

11

IT TOOK THEM FAR LESS TIME than Jay originally thought to arrive at their destination. It seemed they had been stalling. Not that he blamed them. He suspected they didn't come across runaways like him very often. As soon as the boat was docked, Jay was led into a building labeled "Refuge Office." It wasn't a big building by any means. It only had a sign out front and a rack with pamphlets on it. Jay took one, hands encased in cloth, and began to study it. He sat next to John on a bench nearby.

Reading the pamphlet was a challenge—especially since he burned the first one he picked up and had to quickly hide the ashes—but once James offered to hold it open for him, he managed to get the information he needed. The place he'd been stuck in was apparently called "The Great Dismal Swamp," which Jay thought was a very apt name. He was right on all his guesses.

The kawauso he'd seen was called a river otter and the pictures they'd taken were equally adorable. Both of the snakes he'd encountered were two of only three poisonous species.

Jay had to laugh at his luck. The only reason he suspected he was still alive was the constant fever he was running. He looked at the "American Black Bear" picture and felt a stab of guilt. So it was a bear that he'd fought. Confusion arose, because he knew standard bear behavior and unless it was different here, which it very well might be, they weren't aggressive unless provoked. He quickly looked away from the pamphlet and James put it back on the shelf. He didn't need it anymore.

"Jay?" He looked up at James's voice. "I'm going to take you to our boss. He won't hurt you, I promise, but he will ask questions."

Jay nodded and stood up, following behind the older man. He was led through the building to an office where a large and intimidating man sat in a chair. It wasn't his office—that much was obvious, from the too-small chair and the lack of any personal effects—Jay suspected James and the others had called him here when they found him.

"Young man," the boss said, startling Jay. This man spoke Japanese. "My men tell me you were in the swamp." Jay nodded. "Have a seat."

He gestured to the chair in front of him. Jay sat down, making sure everything was covered up. The man eyed this, and gestured to Peter, saying something he couldn't quite catch. Peter and James left the room quickly.

"My name is Grell," said the boss, "and I need to know how and why you got here."

Jay froze up, every muscle tensed and got ready to spring. It was a trap. It had to be.

"Don't be alarmed," said Grell. "I'm not going to tattle to whoever snatched you. I just want to know if there's anything I can do to help you get home. Anyone I can call?"

Jay shook his head, thinking through how much he wanted to reveal. Was he working with Neworda? Hired by them? Or was he part of some rival organization that wanted information?

"It was organized," he decided. "They target children often. I wasn't the only one in the facility, but I was the only one who escaped."

He paused, wondering how to phrase the next part. If they ever discovered the explosion, he didn't want them to connect it back to him. At least not yet.

"I ran into the swamp so they couldn't find me. They haven't yet."

He looked up at Grell, whose face was carefully controlled. He studied the man more. He had very short hair, cut close, and he sat perfectly straight, as if at attention, though he was trying to appear relaxed. Perhaps he was part of this world's government, and was simply called because of an oddity.

"So we have child traffickers on our hands," Grell said. Jay nodded. It was close enough, and probably more believable than the reality.

Peter came back with what looked like clothes, likely from the gift shop, which sent a wave of relief through Jay. He looked back at Grell, who smiled.

"Those are for you. It doesn't look like you have much in the way of clothes, so we got you what we can. Don't forget the gloves."

"Thank you," Jay said.

His voice still seemed to be recovering from weeks without use. He was curious about the gloves. They were thick, and

definitely not gift shop quality, making him wonder if Grell had brought them specifically. When he put them on, he found himself able to put his hands on the desk and nearby notepad without them burning.

Before he could ask anything, a woman Jay didn't recognize burst into the office, speaking rapidly in Unoxan—he would have to find out what it was called here—and waving pictures. She balked when she realized it was Grell, confirming Jay's suspicions that he wasn't normally here, but Grell waved her off and took the pictures anyway. Jay couldn't tell what was on most of them, but the few he did see sent a jolt of panic through him. Steam on the lake, the burnt corpse of a bear, and worst of all, burnt ground shaped like human footprints.

Cursing himself for forgetting about shoes, he held his composure, hoping everything he'd planned would pay off. They couldn't connect these things to him—not immediately—but it would only be a matter of time. He needed to get out of here, fast, but he couldn't just bolt with everyone right there.

To his relief, Grell and the others went from the room after the woman, presumably to find her actual superior. The clothes were left on the desk. Why did they leave me alone? he wondered, but now wasn't the time. They'd be connecting the dots any minute now, and he was precious short on knowledge of this place. Perhaps that was why they'd left him—he'd have nowhere to run.

He closed the door, locked it, and put on the clothes they'd left for him as quickly as he could. No underthings, but that was okay. He could do without. At any rate, pants and a shirt were better than the thin gown the Newordans stuck him in. Before he threw on the jacket, he looked down at the symbol embroi-

dered on the gown. It was filthy and torn, not at all the crisp white sheet it had been. He'd initially wanted to discard it, but then thought better of it. Extra cloth could always be useful. The symbol of Neworda was still there in black thread.

Jay shook his head. He needed to run, but first, he needed a map. The pamphlet wouldn't help, but he thought he saw a large map of the area out in the hallway. Another thought came to him. He started rummaging through the office, eventually finding a map of the surrounding area on a large scale. There were many cities on there, some of them had stars by their names. One such city was labeled "Richmond," was up north, another "Raleigh," was south, and farther north than Richmond was a white star with a black circle around it, labeled "Washington, D.C."

"That's the capital of the nation," came a voice, and he looked up to see Grell.

At Jay's stunned face, he chuckled. "I knew you were going to bolt as soon as she came in with the pictures, and I think the boys knew it too. If you feel like you need to leave, I'm not sure there's much I can do to stop you, especially seeing what you did to that poor bear."

"I need to get to the biggest city," Jay said, ignoring the sting of his soul stone, now tucked inside the shirt, chain carefully hidden. "Anywhere near this place is too close."

"D.C. is your best bet then," Grell said. "But I'm assuming you want to stay off the radar?"

"Yes." He didn't know of anything else, and it was very possible this man was pushing him there. Especially if he was part of the government or military, and this was the capital ...

Grell chuckled again. "Normally my men say 'yes, sir.'"

Military, then. That would explain the haircut.

"I'm not calling you that."

"I understand." He pulled something up on the computer on the desk. A large map, Jay realized.

"I'll print this out for you and highlight a basic route. Considering you're heading to D.C., I assume you see the value in hiding in large cities. This route will take you right through Richmond and straight into the heart of the place. I'll print it out for you so you know where you're going."

As he did so, Jay asked, "Where's the nearest library?"

"I'll mark it. It's not too far from here." He printed it out and circled a few spots.

"You shouldn't have too much trouble finding libraries or the sort along your route, but I want to make a few suggestions. First off, if you ever plan to stop, stop at a religious center. They'll usually have a symbol like this," he drew a cross sign on a notepad he pulled out. "But these are ones you might also find."

He drew two more symbols: a six-pointed star and a crescent moon. "They'll be a lot less common, but generally if you stay on the grounds, you won't be bothered, especially if you stay out of sight. No one's going to hurt you on holy ground. Well, no one with decency anyway." He circled the cross sign. "This one will be the most common. You'll find churches everywhere, and probably a dozen of them in every place you look, especially on roadsides, but all three are viable options."

Jay nodded. If the bouts of shaking and overheating continued, he wanted somewhere safe to stay, even if he didn't sleep.

"What are the words that go with each symbol?" he asked.

Grell wrote them out and Jay memorized them. It was good

to cover your bases.

“Thank you,” Jay said.

“Hurry, kid,” said Grell. “They’ll be looking for you soon.”

Jay nodded, and ran from the building.

He managed to get to the library Grell had circled on the map before noon. The notepad Grell had used was stuffed in the pocket of the jacket he’d been given. He figured he’d be able to find a pen easily. As soon as he was in the door, he went looking for the dictionaries. If Jay was going to survive, he needed to learn this language.

He found them easily. They were the thickest books, and he was able to occupy a small desk nearby. He searched through the books until he found characters he recognized, and another book titled “Japanese.” He’d made Grell write it out for him for this purpose.

Turning the pages was hard, given the bulkiness of the gloves, but it didn’t stop him from scouring the books for the phrases he needed most. He could communicate basically, and it had gotten him this far, but fluency was the goal now. Not to mention, he got the feeling this “Japanese” language wasn’t one a lot of people knew, at least in these parts. Grell was an exception, perhaps because of his military occupation.

Jay was asked to leave not long after the clock struck seven. He sighed, picked up his notes, and put the books back on the shelf. He wasn’t planning on coming back here. Seven hours of studying would have to be enough until the next stop. Walking out the door, he prepared himself for a long trek.