* He had to remind himself of that all the time.

But he couldn't mess this up. He needed the points. "All right. Listen." He took a step back, held his hands up like he was trying to calm a scared animal. "We just met—give it some time. I promise I won't do anything nutty. You wanna jump, I'll let you jump. But at least talk to me. Tell me why."

Tears lined her cheeks; her eyes had gone red and puffy. "Just go away. Please." Her voice had taken on the softness of defeat. "I'm not messing around here. I'm done with this—all of this!"

"Done? Okay, that's fine to be done. But you don't have to screw it up for me, too, right?" Michael figured maybe it was okay to talk about the game after all, since she was using it as her reason to end it—to check out of the Virtual-Flesh-and-Bones Hotel and never come back. "Seriously. Walk back to the Portal with me, Lift yourself, do it the right way. You're done with the game, you're safe, I get my points. Ain't that the happiest ending you ever heard of?"

"I hate you," she spat. Literally. A spray of misty saliva. "I don't even know you and I hate you. This has nothing to do with *Lifeblood!*"

"Then tell me what it *does* have to do with." He said it kindly, trying to keep his composure. "You've got all day to jump. Just give me a few minutes. Talk to me, Tanya."

She buried her head in the crook of her right arm. "I just can't do it anymore." She whimpered and her shoulders shook, making Michael worry about her grip again. "I can't."

Some people are just weak, he thought, though he wasn't stupid enough to say it.

Lifeblood was by far the most popular game in the Virt-Net. Yeah, you could go off to some nasty battlefield in the Civil War or fight dragons with a magic sword, fly spaceships, explore the freaky love shacks. But that stuff got old quick. In the end, nothing was more fascinating than bare-bones, dirt-in-your-face, gritty, get-me-out-of-here real life. Nothing. And there were some, like Tanya, who obviously couldn't handle it. Michael sure could. He'd risen up its ranks almost as quickly as legendary gamer Gunner Skale.

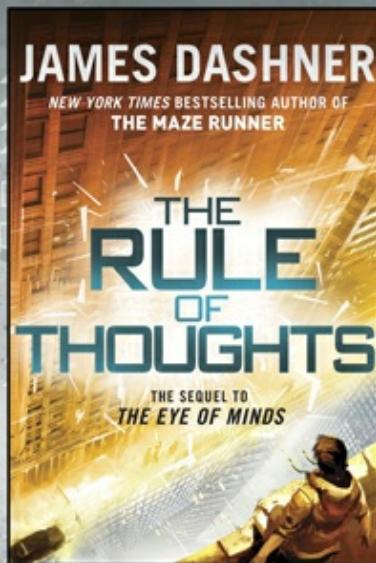
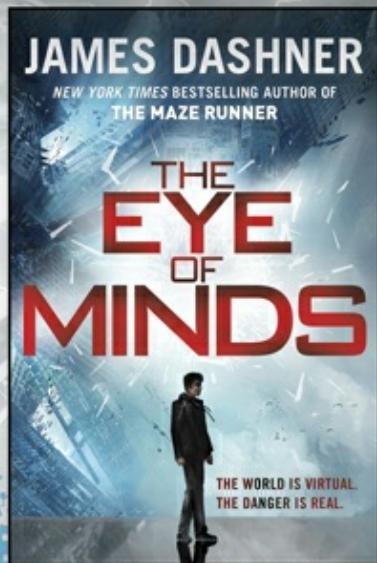
"Come on, Tanya," he said. "How can it hurt to talk to me? And if you're going to quit, why would you want to end your last game by killing yourself so violently?"

Her head snapped up and she looked at him with eyes so hard he shivered again.

"Kaine's haunted me for the last time," she said. "He can't just trap me here and use me for an experiment—sic the KillSims on me. I'm gonna rip my Core out."

Those last words changed everything. Michael watched in horror as Tanya tightened her grip on the pole with one hand, then reached up with the other and started digging into her own flesh.

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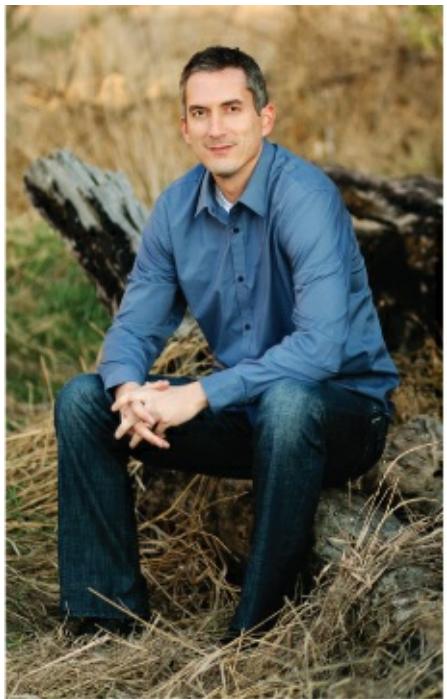
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